THE DEVELOPMENT AND EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH AND FRENCH ROMANTIC POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The Romantic Movement in the arts is often described as a “revolution.” However, artistic movements are inevitable progressions out of the periods preceding them, at first rising slowly, then accelerating, peaking, and eventually declining. Art also moves through space, following paths across national borders. When we trace the path through the times and places of Romanticism, the idea of evolution rather than revolution becomes more apparent.

This thesis investigates the development and evolution of French and English Romantic poetry. France and England have a special bond of history, political interference, conflict, adventure, and luck that deserve as much credit as artistic genius for the literary developments in both countries. Their artists continually form fast friendships and end up teaching and assisting each other in spite of the relations of their governments. I have tracked the evolution of Romantic poetry in these two countries beginning with Shakespeare. I follow literature through the political and sociological changes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the beginning and peak of English Romantic poetry. French Romantic poetry developed after English Romantic poetry was already in decline, and I explore how the English poets influenced the French who were a generation and a country removed.
The Romantic Movement coincided with the rapid and far-reaching sociological changes swayed and, as the pace of industrialization and democratization increased, eventually overtook this style of art. As the world changed, so did the styles, themes, and tones of Romantic poetry, although within each country, Romantic poetry encompassed a broad range of poems. I have attempted to highlight and explain these similarities and differences in English and French Romantic poetry by examining prominent themes, ideas about inspiration and imagination, and poetic form.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND APPROACH

The Romantic Movement in the arts is often described as a “revolution.” Major artistic movements often appear this way in hindsight, as if certain artists and their works suddenly appeared out of nowhere, anachronisms ahead of their time that took root and transformed culture, pulling it into their moment. These ideas may arise from the tendency to venerate the artist, or the constraints of time and energy that require us to be discriminating about which works we choose as representatives of an era, supposedly the best and most important, while we ignore lesser work, the majority. Finch and Peers, however, aptly describe the progress of literature as a sine wave, a continuous line with crests and troughs of equal height.¹ New artistic movements appear revolutionary when we look from peak to peak, but they are inevitable progressions out of the periods preceding them, at first rising slowly, then accelerating, peaking, then eventually declining, reaching bottom, and ascending again as something new. Théophile Gautier writes “poetry had been lost and was now found,”² a claim not of invention, but of restoration. Artistic movements are different now, but that basic continuous curve remains. What has changed is the frequency of the waves: Romanticism’s development, peak, and decline occurred over at least a century, and now artistic movements have lifespans measured in decades. We are as chronologically distant from the Romantics as

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they were from Shakespeare, but we are millennia away in content. The seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries seemed like yesterday to the Romantics.

Art also moves through space, following paths across national borders, like a person making a grand, meandering tour of Europe, and similarly, does not necessarily devote the same amount of time and attention to every place it visits. When we trace the path through the times and places that were described as “Romantic,” the idea of evolution rather than revolution becomes more apparent. For example, the French Romantic writers seem to have reached a consensus that one of their most important artistic forefathers was an English poet and playwright from over two centuries earlier, William Shakespeare, who had been held up at the border, so to speak, until a more liberal government came to power. English and French poets themselves acknowledge a debt to Milton, and Bloom and others argue more forcefully that Edmund Spenser’s “The Faerie Queen” and Milton’s “Paradise Lost” loom over English Romantic poetry. Not all Romantic poets remained faithful adherents to Romanticism, some even renouncing it. Moreover, French Romantic poetry, as will be explained later, begins in the late 1820s, when the most prominent English Romantic poets were already dead or, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, were writing little poetry.

This thesis will investigate the development and evolution of French and English Romantic poetry. My choice of French and English poetry is not capricious, and as my research has shown, this seems to be an obvious and interesting topic undertaken by  

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many talented literary critics before me, including, in fact, many Romantic French and English poets. Poetry is of particular interest for several reasons. Although poetry itself is ancient, and once formed the basis of how literary traditions were transmitted, orally, during the nineteenth century it moved from a public to a more private form of expression, where it remains today. Novelists and playwrights are generally mindful of audiences (no matter how severely they challenge them), but poetry, as I will demonstrate, reached a point during the Romantic era where it could liberate itself from the concerns of audience. Most poets also wrote plays, novels, or essays, but this new freedom in poetry allowed them most clearly and authentically to express their aesthetics and emotions. Poetry, although swayed by artistic movements, is less constrained by socioeconomics and can flourish in many types of conditions. Drama requires theaters, buildings or physical spaces, and novels are a commodity of a vast market enterprise comprising readers, booksellers, publishers, machinery, paper, ink. Remove any one of these, and there are no novels. Although how the novel proliferated as a result of changes in technology is an interesting topic, we can engage poetry without worrying about how such mundane factors affect its physical production. These elements do, however, influence the artist, and I will also include them in my discussion.

A precise definition of Romanticism’s style, techniques, theme does not exist, but we do not necessarily need one. The Oxford University *Grove Art* encyclopedia defines Romanticism as follows:

Dominant cultural tendency in the Western world in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It caused a re-evaluation of the nature of art and of the artist in society . . . . Romanticism was rejected or ignored by most of the major artists later seen as associated with it, but it nevertheless identified several key
tendencies of the period. Though hard to define precisely, it essentially involves: 1) placing emotion and intuition before (or at least on an equal footing with) reason; 2) a belief that there are crucial areas of experience neglected by the rational mind; and 3) a belief in the general importance of the individual, the personal, and the subjective. In fact, it embodies a critique of that faith in progress and rationality that had characterized the main trend of Western thought and action since the Renaissance. This resulted in an opposition to the dominant contemporary values and social structures.  

