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THE MEANING OF ROMANTICISM FOR THE
HISTORIAN OF IDEAS¹

BY ARTHUR O. LOVEJOY

The title of this paper was suggested by the distinguished Committee who planned this Symposium. It presumably conveys a question which the speaker is expected to answer. Questions can hardly be answered unless their terms have an understood meaning, common to those who ask and those who answer, and unless they contain no presuppositions about facts that are contrary to fact. The present question, however, contains two terms having no understood meaning, and at least one supposition contrary to fact. Of these peculiarities of the query propounded, the Committee were, I am sure, fully sensible; and I suspect that their subtle but benevolent design was to formulate the topic in a way which would give the speaker an excuse for calling attention to some still current confusions which pervade the general subject under consideration.

I

The two troublesome terms in the question are "meaning" and "Romanticism." The trouble with them is not that they lack meaning, but that they have too many meanings, so that, when they are used without qualification or explanation, it is impossible to know what the user is talking about. However, of the many senses of "meaning," it is pertinent here to distinguish only two, namely: the sense which the word presumably has when you ask (for example): "What *is* the meaning of 'meaning'?" *viz.*, what is the word the name of, to what object or phenomenon does it point, or of what concept is it the verbal counterpart, in the usage of some person or persons; and second, the group of senses in which the word "meaning" stands for an attribute, not of words, but of things or events, and denotes, not signification, but "significance," or consequence—or major consequences. If one is asked, in this

¹ This and the four following papers were contributed to a Symposium on "The Romantic Movement in Europe in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," at the meeting of the American Historical Association, Section on Intellectual History, held at New York City, December 30, 1940 (see this journal, I, 1940, p. 505). The first paper has been considerably expanded for publication.

second sense, "What is the meaning of Romanticism?" one's answer would express a judgment about what chiefly makes the historical thing called "Romanticism"—if there *is* any such thing—"important," what aspects or what effects of it are most noteworthy or momentous.

It is thus not clear which of two questions this discourse should try to answer—or whether, perhaps, it should try to answer both: *i.e.*, what is the signification of the word "Romanticism," and what, historically considered, is the main significance of the thing, Romanticism? However, it is obvious that the second question cannot be answered until the first is answered, since you cannot communicate to another any observations about a thing unless you and he both understand by the name of it the same thing.

But here the other equivocality of terms in the title presents itself. The first question cannot be answered. No man can say what is "the meaning" of the word "Romanticism"; for meaning, in this sense, is determined by usage, and in its relatively brief life of less than a century and a half this word has acquired so many—and such incongruous and opposed—meanings that no lexicographer has ever yet come near to enumerating them correctly and exhaustively. Next to the word "nature," "romantic," with its derivatives, is possibly the most equivocal in the language—a fact which it is of some importance for historians to remember. That it is sufficiently remembered by most writers on literary, philosophical, political or social history cannot, I fear, be said—though the historians of modern literature are perhaps the greatest sinners in this way, one of their favorite employments being to introduce new explicit or implicit senses of Romanticism, with a fine indifference to the others already in use. The amazing diversity of its meanings I have already attempted to exhibit—though incompletely—in a paper read before another learned body, composed of philologists and literary historians.² I shall, for the sake of brevity, assume that it furnishes sufficient proof, if any were needed, that "Romanticism" has no generally understood meaning and has therefore come to be useless as a verbal symbol. And thus, finally, the question propounded contains an assumption contrary to fact, namely, that there is such a thing as *the* meaning of "Romanticism" for "*the* historian of ideas."

These semasiological preliminaries may seem an unduly pedantic

² "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms," read before Modern Language Association of America, 1923; published in *PMLA*, XXXIX, pp. 229-253.

and logic-chopping approach to what is presumably meant, after all, to be a discussion of a historical topic. But few things, I think, are more needful for historians of ideas—and every good historian is in some degree a historian of ideas—than to get rid of the logical confusions associated with the use of this linguistically extraordinary word “Romanticism,” and, in fact, to cease asking, and trying to answer, the first question suggested by the title of this paper. For an answer to it, whether expressed or implied, will either (a) contain the factually false assumption which I have indicated—*viz.*, that the word has one understood and accepted meaning—or else (b) it will be a personal definition of the word, conveying no information except about the definer’s private taste in terminology, and not open to discussion, or comparison with any objective matters of fact—since personal preferences in the definition of terms are not discussable, provided the definitions are not self-contradictory. Yet those who propound definitions—new or old—of “Romanticism,” appear usually to suppose that they are *not* merely uttering a verbal proposition—a statement of the signification which they choose to attach to a term—but are putting forth a proposition of historical fact, capable of discussion and verification. This singular confusion in most instances can be seen to rest upon a vague, tacit assumption that there is a kind of determinate entity existing prior to the definition, an object or an essence, or Platonic Idea—which *must* be the thing that the word “Romantic” or “Romanticism” denotes, but which, when it is discovered, must then be assumed to be exemplified or embodied in all the writers or writings which have been conventionally called, or which the particular historian or critic is accustomed to call, “Romantic.” In determining what this Romantic essence is, the inquirer is usually guided by his own associations of ideas with the word, the connotations which it chiefly has for him,—or sometimes, in the case of those for whom “Romantic” is an adjective of disparagement, guided only by a determination to apply that damning epithet to all the ideas or tastes which they most dislike. The result of this sort of procedure is not only the vast terminological confusion to which I have already referred, but a vast amount of bad history—the reading into texts or doctrines which have come to be commonly classified as “Romantic,” of all the characteristics or theses which one has, by a largely *a priori*, non-historical method, determined to be the pure quiddity of

“the Romantic,” *das Wesen des Romantischen*. These are, I am aware, dogmatic-sounding assertions; but probative examples could be cited by the dozen, if there were time for them.