The phrase “embodies a critique” is important. Romanticism was not a philosophy, and it would have been a paradox if it were. It was concordant with a critique, expressed in actions and lifestyles as much as it was in theory, of Western thought, but was not itself the critique. Many Romantic writers explicitly avoided the didacticism that was a prominent characteristic of the arts that preceded it. If it were to have one quintessential slogan, it would perhaps be “l’art pour l’art” adopted by Théophile Gautier. This was a new statement of the purpose of art, but as will be explained, it was not necessarily intended to be self-serving. There was always an elliptical reference to the idea “because no longer is anything else sacred.” That is, Romanticism was not purely an artists’ movement, but expressed a nostalgia for and assimilation of emotional, spiritual, irrational, primal, atavistic aspects of culture and human experience that were being rapidly blotted out of existence by scientific, social, and industrial advances. It is never a description of what people were doing or what their condition was, and examination of their physical circumstances (that movement would follow), but a snapshot of what they

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were feeling, what they found beautiful, how they loved, that is, it explored and presented
“the deep-seated needs, concerns, and dreams of the men and women of the day.”

France and England have a special bond of history, political interference, conflict, adventure, and luck that deserve as much credit as artistic genius for the literary developments in both countries. They are like two feuding sisters, often at odds, but never quite determined to annihilate one another. Their artists continually form fast friendships and end up teaching and assisting each other in spite of the relations of their governments. The neoclassical style that preceded English Romanticism was imported from France by Charles II, who was given refuge there during the period of the Commonwealth of England. This changed the direction of English literature from, if they are truly the proto-Romantics, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton. Napoleon, who promoted a kind of French linguistic chauvinism, did, however, welcome the work of the Scots-English poet Ossian (the persona of the James Macpherson) into his library.

English poets, particularly Wordsworth, explicitly expressed their debt to French ideas and French historical events, such as those of Jean Jacques Rousseau and the French Revolution, but did not have French poet contemporaries.

During the French Revolution, however, England in kind became a refuge for French aristocrats, most notably with regards to Romantic literature, François-René viscount de Chateaubriand. Chateaubriand did not leave much of a poetic legacy, but

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shaped early French romantic prose, poetry, and literary theory. He was an Anglophile, bringing back with him an appreciation of Shakespeare and Byron, and especially Milton, creating a French translation of “Paradise Lost” in blank verse (a hitherto unknown form) and championing Milton to the French as a greater poet than Homer or Dante.¹ His affinity for Byron, however, really caught on and reached a level of idolatry among the first generation of French Romantic poets. They even felt compelled to emulate his dress and lifestyle; a proper poet was supposed to look like Byron.²

The incompatibilities between the two countries are also worth investigating. Coleridge believed that the French language was unsuitable for his poetry, and the French poets did not give Wordsworth and Coleridge serious readings.³ Later in his life, Chateaubriand would create a large, two-volume survey of English literature in which he only mentions Coleridge and Wordsworth in a list of “working class” poets who restored the ballad.⁴ Although the French poets revered Byron, they paid almost no attention to his friend and artistic brother Shelley.⁵ Moreover, despite the mania for Byron’s personal look, the French Romantic poets never seriously attempted to emulate the spirit and style of his work.

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Focusing on these two countries is not meant to imply that they were closed to other influences. Another large, prolific tradition was that of Germanic writers, including those like Johann von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, who wrote in German, and northern writers of other Germanic languages. In terms of dating and duration, German Romanticism bracketed this period in both France and Britain. The beginnings of German Romanticism can be traced to Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*, published in 1774, and arguably was prominent until German unification in 1871. Romanticism was also had the broadest influence in Germany, influencing, drama, poetry, music, opera, painting, and architecture.

French and English poets, although they read and admired the Germans, were nevertheless ambivalent about their works. German literature was not monolithic, but was known for the highly emotional and melodramatic “sturm und drang” (storm and stress) style that featured (perhaps improbable) suicides, unhealthy sexual encounters, crime, and the supernatural. Although Romantics wanted to free themselves from the classicist expectation that art should imitate nature, German works were a bit too unreal. Wordsworth believed they were “sickly and stupid” and degrading to English literature, opinions echoed by Coleridge, Walter Scott, and most others who deemed themselves spokespeople for the national literature. Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” can be viewed as a repair of the German style, in which the supernatural and melodramatic elements are not present just to stimulate or excite the emotions of the

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reader, but to create a mood in which the reader engages in introspection and reflection about the protagonist’s actions and fate.\textsuperscript{13}

Although the Germans did excite the imaginations of the later French poets in their youth, it was only the superficial elements that did so; the deeper symbolic meanings of the mysterious and mystical elements eluded them, because they were unique to German culture.\textsuperscript{14} Perhaps most importantly, Napoleon’s military doctrine included vehement Francophone imperialism, a perfectly logical idea if one follows Machiavelli. He tried to stabilize his precarious empire by eradicating differences and making all of Europe French.\textsuperscript{15} England escaped any imposition of French superiority, but the Germans did not, and resisted vehemently. After Napoleon’s defeat, they tried to isolate themselves from French influences and purify their literature. Art and culture tend to spread best as conversations, but with the Germans only willing to speak German, so to speak, their literature necessarily contained less of value to the French poets.