Nothing, then, but confusion and error can result from the quest of some supposititious intrinsic nature of a hypostatized essence called “Romanticism.” But there is a quite different sort of inquiry into which our initial question may be converted; and such an inquiry would make for the elimination of confusion, and is indispensable for the understanding of the history of the past century and a half, and, consequently, for the understanding of the contemporary intellectual, moral and political situation; and this inquiry is primarily the business of the historian of ideas, and requires the application of a specific method of analysis proper to that study. Its starting-point is a massive historical fact which no one is likely to deny—namely, that in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, especially in the 1780s and 1790s, there were discovered, invented or revived, chiefly in Germany, a large number of ideas which had been relatively, though not always absolutely, unfamiliar or uninfluential through most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and that the total impact of what we may call, for short, the new ideas of the 1780s and 1790s (including revivals of old ideas under “new”), as they developed, ramified, and were diffused during the following decades, profoundly altered the habitual preconceptions, valuations, and ruling catchwords of an increasingly large part of the educated classes in Europe, so that there came into vogue in the course of the nineteenth century and in our own a whole series of intellectual fashions—from styles in poetry and styles in metaphysics to styles in government—which had no parallels in the preceding period. The result was—to resort to the hackneyed but apt metaphor—not one, but a whole set of “climates of opinion,” in which species of plants either unknown to the earlier eighteenth century or only germinant then, came to flourish mightily. The “newness” of these ideas of (*e.g.*) the 1790s was, for the most part, not an absolute newness; it lies in the contrast with the dominant ideas of the immediately antecedent age, and with what may be called the “old ideas” of the 1790s, exemplified, on the political side, in the French Revolution. For, roughly, in that decade two revolutions were taking place—one, external and political, in France, which was the culmination of the *Aufklärung*, the other, primarily in the realm of abstract ideas,

mainly in Germany, which was only somewhat later to manifest its political consequences—some of them, indeed, only in our own unhappy day.

To call these new ideas of the 1780s and 1790s “Romanticism” is confusion-breeding and productive of historical error above all because it suggests that there was only one such idea, or, if many, that they were all implicates of one fundamental “Romantic” idea, or, at the least, that they were harmonious *inter se* and formed a sort of systematic unity. None of these things are true. The new ideas of the period—even when held, as they often were, by the same individual minds—were in large part heterogeneous, logically independent, and sometimes essentially antithetic to one another in their implications, though their full implications were not always at once discerned; and some writers traditionally labelled “Romantic” were influenced by some of them, others by others, and yet others, I suspect, by none. But though there is no such thing as Romanticism, there emphatically *was* something which—for lack of any other brief name—may still be called a Romantic period; and one may perhaps speak of—not a, but several, Romantic movements: the period in which this array of new or newly energized ideas emerged into prominence, and the movements which consist in the propagation of one or many of them, in the drawing out of their initially latent consequences, logical or pseudo-logical, in their alliances with one another or with various older ideas and fashions of thought, and in their interaction with certain more or less permanent affective elements of human nature. For my own part, at any rate, I am—in a spirit of compromise—willing to speak of such a period and of such movements—meaning, approximately, the half-century 1780–1830, but especially its second decade, and the movements in which any one or more of these ideas conspicuously manifested themselves. In what follows I shall be chiefly concerned with some of the ideas of those German writers who, in the 1790s, first introduced the *term* “Romantic” as the designation of a new tendency or fashion of thought.

Now the question: What were the new, or newly *active* and peculiarly influential, ideas of the 1790s and what were their vicissitudes and developments in the subsequent decades? is a factual and therefore a properly historical question. But it is a question in the history of ideas; and it therefore, as I have said,

requires the application of a method of investigation appropriate to that study. And the nature of this method, as applied, not to the life-history of a particular idea but to the integral study of a period, still appears to need some explanation. Given the prerequisite knowledge of the relevant texts, the first task of the historiographer of ideas is a task of logical analysis—the discrimination *in* the texts, and the segregating *out of* the texts, of each of what I shall call the basic or germinal ideas, the identification of each of them so that it can be recognized wherever it appears, in differing contexts, under different labels or phrasings, and in diverse provinces of thought. And in this part of the task the historian—unhappily—must usually begin by carefully scrutinizing the most recurrent and crucial terms in his texts—the most prevalent formulas or phrases or sacred words—in order to determine what and how many distinct ideas appear to be expressed by, or associated with, each of these terms in the minds of the various users of it. For once a word or phrase or theorem has gained vogue and sanctity, it is likely to be used by different writers in quite different senses—usually without their being clearly aware that they are doing so.

For example: it is, I suppose, commonly recognized that *one* of the relatively new phenomena of the Romantic period was a new or, at all events, a much wider and intensified, vogue of the highly abstract and equivocal term “infinite.” It is notorious that such phrases as *Streben ins Unendliche* or *Sehnsucht nach dem Unendlichen* or *Annäherung zu einer unendlichen Grösse*, were peculiarly dear to the German *Frühromantiker* as expressions of their ideal of life or of art. But, as I have elsewhere pointed out, the term “infinite,” as used by one or another of these writers, had at least five distinct, though not in all cases mutually exclusive, senses or applications.³ All of these senses obviously had something in common, and that something was, historically, highly important. The common element was the negative element. The “infinite,” whatever positive meaning might be connected with the word, meant at least the not-limited or not-completed, the *Unbegrenzt* or *Unvollendet*—in *some* sense of limit or completion. And the sanctity of

³ “Schiller and the Genesis of Romanticism,” *Mod. Lang. Notes*, 1920, pp. 138 ff. Cf. also H. Rehder: *Die Philosophie der unendlichen Landschaft: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der romantischen Weltanschauung*, 1932; E. L. Schellenberg, *Das Buch der deutschen Romantik, die Sehnsucht nach dem Unendlichen*, 1924; F. Strich, *Deutsche Klassik und Romantik; oder Vollendung und Unendlichkeit*, 1928.

the word in most of the new writers of the period was evidence of a tendency to a new presupposition about what is excellent or valuable—and also about the nature of things, the constitution of the universe or the course of history. It was a presupposition contrary to a feature of what may be fairly called the main—not the only—earlier tradition of European thought, at least in value-judgments of all kinds, and not in these alone. There were important opposing strains in the older tradition, but the most prevalent and orthodox tendency had been to think in terms of finites, and to regard limitation as an essential element of excellence, at least for mortals. In logic and science, the first thing needful was to have precisely *defined* concepts and terms; in a work of art, the first essential was that it should have one limited theme and a clear-cut and readily recognizable “form,” so that, as Schiller declared in the essay that gave the decisive initial impetus to the early Romantic movement in Germany,⁴ the essence of classical art is that it is a *Kunst der Begrenztheit*; in literary style, the supreme merit was the clarity that comes from using words which immediately convey clear and distinct ideas, express exact and therefore limited meanings; and in human character and conduct, the mark of excellence was to observe metes and bounds and to be moderate in all one’s desires, ambitions and pretensions. The historic process, too, in the Christian tradition—in spite of opposing Aristotelian and other influences—was conceived as a finite thing, having a beginning, a middle and an end—neither an interminable undulation, nor an endless recurrence of similar cycles, nor even a perpetual movement towards an infinitely distant and therefore unattainable goal. Now the German Romantics of the 1790s were in conscious and zealous—though not in consistent or unwavering—revolt against all these assumptions, but first of all in the theory of art. They conceived and proclaimed themselves to be the prophets of a new, a “modern,” art—and “modern” is what *they* primarily meant by “Romantic”⁵—which should be a *Kunst des*

⁴ *Ueber naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*; see my “Schiller and the Genesis of Romanticism” in *Mod. Lang. Notes*, *loc. cit.*

⁵ Cf. my “The Meaning of ‘Romantic’ in Early German Romanticism” in *Mod. Lang. Notes*, XXXII, 1917. For an example, cf. A. W. Schlegel’s Berlin *Vorlesungen über schöne Litteratur und Kunst*, 1803–4 (ed. Minor, 1884, Pt. I, III, p. 7): “eine romantische, d. h. nicht nach den Mustern des Alterthums gebildete Poesie.” So the title of the Third Series, *Ueber die romantische Poesie*, is explained as meaning “eine Geschichte und Charakteristik der Poesie der Haupnationen des neueren Europa, oder der romantischen.”

Unendlichen. The new valuation, the revolt against "the finite," speedily passed over into other provinces; and since one of the most pregnant differences of taste or habit in categories is that between a habitual preference for the limited and well-defined and a habitual preference for "the infinite," this one among the ideas of the 1790s has had many and far-reaching consequences.

But in spite of this common element in the new vogue of the word "infinite," when any more positive and concrete significations were attached to it by German writers of the 1790s, it could serve as the catchword for several quite distinct and, in part, mutually antagonistic tendencies, since there are numerous varieties of "the infinite." These, again, I may not take the time to enumerate; I merely recall the general fact in order to illustrate the indispensability of a careful semasiological analysis in the first phase of the intellectual historian's study of a period.

When this phase is completed—when he has discriminated and listed as exhaustively as he can the separate "ruling ideas" which distinguish the period, or the particular group of writers in it with whom he is concerned, his next task is to examine the relations between these ideas. And the relations he will need to look for are of three kinds: logical, psychological, and historical—and especially, under the latter, genetic—relations.

The first two of these inquiries I have distinguished from the strictly historical because they are procedures of analysis and construction which need in some measure to be carried out in the historian's own mind before he goes on to confront their results with the historical evidence to be found in his sources. It corresponds to the phase of constructing tentative hypotheses in the work of the natural scientist. By logical relations I mean relations of implication or opposition between categories, or tacit presuppositions, or express beliefs or doctrines. When he has ascertained the currency and influence of a given idea in his period, the historian does well to ask himself, what does this idea logically presuppose, what does it imply, and with what other ideas is it implicitly incompatible—whether or not these logical relations were recognized by those who embraced the idea. For if it should turn out that some of its implications were not recognized, this may become a highly important, though negative, historical fact. Negative facts are of much more significance for the intellectual historian than is usually appreciated. The things that a writer,

given his premises, might be expected to say, but doesn't say—the consequences which legitimately and fairly evidently follow from his theses, but which he never sees, or persistently refuses to draw—these may be even more noteworthy than the things he does say or the consequences he does deduce. For they may throw light upon peculiarities of his mind, especially upon his biases and the non-rational elements in his thinking—may disclose to the historian specific points at which intellectual processes have been checked, or diverted, or perverted, by emotive factors. Negative facts of this kind are thus often indicia of positive but unexplicit or subconscious facts. So, again, the determination of not-immediately-obvious *incompatibilities* between ideas may lead to the recognition of the historically instructive fact that one or another writer, or a whole age, has held together, in closed compartments of the mind, contradictory preconceptions or beliefs. Such a fact—like the failure to see necessary positive implications of accepted premises—calls for psychological explanation, if possible; the historian must at least seek for a hypothesis to account for it.