Even prior to Napoleon, Romanticism on continental Europe is often associated with burgeoning nationalist movements. Germany did not exist as a unified country until 1871, Austro-Hungary was a mosaic of several different cultures, which Napoleon shattered, and in the middle sat Switzerland, comprising French, Germans, and Italians who had eluded any particular empire. France and Britain, however, were coherent political and cultural entities. Regional writing was occurring, most prominently the

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 56-66.

\textsuperscript{14} George, \textit{The Development of French Romanticism}, 30.

wave of poetry and prose in the Scots dialect, but the Romantic poets were not preoccupied in what it meant to be British (that is English) or French. Britain’s territory was defined by its occupying an island, and France had natural borders around it, except in the northeast. Britain was politically stable, which engendered a prosperous merchant and middle class. Although France would undergo numerous changes in its political regime, it had a strong sense of cultural unity. It had a governing body for language and culture, the Academie Francaise, which dated from 1635, which, even to the relatively liberal Romantics, allowed for a certain amount of cultural confidence—the French language was real and eternal—if not snobbery. Many Romantic writers, in fact, would become members of the Academie. Although, due to political circumstances, French and English poets did not have the same levels of confidence and optimism about their lives, they were at least confident in their national identities. What it meant to be French or British was largely a settled question. Their works often turn to questions of identity of a higher order, what it meant to a citizen of the world or to exist at a point in history.

German writers had no coherent national identity, and first attached themselves to regions, none of which could claim ownership of all the essential German ingredients. Thematically one finds many works asserting a particular Volk, a specific, homogenous people bound by language, culture, and geography. Poets including Goethe engaged in myth making, trying to simulate quintessential German folk songs, to rediscover folk culture through invention by creating authentic-sounding folk tales.\footnote{Blanning, \textit{The Romantic Revolution}, 115-120.} These often had a
definite, anti-aristocrat or autocrat (portrayed as outsiders or foreigners) agenda. It was a powerful, populist theme, and literature was meant to hearten people that autonomy, stability and unity had eluded. In the heart of German-speaking Switzerland, the quintessential expression of “Swissness” was and still is Friedrich Schiller’s play *Wilhelm Tell*, which is based on folk figure from over five centuries earlier. Napoleon caused them to redouble their efforts, until artistic statements of nationalism were becoming part of an almost paranoid fanaticism for late Romantics like Richard Wagner. Social injustice certainly was prevalent in Britain or France, but to the extent they still had a problem with aristocrats or autocrats, at least they were their own.

One could continue for many more pages to compare and contrast France, Britain, and Germany. Suffice it to say that during the Romantic era, although slightly out of step, France and Britain were proceeding on similar historical and cultural paths. In fact, the Battle of Waterloo would be the last time in history that the British and French armies would face each other on a battlefield. Not so for Germany which still had many unsettled questions of creating identity and asserting it, all reflected in its literature. It is apparent reading Romantic German literature now, and I believe it was apparent to the French and English Romantic poets as well. There is more than enough material in French in English literature to reveal their Romantic poetry without worrying about ignoring the Germans.

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This thesis makes critical examinations of poems that illustrate points about history, sociology, and the themes of the artists, or serve as turning points for new trends. For example, Victor Hugo’s poem “Réponse à un Acte d’Accusation” is a reflection on the French Romantics anti-classical use of language and the controversy it caused. The poets themselves were prolific critics and literary historians. They definitely had an impulse to prove their legitimacy through claims of artistic ancestry, theoretical discussions about form and style, and robust critiques of their predecessors and rivals. These works also provide insights into events, people, and ideas that have been forgotten or are often overlooked by later critics. Romantic poetry was as much an expression of thoughtful, eccentric genius as it was of youthful vanity and enthusiasm. These poets expressed their passion not only in emotional intensity of their poetry, but also in great joy, warmth, and friendship for each other. Many times friendships provide the simplest explanations of an artist’s influences and origins of his or her ideas. The later literary scholarship I consulted has generally observed the importance of these relationships, and has provided helpful summaries of a body of letters and prose writings too enormous to handle in this work. Most of the scholarly work I have consulted, however, has been in the same genre as this thesis is intended to be, literary history.

I discuss in the next three sections with important historical and biographical events, and dates of publications. I will also explain the primary characteristics and themes of different poetic styles. For example, Shakespeare was neither a classicist nor a Romantic, but, for several specific reasons, he was more readily acknowledged as a forefather of the latter style. I devote the rest of this section to following this timeline
and connecting people, places, and events. I do not allow art and history to dominate, because socioeconomics prove to be extremely important. Part of my purpose is to show that Romanticism was very much a product of its times, and it coincided with the industrial and middle class revolutions. The importance for writers of the expansion in literacy and the publication industry cannot be overstated. For the study of Romantic poets, biography does matter, because one cannot be a Romantic poem without coloring one’s work with one’s experiences, emotions, and subjective judgments. I include brief biographies of a few key figures, but only the details relevant to the discussion of poetry. However, many of the Romantics’ literary ancestors barely mattered as people per se, and their names were synonymous with their works. For example, “Milton” can mean “Paradise Lost,” or simply the character of Satan in that poem. Because Milton’s biography was not of interest to the Romantics, I have not included it in my discussion of him. I have, however, devoted some space to Napoleon, who, although he seemed to have almost no aesthetic sensibility, ranked with God and Satan as major figures the French poets would have to deal with.

The fifth section addresses dominant themes in poetry, where they came from, and how they evolved. Romantic poetry is especially fascinating because it is so flexible; it is not so much a question of what you write about, but how you approach it. Romantic poets pondered antiquity, Satan, locomotives, grandchildren, friendship, love and relationships (of course), politics, and history. Ironically, when one considers the diversity of themes, a more precise definition of the movement emerges, because it becomes less a matter of subject and object, but of perspective. There are numerous
thematic choices to consider, but I have chosen to explore just two, Nature and love, and the relationship between the two.

The final section is devoted to a fifth theme, one explicitly explored in many poems, and implied in all of them, the Romantic conception of art and the artist. In classical literature, art imitated nature. Rules and conventions were established on how best to create this artificial reality. This did not necessarily limit creativity or ingenuity, because formal classicism did indeed produce many masterpieces. But it did suppress imagination, where arguably most of the human experience occurs. In order to reintroduce imagination, to represent emotion, or internal realism, the poet had to tap into his or her own personality. What art could express was potentially unlimited, extending as far as the poet’s feelings or fancy. What the poets struggled with, however, were the limits of their powers of expression. Romantic writers also worried about over-indulging the imagination, and talked about their dismay at certain artists that were grotesquely eccentric, or ideas that did not seem fit for poetry.

Poets also faced external obstacles. The middle-class was literally devouring popular art and culture, which forced the poets from the mainstream to the fringes of art, where they, for the most part, remain today. Whether or not to compromise for the sake of popularity became a weighty concern as the poet mulled over his or her integrity and simply earning enough money to eat; there were no longer patrons subsidizing poets. Poets also contended with censorship and entrenched literary tastes often expressed in harsh criticism. The French poets would also identify with another figure, Napoleon, a man who had used his talent and ambition to lift himself from obscurity to become a god,
and would have to fight endlessly to maintain his status. The poets were all too aware that despite his efforts, to obscurity Napoleon was returned.
CHAPTER 2

SHAKESPEARE AND CLASSICISM

The Beginnings and Shakespeare

Literature, like language or any human activity, is the culmination of everything that preceded it, but in order to have a beginning for the development of Romanticism, I begin with Shakespeare. This is not for the obvious reasons of the quantity and quality of his work, his legacy to the English language, the remarkable relevance his works have had across eras, and the amount of attention devoted to him. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, his almost universal appeal had not yet occurred, and one often overlooked product of the Romantic era is the proselytization of his art outside of England.

At the most superficial level, Shakespeare represents English drama in general. English drama brought high art to the masses who, due to low levels of literacy, could primarily access it through the spoken word. England was hardly democratic in the modern sense and did not grant unlimited artistic freedom to its artists, often politically censoring them, and its writers and poets were also constrained by self-imposed standards and popular tastes. However, compared to other countries, English writers did not suffer under the heavy hand of autocratic control of the arts or any official governing body, and English literature has, perhaps more than that of most European countries, has generally been more democratic in the sense that its quality derives from the interaction between the artist and the people.
French literature is a striking contrast. By the late of the sixteenth century, French
drama was on a radically different path due to its government and the disposition of the
people, as Cazamian explains:

The readiness of the French mind to accept values that met its needs of clearness,
regularity and order had much to do with a choice that settled the fate of dramatic
art in France for more than two centuries. It was a basic fact of temperament, and
accounts for the difference between the average tastes of audiences in the Paris of
Henry III [who ruled until 1589] and in Elizabethan London. . . . [W]e know from
manifold evidence . . . that a desire for easier satisfactions and for a pleasant
relaxation of all strains was ingrained in the main body of French playgoers.
Again and again throughout the process of development we meet with plays that
demanded no effort and brought cheaper pleasure to the crowd.¹

In the seventeenth century, France embarked on the era of “classical” literature while the
French public was content with lower forms of art. Moreover, the differences between
high and low art, and who had access to them, would be officially codified, and high
poetry and drama would also conform to the values and conventions of the aristocracy, as
defined by the king. Consequently, to the French Romantic poets, Shakespeare
represented a point in history that had never occurred in France, where in the forum of
the theater, the masses encountered high art for the public. So important was it for them
to find legitimacy for their style in the past that “Shakespeare” was first a “battle-cry” for
specific type of theater experience—exciting, engaging, and accessible—before he came
to be more fully understood as a specific model for new drama.²

Romantic poets in both England and France were also bedeviled by a crisis of
“negative imitation,” that is, being limited to rejecting principles of classical poetry

² M. B. Finch and E. Allison Peers, The Origins of French Romanticism (London: Constable and
Company, 1920), 254-256.
without a positive assertion of their own. Writers such as Wordsworth, Chateaubriand, Germaine de Staël, and Hugo, who engaged in a critical theory of Romanticism, however, succeeded in distinguishing themselves as more than “anti-classicists,” relying on historical precedents, contemporary influences, and aesthetics that were not always new, but perhaps expressed formally for the first time. The French poets in particular, having few models in the preceding two centuries, felt the need to seek literary icons to anchor themselves to. The names of “Shakespeare” and “Milton” were general references to style and principles of practice. De Staël set a goal for France in the eighteenth century to develop a true people’s literature, noting that French literature had been almost wholly aristocratic, whereas Shakespeare was read and viewed by the lowest classes in England, and was a fundamental part of English cultural identity.