By the psychological relations of ideas, I mean, so to say, elective affinities between them not properly logical in character—the tendency of one, through some process of association by similarity, or often through the ambiguity of the terms used to express it, to suggest or evoke others. These transitions often pass, with the writers in whom they appear, for logical ones. But especially important for the historian, under this head, is the consideration of the natural *affective* concomitants of various ideas—the kinds of feeling—even, if you like, of “bodily set”—which, when entertained, they tend to arouse, the moods or attitudes to which they are congenial, what I have elsewhere called the “types of metaphysical pathos” which go with various types even of highly abstract notions or doctrines, and are perhaps the real secret of their appeal, at least to the lay public. Philosophy, historically considered, like Nanki Poo in the opera, can sing, and has sung, songs adapted to every—or almost every—changing mood or passion. Into the highly controversial question whether changes of dominant mood beget the philosophies, or changes in philosophy the moods—or sometimes one and sometimes the other—I do not propose here to enter; I merely suggest that the historiographer of ideas must be alert to note the connection between specific ideas and philosophies and specific moods. “Connection” here includes repug-

nancies. A not uncommon historical phenomenon is a repugnancy between a dominant doctrine in, for example, aesthetics, and the actual tastes of those who feel obliged to subscribe to that doctrine. It has been pointed out by acute students of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English criticism that most critics of the period seem to have really liked and admired Shakespeare, while the critical principles many of them professed required them to damn him—at least with faint, or much-qualified, praise. This is even more apparent, I think, in those German critics of the early 1790s who were still classicists of the strictest sect, but were, in a few years, to promulgate the new program of *die romantische Poesie*. One factor—though only one—in causing them to reverse their position was, I suspect, that their strong, but repressed, taste for Shakespeare predisposed them to accept a new philosophy of art—and in particular, of poetry—which would justify their taste.

When the intellectual historian of a period has thus considered the logical and the hypothetical psychological relations of the major unit-ideas which he has found prevalent in the period, he must then, of course, return to the historical data, to observe how far the logical relations between these ideas were in fact manifested as operative factors in the thought-tendencies of the time, and what psychological relations among them can be actually seen at work in the minds of their spokesmen. In this latter inquiry he will often, if lucky, be able to discern a sort of genetic relationship between one logically distinct idea and another—to note the nature of the transitions in thought by which one gave rise to a quite different one, and into what combinations or idea-complexes it entered.

For example: the *original* “Romanticists”—the German introducers of the term, the Schlegels and their group—were preoccupied at the outset chiefly with two peculiar problems: (a) What are the essential and distinguishing characteristics of classical, *i.e.*, Greek, art and thought and culture, on the one hand, and of non-classical, *i.e.*, modern art, etc., on the other? (b) How are these differences to be explained historically? They began their reflection on these problems while still assuming the superiority of the “classical;” their lucubrations on the subject are an episode in the history of the quarrel over the Ancients and Moderns. Now their answer to the second question was that the fundamental differences between classical and “modern” ways of thinking must be due to one or

both of the two great historic events which brought the ancient culture to an end: the introduction of Christianity and the invasions of the Nordic or Germanic peoples. This suggested to them, in part, the answer to their other question. If you want to know, in terms of basic ideas—of preconceptions, valuations, or emotional susceptibilities—what distinguishes the classical from the modern or “Romantic,” you have but to determine wherein the Christian view of life or of the universe fundamentally differs from the Greek, or the Germanic or Nordic from the Latin or Mediterranean. At first they (certainly Friedrich Schlegel) conceived the former, at least, to be a difference for the worse. But in their attempt—much influenced by Schiller’s essay to which I have referred—to formulate the “essence” of the “modern” or Christian *Lebensanschauung*, they came (through processes which, once more, it would take too long to analyze here) to find this in certain propensities or assumptions such as the craving (to which I have already referred) for infinite values or infinite objects for thought or imagination to contemplate, or for the will to aim at, a love of mystery, otherworldliness, an awareness of the duality of man’s constitution, a preoccupation with the inner life, and a sense of man’s inner corruption—all of these being contrasted with the classical sense for “form” and limits, the supposed Greek love of clarity, absorption in the beauty of this world, “objectivity” (*i.e.*, looking out and not in), untroubled unity of personality, and “serenity.” And some, at least, of the former propensities or assumptions these writers found congenial to their own imaginations or temperaments; and they thereupon abruptly turned from what they conceived (with a good deal of historical error) to be the classical mode of art and thought to its opposite, which they had already named “Romantic.”