Shakespeare, both fiercely loved and fiercely hated, and sometimes both by the same person, caused somewhat of a hysteria in France. Gautier relates the anecdote of Jules Vabre, an eccentric architect, who had sentimental adoration of Shakespeare, “excessive, even in a Romanticist caenaculum.” In order to bring to France the most perfect translation of Shakespeare attainable, one that is true to every nuance of the English language and culture, Vabre moved to London to completely immerse himself in English culture, and, carrying this to the extreme, ended remaking himself as an ideal

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English gentleman.\(^6\) Voltaire initially admired greatly the vitality of Shakespeare’s work, despite its “barbarity,” bad taste, and ignorance of the classical unities,\(^7\) but after seeing these elements show up in French drama, would later try to “exorcize the demon he had let loose on the French stage,” and harshly denounced him.\(^8\) To the French Romantics, Shakespeare also exaggerated the crisis of how stale and impotent (that is, polite and tasteful) French literature had become. During an 1822 performance of *Othello*, a rare authentic interpretation of the play, Parisian theater-goers threw rotten apples and rioted.\(^9\) Seven years later, this odd event was repeated when Alfred de Vigny’s translation of *Othello* was also booed off the stage.\(^10\) These events heightened Shakespeare’s prestige among the younger French Romantics, who dreamed of shocking the public and raising its expectations for literature.

We should retrace our steps and explore what happened in English and French literature between Shakespeare and the Romantic period. France until 1660 was a period marked by the stabilization of French government and culture under “a unifying desire for the victory of rule.”\(^11\) The French Ministry of State, first under Cardinal Richelieu, took charge of solidifying national defense and quelling the rebelliousness of the aristocracy in order to place “a vigorous stamp of unity and order upon all aspects of

\(^6\) Ibid., 59-64.


With regard to France’s literary history, Richelieu’s most important contribution was the creation of the Académie Française in 1635, ostensibly organized to standardize the grammar and style of official government communications. Its prestige attracted many successful writers, who took advantage of their positions to set standards for all literature. Needless to say, writers principally with conservative tastes were attracted to such an enterprise, but the rules and standards needed a more robust justification than the consensus of opinion, so the Académie sought a logic for aesthetics in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Thus Classicism became the model.

The precepts of French Classicism dictated that artists should, through ingenuity and hard work, strive for the utmost verisimilitude of nature. In drama, this meant the imposition of the classical unities of time, place, and action, which were supposed to make drama appear more real, and therefore rational, because a play is structured as if the audience were witnessing an actual event and not a performance. This explains why Shakespeare’s plays, with plots that can span decades and vast geographic distances, were not considered to be in the proper style. Importantly, imitation of nature did not include imitation of common speech, another of Shakespeare’s sins, for the reason that language was art and not nature, and therefore common language was simply poor art. Classicism did not intend to impose cold logic upon the characters, that is, to strip sentiment from poetry and drama. However, emotion was required to fall within a range of normal, tasteful behavior, and eccentric characters were generally antagonists, fallen

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 151-155.
protagonists (the Greek principle of hubris leading to tragedy being very much employed), or ridiculous comic figures serving to lampoon real individuals or groups of persons (for example, foreigners) whose behavior violated refined cultural norms.

French Classicism’s dominance was cemented in 1661 by the assumption of personal rule by Louis XIV. He proved to be the perfect monarch with the will to enforce the endeavors of the French Ministers of State to regulate French culture and politics. Asserting his absolute power and divine right to rule, Louis moved to homogenize the French aristocracy according to his own tastes. All aspects of court life were subject to rigorous standards of etiquette, standards that entertainment and arts for the court were required to reinforce. Order and propriety were the values of Louis XIV’s rein, and the aesthetics the Académie Française was advocating were perfectly suitable. Louis became a great advocate for literary classicism and a protector and patron of its finest practitioners, who had no viable alternative in generally poor quality mass entertainment. Thus, the division in art and entertainment between that of the aristocracy (high art) and that of the masses (low art) became institutionalized. This split proved to be so persistent that the French Romantic writers would struggle with the same dichotomy. Tradition would be the one of the greatest obstacles confronting de Staël’s dream of a high quality national literature.

Drama was radically changed by classicism, but the standards and regularity imposed on it elevated the craft, and, coupled with a favorable cultural and political

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environment, drama flourished, reaching a golden age under Louis XIV. Ironically, this proliferation of talent and literary works left little of value for the French Romantics who followed. For several reasons, French classicism dealt such a blow to poetry that the Romantic poets doubted whether they had any kind of tradition to refer to, which only encouraged their inclinations toward English poetry. Poetry became subject to a quasi-official doctrine that can be summed up as follows:

Poetry is no longer divinely inspired, but the forcible expression of sustained thought; it may be moved and moving, but should be all means preserve its clear balance. Let the poet labour and prune untiringly: it is a craft to write lines, as to play ninepins. If the words are aptly selected and combined, beauty will arise, whether the thought be original or not. A good writer must avoid dialect or vulgarisms, and use only terms in their purest sense; the laws of grammar must never be allowed to suffer for the sake of poetic measure . . . As for similes, they must be confined cautiously within the actual possibilities of nature.  

A student of literature might find something austere or shocking about such a doctrine, but it is worth noting that this definition of poetry embodies the expectations of the non-literary public—that is, the majority of the public that does not participate in the scholarship, criticism, or writing of literature as an art form—even to the present day. This trivializes the emotional content of poetry, and reduces it to an exercise in skillful, but seemingly effortless, use of rhyme and meter to express with good taste and wit astute insights about nature and the world, that is, poetry is distinguished from common rhymes according to its level of sophistication. However, the most talented French writers of the time were receiving the most fame and attention as dramatists, and dilettante courtiers took up poetry as an exercise to flaunt the quantity of their charm and wit.  

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16 Ibid., 234.
of talent led to a period of dormancy for French poetry, or rather a self-reinforcing
tradition of mediocrity that was not challenged until the Romantic era.