But this conversion was clearly much facilitated by the influence of another idea which has its own pre-history, but was especially potent in the Romantic decades: the idea that a man—and especially an artist—ought to be of his own time, to express in his life or art the characteristics, the ideas, the spirit of his age.^{5a} He will neither be true to himself nor *en rapport* with his contemporaries if he does not do so. If, for example, he is a dramatist, he must

^{5a} This became an especially influential idea among the French Romantic writers and artists of the 1820s. On this see George Boas, “*Il faut être de son temps*,” in *Jour. of Aesthetics*, I, 1, 1941, pp. 52–65.

exhibit in his characters the emotions and motives which he understands—those by which men of his time are moved. A modern man, then, should *be* “modern.” But since “modern” or “Romantic” meant mainly, for the early German Romanticists, “Christian,” and since for them the spirit of Christianity was best exemplified in the Middle Ages, what at first looked like a sort of revolutionary modernism proved to be identical (in part) with a kind of medievalism.

Now in noting these phenomena which I have roughly sketched, the historian is at once (a) discriminating certain (by no means all) of the more characteristic ideas of the Romantic period, (b) observing the processes by which some of them generated others, and (c) recognizing the complex groupings which they formed in individual—in fact, in numerous individual—minds of the time. When he has done this, the ideas fall into a pattern, of which the diverse modes of relation, logical or psychological, between them are, as it were, the framework. And—though this is perhaps a counsel of perfection—one has not, I think, fully understood the Romantic period as a historic phenomenon—has not grasped what was then going on—until he has apprehended this pattern. It could be at least suggestively portrayed graphically, though the diagram would need to be an extremely large and intricate one.

But when the historian has thus traced these genetic processes, the passing-over from one idea to another, and noted one particular combination of ideas which resulted, he has still to observe that each of the units of *that* complex presently broke loose from its original context and went on its own separate way, generating, in different minds, yet other ideas or entering into other combinations. Thus, out of one group of assumptions made or theorems evolved by the Schlegels, Novalis, and their circle, of which I have tried to suggest roughly the components and their genesis, a whole series of distinct notions and thought-movements emerged. Was it to be assumed, for example, that “modern” or “Romantic” art, as a result of the preoccupation of Christianity with the inner life, is, or should be, peculiarly introspective? Then modern “poetry” has before it as its special province the whole field of subjective states and their infinite nuances, and finds its best expression in the psychological novel or play, especially in those exhibiting subtle moral conflicts in the soul of the hero—already exemplified, or supposed to be exemplified, in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. This, it will

be remembered, is one of the themes of Chateaubriand's *Génie du Christianisme*.⁶ With this, the novel, as the form best adapted to this purpose, tended to assume a new dignity and pre-eminence among the literary *genres*. But it was no far cry from this idea to that of the superiority of the *realistic*—but the psychologically realistic—novel in general; so that a French literary historian has not unintelligibly written of “the realism of the Romantics.” *Madame Bovary* is certainly neither medieval, nor mysterious, nor vague, nor otherworldly, nor particularly characterized by *Unbegrenztheit*; it has often been described as an attack upon the “Romantic” temper; but it has nevertheless a filiation with one of the elements in the idea-complex of the *Frühromantiker* of the 1790s and the French Romantics of the following decade, as that element developed in isolation from the others. But, on the other hand, Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie assures us that “there is an element directly opposed to romanticism; it is realism.” Thus a truly romantic taste in “Views,” or landscapes, finds the “pleasant thing in them” to be “a certain blur or dimness, which prevents the eye from being lost in a throng of things positively known, and at the same time stirs one to guess at the infinite possibility the blur contains of things which might be known.” “The best thing our minds can do for us is

In keeping us in hope strange things to see
That never were, nor are, nor e'er shall be.”⁷

Now in insisting that this is the *truly* “romantic” thing, Mr. Abercrombie was simply expressing his own taste in the use of that adjective; but it happens to be true that this note, as well as the other I have just mentioned, was one of the elements in the original idea-complex of the German Romanticists of the 1790s; so that from it a literary tendency opposite to realism could also develop, or at least could gain reënforcement: the cultivation of a mysterious vagueness, the poetry that hints at what cannot be expressed, at least in words, the art that seeks always to convey a sense of something vast and ineffable in even “the meanest flower that blows.” This too is “Romantic” in the sense of one, but only one, of Friedrich Schlegel's definitions: “romantisch . . . in jenem weitern

⁶ Pt. I, Livre ii, chap. 1; iii, chap. 1, 8, 9.

⁷ *Romanticism* (1926), p. 44.

Sinn des Wortes wo es die Tendenz nach einem tiefen unendlichen Sinn bezeichnet.’⁸

In a similar way, then, could be pointed out the later separate fortunes, vicissitudes and alliances of each one of the ideas that constituted the particular combination, in the minds of the original avowed Romanticists, of which I have attempted to indicate summarily the process of formation. But let it not be supposed that this combination contained *all* the new or peculiarly potent ideas of the 1790s. It includes only a group of them which were, at that time, especially associated with the word “Romantic.” There were others, equally important, which sprang from other sources and developed in other ways—though often absorbed by the same minds and in that sense combined with the former. In the total pattern, these, too, with their relations to the others, would have to be incorporated. But that is too large an enterprise to be attempted here.

II

I suppose, however, that most of the learned company I am addressing are primarily interested in political and social history; but most of the slight illustrations hitherto given of the application of the method of the historian of ideas to the study of the Romantic period have not been obviously pertinent to political or social history. They have had to do with seemingly non-political notions, belonging initially to the fields of literary criticism, aesthetics, or quasi-aesthetic valuations, or religion, or metaphysics. The reason for this lies in a fact which the political historian needs to bear in mind—namely, that most of the new ideas of the 1780s and 1790s *were* originally aesthetic or religious or metaphysical ideas. But they are not on that account less pertinent to political history. For they were the sort of ideas that, when accepted and developed, could modify men’s general ways of thinking profoundly, and because profoundly, widely—in many diverse fields, including the political. And if one were to consider the “meaning,” in the sense of the historic significance, of—not “Romanticism,” but certain ideas of the Romantic period—from the point of view of 1940, their political consequences may well be regarded as the most significant. For a particular group of these ideas, continuously at work on the minds of the educated and reading public for fifteen decades, have produced in our own time a sort of culminating joint-effect, which is

⁸ *Gespräch über die Poesie*, 1800.

at least an essential and conspicuous part of the monstrous scene presented by Germany and by Europe today. That the revolutionary—or counter-revolutionary—political events of the past twenty years would not have occurred but for these earlier alterations in fashions of thought, it would be hazardous to maintain. For most of these events are merely new instances of familiar types of historical phenomena which seem to repeat themselves in ages or among peoples whose ruling ideologies are extremely dissimilar. The rise of dictatorships, for example, is an old story. It is, doubtless, possible only under certain conditions; but no uniform underlying general ideas seem to be among those conditions. A political phenomenon which, even in our own time, appears almost simultaneously in, *e.g.*, Germany, Italy, Russia and Spain—countries whose recent intellectual history has certainly been very different—can hardly be explicable as due to the prior prevalence among their peoples of identical fashions of thought. Equally old is the lust of conquest and the emergence of military conquerors on the grand scale—though we had fondly and foolishly supposed the day for such things to be over. I am, therefore, far from suggesting that the rise of the dictatorships and the return of an era of wars of territorial aggrandizement in Europe have their sufficient condition in the changes in ideas which marked the Romantic period; and I recognize that there is room for question whether those changes were even among the necessary conditions for the present recrudescence of those ancient evils. Nevertheless, it is certain—and notorious—that all these contemporary revolutions have had distinctive ideologies—*i.e.*, idea-complexes—associated with them, and that their leaders—some of whom are past masters of practical political psychology—seem to regard the inculcation of these ideologies as indispensable to the success of their revolutionary enterprises and the permanence of the “new orders” they wish to establish. The ideologies may be, in great part they indubitably are, only “rationalizations” of the ambitions, or delusions of grandeur, of the leaders or of the passions of their followers; but even so, the rationalizations are found necessary, before those ambitions are converted into deeds or those latent passions into mass-action. A Hitler or a Mussolini is not more sedulous in the strengthening of his armaments than in the propagating of his ideas—the ideas which, on the one hand, serve his purpose, but on the other, can appeal to the minds of his followers because those minds have already been “conditioned” for their reception.

Now, out of the many “new ideas of the 1780s and 1790s,” there were three which—though at the outset they were not political at all in their reference—were destined to be transferred to the domain of political thought and sentiment; to which the German—and in less degree the general European—mind was increasingly conditioned by a series of influential nineteenth-century writers; and the *fusion or combination* of which, I suggest, has been a factor in the production of the state of mind upon which the totalitarian ideologies depend for their appeal. These three are by no means the only ones of which the same might be said; but they are, I incline to think, the most fundamental and most important, though the estimate is certainly debatable. They consist in a sort of apotheosis of conceptions associated with three words; the German words are for the present purpose the most appropriate: *das Ganze*, *Streben*, and *Eigentümlichkeit*. If terms ending in *-ism* must be had to designate these ideas, they may be called holism or organicism, voluntarism or “dynamism,” and diversitarianism.

1. The first—which is now familiar enough—was a relatively new idea about the relation of the individual to the whole—the idea of organism, in its logical or metaphysical sense. The political liberalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had, it need hardly be recalled, usually conceived the individual as primary. This is the essence of the doctrine of natural rights; it is not really less characteristic of the presuppositions of political utilitarianism. The reality with which politics was concerned was the human person, conceived as a possessor of intrinsic rights, or as a claimant for the means of happiness. He had, admittedly, relations to other individuals, and—at least in the natural rights theory—moral obligations towards them. But the relations and obligations were *between* individuals as such; and though the interests or instincts of the individuals required them to combine in organized aggregates, such as the State, these were secondary, derivative, and merely instrumental to the assurance and adjustment of individual rights or the satisfaction of individual needs and desires. The whole was just the aggregate of its parts, and apart from them was nothing; and the dominant conception of scientific method, like the dominant political theory, proceeded, in its investigation of any complex thing, by an “analysis” or “resolution” of it into its ultimate component parts. To understand *it*, you had but to take it to pieces, to know the parts and *their* characteristics and the laws