Classicism came to England by way of an altogether different and unusual path.
King Charles I had tried to exert autocratic control over the state, but unlike France, had
to compete with another official governing body, the English Parliament. The coalition
controlling Parliament were also religious and cultural foes of the King, who was accused
of moving the Church of England closer to Roman Catholicism and of suppressing
Puritan groups. What also lay beneath this was the King’s cavalier handling of power
and the English treasury. The emerging powers of Puritanical rule, to demonstrate
“moral superiority above the Court and its decadent entertainments,” closed the public
theaters by an act of Parliament in 1642 and later demolished many of them, depriving
the Puritan’s opponents, which probably included every theatergoer, of public gathering
spaces. 17 From 1642 to 1649, England was plunged in two civil wars pinning
Parliamentary forces against those of the King, which ended with Charles’ capture,
conviction for treason, and execution; the abolition of the monarchy; and the
establishment of the Commonwealth of England. Although the monarchy would be
restored and Britain would have powerful, iconic kings and queens in the future, 1649
effectively ended any possibility of a British monarch establishing absolute rule. The
English middle-class had staked its claim to power, almost a century-and-a-half before
the French.

17 J. Douglas Canfield, introduction to The Broadview Anthology of Restoration and Early
An ironic outcome of the Commonwealth is that one of its most unrepentant religious and political adherents was also one of the greatest English language poets, John Milton. Milton is, in fact, one of the only artists to be associated with the Commonwealth, and he published his “Paradise Lost” in 1664. Despite being a political outcast until his death, he wrote poetry that was enthusiastically embraced by most English poets who followed and that inspired Romantic poets, who were drawn to his style and language and were perhaps unaware of or overlooked the fact that those who shared his theological outlook would likely have been bitter enemies of Romanticism. Here again we seem to have another poet as a symbol rather than the reality of the person himself. Milton stylistically was not a classicist, and “Paradise Lost” is a reimagining, or more accurately an invention, of a Christian myth relevant to the ordinary Protestant.

Charles II had fled to France in 1651 and had participated in the French court—his father was also a great admirer of the French aristocracy—and when the English monarchy was restored in 1660 (almost exactly coinciding with Louis XIV’s personal rule), he set about rebuilding English arts and the English court according to the French model. He was likely motivated not only by an appreciation of the French style, but also by irritating his Puritan rivals with importing the aristocratic culture of a Catholic country. During the Restoration period, Charles II was the ultimate patron of the arts, like his French counterpart, and took personal interest in the theater as an “ideological state apparatus,” also like his French counterpart. However, Charles was not Louis, and had a great and self-deprecating sense of humor, and he and the monarchs who followed

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18 Ibid.
had little taste for the pomposity of French arts. The distance between the English Crown and the people was small compared to that of the French: Charles was an Englishman and not the Sun King that Louis XIV envisioned himself as. Shakespeare was also restored to an honored place in the repertory, but new plays were needed, and were created according a distinctly English type of classicism.

Charles II’s political position was continually threatened, and, with writers’ loyalties purchased via patronage, drama and poetry were frequently used against the King’s bourgeoisie opponents. Rather than exalting the King and policing the court, literature took on the imperative of anti-middle class propaganda. In English poetry, “classical canons of versification . . . exercised less authority,” allowing it the flexibility to flourish in this era, although its overt didacticism and venom would render much of useless to the Romantics. John Dryden, the archetype of this type of poetry, wrote many exceptional works of satirical snobbery such as ”Religio Laici,” a scathing criticism of low Protestant Churches, and “Absalom and Achitophel,” a satire of political intrigues against the monarchy. Much of his satirical poetry, with its digressions and crude humor, would have been considered in extremely poor taste according to French standards. By the end of the seventeenth century, the monarchy was marginalized,

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19 Homans, *Apollo’s Angels*, 51-52.
20 Ibid., xiv.
22 The Restoration was marked by numerous political maneuvers that are reflected in its literature. I have chosen not to discuss them in greater detail because they are not relevant to our topic.
although not abolished, when Parliament took control of accession. English literature would never again be an instrument of a monarch.

Although England was not as neatly arrayed politically and culturally as France, its condition was characteristic of the greater freedom of the people. In addition, the so-called Age of Enlightenment came much earlier to England: the Restoration was also the Age of Newton. Any kind of similar activity in France would have to wait until Louis XIV’s death in 1714. Humanism and the permanent debilitation of the monarchy meant that English literature was perpetually conjoined with the common people, not that it had ever been otherwise. Ironically, English neoclassicism had its own demands for order in propriety, but these were in regard to behavior of the common people. Joseph Addison and Richard Steele published pamphlets instructing the middle class on taste and manners. Satire softened to more gently reinforce these principles and the literature of the first half of the eighteenth portrays the solidification of bourgeoisie ideology.¹² English Romantic poetry would never have to struggle to escape aristocratic enslavement.

It is worth noting that despite Romanticism’s protestations against the Enlightenment, its neo-classicism represented a progression toward Romanticism. Specifically, it was marked by the resumption of humanistic subject matter that had formed the primary basis of Renaissance art. This humanism, however, was only interested in that which could be measured empirically, the material conditions of human existence, and could be seen more as a pre-cursor to the movements that followed Romanticism, naturalism and realism. Regardless, with the artist’s attention once again

²³ Canfield, introduction to Restoration Drama, xvi-xvii.
focused on the humanity, the change in emphasis from physical to emotional condition seems relatively a minor.