of their action, and how many of them there were in the given complex—and your problem was solved. But a strain of German thought in the late eighteenth century—which had had earlier foreshadowings in Shaftesbury, Stahl, and others—tended increasingly towards a reversal of this whole way of thinking—towards giving primacy and a mystical sanctity to what was called “the Idea of the Whole,” as defined by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*: “An Idea [of something] which must determine *a priori* all that is contained in it”—of a “product of nature” in which, “just as every part of it exists *through* all the others, so every part is also thought as existing *for* all the others and for the sake of the Whole (*um . . . des Ganzen willen*), that is, as a tool or organ (*Werkzeug, Organ*).”⁹ Kant was talking about a natural organism—a tree; but, as is well known, the conception was speedily carried over into the provinces of metaphysics, of morals and, especially, of politics. The “Idea of the Whole” came increasingly to mean, in its practical application, the idea of the political State. The details of this process are exceedingly various and complex, and cannot be analyzed here; happily, Professor Anderson and Professor Briefs are to deal with some important parts of the story in their papers. But the general result of the repetition of this conception, by many greater and lesser teachers, in diverse forms and with or without qualifications, was the conditioning of the mind of individuals to think of themselves (to a degree perhaps unprecedented in history) as *mere* members of *das Ganze*, as “tools or organs” of the national State—as existing *um des Ganzen willen*—and as finding the interest and value of their existence in the realization of the ends of the State, which are by no means merely the summation of the private ends even of all of its members. Without a long prior conditioning, then, to this idea, among others, the totalitarian ideology would not, I suggest, have the potency that it has, either in Germany or Italy.

The distinguished president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Professor Cannon, in his recent presidential address, has argued that the political analogue of the biological organism is democracy, and that “the human body is the best democracy.” I venture to disagree, but there is no time to state the distinctions which would justify this disagreement. But in any case the historical effects of a conception, especially of one

⁹ *Kr. d. Urteilskraft*, Pt. II, 65; A288.

of the great metaphors which play so large a part in the history of ideas, are not necessarily, or, perhaps, normally identical with its logical implications; and it will, I think, be generally agreed by historians that the vogue of the organismic conception in the nineteenth century has *not* made for what is commonly understood by democracy.

2. But the practical tendency of this idea is profoundly modified by its fusion with another idea of the 1790s. This is the assumption of the primacy, in reality and in value, of process, striving, cumulative becoming, over any static consummation—the dislike of finality, *das Abgeschlossene*, and in particular, the peculiar sensibility to the pathos of struggle, which is, by necessary implication, a struggle *against* something or somebody, some *Anstoss* or antagonist. *Streben*, as everyone knows, was one of the most sacred words of the German Romantics—and it was necessarily, for them, a *Streben ins Unendliche*, a striving without a terminus; and in spite of the various other senses and applications which this formula could and did receive, its vogue tended in the main towards that apotheosis of “the Will” which, astonishingly combined in Schopenhauer with its polar opposite, a Vedantist and Buddhist quietism and otherworldliness, found its natural culmination in Nietzsche’s gospel of the *Wille zur Macht*, that “Dionysian philosophy” of which “the decisive feature,” as he writes in *Ecce Homo*, is “the yea-saying to contradiction and war, the postulation of Becoming, together with the radical rejection even of the concept *Being*”—the “tragic” temper which seeks “to be far beyond terror and pity and to be the eternal lust of Becoming itself—that lust which also involves the joy of destruction.”¹⁰ The notion of *Streben* was originally, and even in Nietzsche largely remained, an ideal for the individual. But it too, naturally enough, has been converted into a political idea; and Nietzsche, as Professor Brinton has shown,¹¹ has become the chief official philosopher of Nazism—after Hitler. But as a political idea, this second notion has been fused with the first. The individual, as essentially an organ of *das Ganze*, the State, does his striving through the

¹⁰ *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, tr. by A. M. Ludovici: *Ecce Homo*, p. 72. Part of the citation is quoted by Nietzsche himself from *The Twilight of the Idols (Götzendämmerung)*.

¹¹ Crane Brinton, “The National Socialists’ Use of Nietzsche,” *JOUR. OF THE HIST. OF IDEAS*, I, No. 2.

State, which is the embodiment of the Will to Power. If it is to be effective in this capacity, it must be completely integrated; it can permit no struggles within itself, between its parts—for example, no class-struggle and no party-conflicts. The parts must be strictly regimented, *gleichgeschaltet*, for the service of the whole. But the nation or State itself takes on the rôle of the insatiable Romantic hero—in which its members can, indeed, vicariously share. It must ever strive for expansion, external power, and yet more power, not as a regrettably necessary means to some final rationally satisfying goal, but because continuous self-assertion, transcending of boundaries, triumph over opposition, is its vocation. As the personification of the present German State, Adolf Hitler is Carlyle's "infinite bootblack" endowed with all the power of a great people and a vast military machine. It is true that, somewhere in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler shows, in one passage, some embarrassment at the thought of the finitude of this planet. When the "superior man," *der höchstehende Mensch*, through struggle has once made himself master of the world, there will be no more opportunity for struggle, but only a tedious reign of universal peace. But Hitler puts the awkward thought from his mind; the evil day is at least a long way off; *also, erst Kampf, und dann kann man sehen was zu machen ist*. Hitler is, in short, a kind of vulgar, political and sanguinary Faust, *der immer strebend sich bemüht* upon the international scene—a Faust, I need hardly add, before his redemption.