The Enlightenment’s appeal was as apparent then as it is today. It empowers individual to divine truths that eluded theology:

By rooting knowledge in the universally shared powers of the human mind, the philosophes could make an end run around religions claiming corners on truth. Now, anyone could know the truth. No ordination was needed; no papal robes were required. One needed only to open one’s eyes and use one’s head. Moreover and delightfully, the kind of knowledge that these newly celebrated rational faculties afforded was precisely the clear-picture knowledge that the old religions kept promising. What's in your head is a precise copy of what's out there in the world. If you put it in words, and then write them out on paper, voila, you’ve captured the world on a page and recorded it in a book. Such are the enticement[s] of the Enlightenment.

Western thought up until that time had almost entirely been based on logic and theory which closed philosophy off to all but a few who understood its rules and premises. The Enlightenment stood for observation and experimentation, and the development of the scientific method. The basic principles of scientific method are so well established, and seemingly so self-evident, that it is almost staggering to consider how little experimentation had occurred until the Enlightenment. Regardless, the Enlightenment’s defect was one of exclusion: it did not necessarily constrain or suppress the arts, but its scope was simply too limited to fully encompass them. That which could not be studied, such as the numerous irrational actions that comprise human existence, was not studied, and was therefore trivial due to its lack of empirical basis.

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I do not think this is a particularly convincing criticism, and although it persists today, the idea that “the things that are not science are not useful because they are not science” is a flimsy tautology. The majority of people spend the majority of their days taking science almost completely for granted, living their lives according to tradition, ideology, emotion, and instinct. The Enlightenment’s failing to account for these things and setting them aside, as it were, benefited the Romantics, because by failing to fully include the arts, it effectively relinquished control of them. The Romantics’ possession of the creative and irrational does not explain why science was essentially optimistic, whereas Romanticism was often melancholy and pessimistic. These traits could not necessarily be blamed on disappointment with the Enlightenment, because science made no emotional promises to break. As will be discussed, many other factors colored Romantic art.

*The Novel*

As Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* writes, “Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine;—they are the life, the soul of reading.”25 In order to understand the genealogy of Romantic poetry, we must make a slight diversion and briefly examine the development of the eighteenth-century novel. The novel was still a new form of literature, and one that was tailor-made for mass consumption. Yet in the eighteenth century, the novel had not yet settled into the remarkably consistent orthodox form that remains with us today, the ubiquitous “person, plot, character, setting, and theme”

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construction used to ruin school children’s appreciation for imagination and language. The novel was an unsettled form, and writers experimented with structures that still seem unconventional or innovative. Romanticism was in particular influenced by three English novelists, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Laurence Sterne.

The existence of the novel itself represents the victory of the middle class as the audience for literature, and that audience wanted to read about “characters, neither great nor mean, but just ordinary people with ordinary ambitions.”26 Classicism at its purest did not contain a notion of this idea, and although English dramatic comedy, still compliant with the classical unities, would accommodate this demand, tragedy, where the artist could more fully explore human psychology, would not. That is, the bourgeoisie simply was not important enough for classical tragedy. Richardson’s Clarissa is a romance in the modern connotation of the word, that is, ordinary and sentimental. Every culture had folk stories and traditional romances, but the English novel had opened an avenue to a contemporary rendering of romance to the masses, and the epistolary form of Clarissa helped portray human emotion and psychology in the protagonist’s own voice.

Richardson, however, seems not to be a direct influence on the Romantic poets. His novels were best sellers in England, and it goes without saying that they would be part of the literary tradition of the English Romantic writers, but his influence is certainly more prominent in the evolution of the Romantic novel than of poetry. English poets would be indebted to him because of Rousseau’s borrowing of Richardson’s plot and

form for Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse. However, Rousseau moved beyond Richardson’s sentiment toward more sincere emotion with depictions of imagination and passion that were accessible to but not necessarily realized by the average person, a major theme of Romantic poetry. Two generations after his death, Richardson would be lauded in France by writers such as Chateaubriand who were assembling the raw materials (significantly dominated by the English) for their own Romantic poetry. For reasons similar to why Shakespeare resonated with the French, Clarissa provided not so much a form to imitate, but represented the psychological exposition of the common voice that French literature lacked.

Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, published in 1719, would be important for different reasons. However, as was the case with Richardson’s novels, the English Romantic poets would draw inspiration from Defoe via the innovations introduced by Rousseau. The story of Robinson Crusoe is well known even to people who have not read the novel. Crusoe a merchant trader is shipwrecked on an island and, due to Anglo-Saxon virtue and ingenuity, survives for twenty-eight years building a small civilization of his own, even teaching a native whom he names “Friday” English and converting him to Christianity. The exposition of the plot of this novel is in the form of Crusoe’s journal entries.