3. One of the most revolutionary of the ideas of the 1790s was an assertion of the value of diversity in human opinions, characters, tastes, arts and cultures. This had, it is true, a long pre-history, which cannot be told here;¹² but in the original German Romanticists of that decade it reached a climax and became one of the chief articles of their creed. It was revolutionary because it reversed a presupposition that had been dominant for some two centuries: the presupposition which may be called uniformitarianism. By this term I do not mean the assumption that individuals and peoples are *in fact* identical in their characters and beliefs and ways of living. It was evident—to the reformer of the Enlightenment all too painfully evident—that they are not. Uniformitarianism is the assumption that what is most important, most valuable,

¹² I have dealt with it more fully and tried to show its sources in *The Great Chain of Being*; see especially Lecture X.

normal, in men consists in what is the same in all men, and that their actual diversities in opinion and cultures and forms of government are evidences of departures from the norm of human life. And this was a natural and seemed an obvious inference from a very common assumption concerning the nature of truth. To any given question that can be asked or any practical problem with which men are confronted, it seemed evident that there can be only one true or correct answer. There is one right generic way of performing any kind of task—of writing a play or an epic, painting a landscape, building a house, organizing and governing a society—and (this was a postulate usually tacitly or explicitly associated with the uniformitarian preconception) any man having normal human faculties is capable of discovering the one true view or the one correct rule of practice, for himself, by the unaided—provided it be also the uncorrupted—light of nature. For there is, in that admittedly very mixed compound called human nature, a faculty, the *gemeine Menschenverstand*, which is the organ for apprehending or revealing the one true answer to any question to which an answer is needful for man, the universal and invariant objective truth. What is rational is uniform; and what is not uniform is *eo ipso* not rational; and diversity is therefore the easily recognizable mark of error. In a sense, every man has a latent potential knowledge of such truth, by virtue of his possession of *le bon sens ou raison* which, as Descartes declared, is *la chose du monde la mieux partagée* and is *naturellement égale en tous les hommes*—and therefore has nothing to do with time or place or race. But in most of mankind it has been buried under a vast mass of accumulated error—that is to say, of differences in beliefs, valuations, laws, practices. These errors were the product of a long, increasing series of unhappy accidents—*i.e.*, of lapses from rationality on the part of the multitude, misled by a few men actuated by the love of power—priests and kings. The vehicles of the transmission of these errors—what were called *les préjugés*—from generation to generation, were tradition, custom, (whose tyranny was so bitterly denounced by Montaigne and Charron and many lesser writers), and above all, the early education of children. The task of the lover of humanity, the reformer, the educator, therefore, was less to discover and show to men new truths, than to purge their minds of the historic accretion of non-rational prejudices, and thus to allow the pure, clear light of nature within them to shine forth of

itself. For, among all the extremely numerous senses of the sacred word "nature," in its normative use, from the sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, the most common and potent was that in which it summed up this whole uniformitarian complex of ideas.

But to the Romantics of the 1790s (following Herder) it appeared that the diversity of men and ages and peoples, in their ways of thinking and feeling and expressing themselves in arts and institutions, is "natural" and necessary, and also supremely desirable and right. And from this pregnant premise they drew two opposite consequences, of which the second was to prevail over the first. The assumption made initially for tolerance and catholicity. All the historic manifestations of human nature are good, and the cultivated man will train himself to appreciate and enjoy them all. But the other inference was that it is the first duty of an individual or a people to cherish and intensify the differentness, idiosyncrasy, *Eigentümlichkeit*, with which nature has endowed him or it. This, like the ideal of *Streben*, was, at the outset, applied largely to the individual, especially to the artist; but it also tended to be applied, and in the end to be chiefly applied, to the nation or race. So applied, it eventually destroyed, in many minds, the conception of a universal standard of human conduct and the sense of a common human destiny. It gave respectability to what the eighteenth century had meant by *les préjugés*. It seemed to lend a new philosophic sanction to that unreflective or animal nationalism which had long been a potent factor in European politics, but which, in the *Aufklärung*, had appeared to be on the wane among enlightened men. It tended to substitute for the piety towards humanity as such an exclusive piety towards one's own folk and its peculiarities; the very word "humanity," beloved by the earlier liberals, began to be *démodé*, and it became, as is well known, almost a commonplace in the Romantic period to say that there are no "men" but only Frenchmen, Germans, Englishmen, *et al.* Finally, when combined with that "permanent affective element of human nature," the collective, mutually re-enforcing *amour-propre* of the group, it was easily transformed into a conviction of the superiority of what is distinctive of one's own people—its "blood," its *Volksgeist*, traditions, *mores* and institutions—and of its right to dominate all lesser breeds.

Of these three among the ideas of the 1790s, any one, by itself, might have worked out to historic issues quite different from those

that actually resulted—and, in fact, when not combined with the others, did so. For example, if the first had not been combined with the third, the “whole” to which the individual is to subordinate himself and whose ends he is to seek might have been construed as humanity—which is, in fact, the only real social totality—and a tendency towards this interpretation may be seen in Novalis’s *Die Christenheit oder Europa*; and the second and third, when taken as ideals for the individual, have always been at variance with the first. But when, and in so far as, these three ideas are (however incongruously) combined, one may discern, I think, an important part (though, assuredly, far from all) of the pattern of ideas behind—or associated with—the fateful political events of our own time: the idea of a national State whose members are but instruments to its own vaster ends; in which, therefore, no internal oppositions or disagreements in individual opinion can be permitted; which, however, is itself dedicated to a perpetual struggle for power and self-enlargement, with no fixed goal or terminus, and is animated by an intense and obsessing sense of the differentness of its own folk, of their duty of *keeping* different and uncorrupted by any alien elements, and by a conviction of the immeasurable value of their supposedly unique characteristics and culture. A host of other factors and events between the 1790s and the present, of which nothing has been said here, have, of course, contributed to this outcome; I have merely attempted to suggest, in a deplorably but unavoidably sketchy fashion, that there is a certain specific historical connection between the intellectual revolution of the Romantic period and the tragic spectacle of Europe in 1940.

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