Defoe was writing well within the bounds of tastes of the time. The French and English publics became more aware of the native inhabitants of their countries’ colonial holdings, and English writers had been incorporating primitive themes into their works for several decades. John Dryden, in fact, coined the phrase “noble savage” in his 1672

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27 Ibid., 63.
play The Conquest of Granada. The main idea behind primitivism and noble savages is an Enlightenment, humanist notion of innate morality. Primitive people were neither derided nor idealized; they represented the somewhat condescending principle that they, although not necessarily virtuous in their natural state, had the capability and the unarticulated desire to adopt Western ethics and culture. These characters were often contrasted against immoral European characters in order to call greater attention to the level of their corruption. Rousseau, however, seems to have interpreted Robinson Crusoe from his own unique perspective, namely, that the process of imbuing virtue worked in reverse. The primitive state was the source of it and not merely receptive to it. So taken was he by the novel that he proposed that an ideal education for children should include only this book for the study of literature.28

Sterne’s The Life and Times of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman published in volumes between 1759 and 1767, reaches the Romantic poets directly, and its content and form helped shape the Romantic aesthetic. Sterne’s novel contains no proper plot; the narrator is trying to tell his life story, but Sterne, challenging the Enlightenment itself, uses the work to show that the fundamental building block of the humanist endeavor, a single human life, is too complex to be neatly categorized and studied. Most of the work is devoted to the narrator’s trying to unravel the variety of common events and accidents that led just to the circumstances of his birth. In doing so, he also challenges all the assumptions of narration, that realism and authenticity is supremely artificial in that it

28 Ibid., 64.
must pretend that any story comprises discrete events. Satire is heightened by the fact that Shandy is portrayed as a highly learned, literate man of his time, but he is capable of merely “insanely abstruse scholarship and . . . elaboration of minutiae.”

Epistolary novels that strive to simulate authentic rendering of human thoughts, like those that one might record in a journal or a letter to a close relation, end up being false because they abide by an unspoken agreement between writer and audience that the writing be orderly and understandable. In reality, when one re-reads one’s own journal, one often cannot understand the writing nor remember the reason for writing all of it. That does not necessarily make the exercise abstract or useless, because what survives are intimations of sentiment, whimsy, or imagination, and the writing eventually does arrive at a point, although one might be bewildered as to how one got there. Moreover, the purpose for writing is often accidental and does not necessarily arrive at an ultimate event; unforeseeable events that follow will alter the importance and relevance of the text. That journal entries or letters could neatly lead the reader to a future conclusion that is unknown to the writer is absurd, or at least highly unlikely. Shandy does have some vague sense of leading us to a point, but it is a point in a life in progress, and he never arrives at where he set out to. This is the aesthetic Sterne portrays, a reality that delves straight into the source of all experience, human perception, thought, and imagination at the moment. One can compare this to Victor Hugo’s explanation for the voluminous

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29 Peter Conrad, preface to *Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. x.
30 Ibid., ix.
31 Ibid., vii.
amount of poetry he produced, that he worked from pure inspiration, wrote once, and
never revised. The English Romantic poets, bypassing the novel for the most part, found
a model in *Tristram Shandy*:

The long poems of the Romantics, which are loose, vagrant compendia of
consciousness, [are] proudly incomplete because their vital imperative is to
continue growing. Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, subtitled ‘Growth of a Poet’s Mind’,
was itself only the prelude to another even longer poem which remained
unwritten. Like Tristram . . . Wordsworth can only move forwards by traveling
nostalgically backwards. . . . Equally Shandyean is Coleridge’s epic of frustrated
intellectual quest, *Biographia Literaria*, the haphazard, abortive record of a mind
incapable of walking in a straight line. Coleridge, who like Tristram saw the
procrastinating Hamlet as a self-image, looked to *Tristram Shandy* as a
justification of his waywardness: ‘hence the digressive spirit is not wantonness,
but the *very form* of his genius.’

Thus Sterne serves both as a model and an apology for the poet not to “labour and prune
untiringly.” Sterne also refined the Romantic hero “tearing aside the outer wrappings of
reasons and self-control [and] revealing man as that creature of instinct, the sport of
destiny, tossed by indecision and racked by doubt.” The messiness of human life that a
classicist might label as grotesque is, in fact, real.

In its service to the English Romantic poets, *Tristram Shandy* would necessarily
influence the French Romantic poets who would come of age 60 years after its final
volume was published. But Sterne was popular in France even in his own lifetime. The
French, however, did not foresee his association with this new form, “Romanticism,” that
would eventually cause much consternation to orthodox literature. (Rousseau was either
unaware of Sterne or simply ignored him). Sterne was invited to France and lived there

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32 Ibid., xxi.

from 1760 to 1763, associating with the most prominent French *philosophes*, the Enlightenment thinkers of the day.\textsuperscript{34} Denis Diderot, the chief editor of the *Encyclopédie*, the first compendium of all human knowledge, called him “a kindred spirit.”\textsuperscript{35} French writers vied for the honor of translating Sterne’s work, and even Voltaire participated in the “extravagant adulation.”\textsuperscript{36}

French writers’ attraction to Sterne was twofold. First, whereas the Romantic poets perhaps saw in it the futility of the Enlightenment and the sanction to simply accept things as they were, the *philosophes* were optimistic that Sterne had at least defined their greatest problem. *Tristram Shandy* was one of the Western world’s first meta works in that it was “the precise image of the human subject [because] [i]ts fractures and disjunctions stand for the inequality within man between mental conception and physical execution.”\textsuperscript{37} Not only is the work explicitly about itself, one cannot discuss it without being aware of the possibility of one’s own discussion lapsing into precisely the same digressions the work portrays. All understanding is incomplete, and thorough knowledge requires following an infinite number of paths that extend infinitely in all directions. For every cause that is discovered, the question of what caused it immediately arises. It is precisely this kind of puzzle that would appeal to a group that had charged itself with documenting all human knowledge.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 64.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 66.

\textsuperscript{37} Conrad, preface to *Tristram Shandy*, xvii.
Sterne’s other main appeal was that, from an artistic perspective, the French writers actually saw him as quintessentially French. They responded to the sincerity of Tristram as a philosopher and wit. The character was an altogether humane and humble soul, qualities the Enlightenment French writers tried to re-instill in their work following the caustic satire of the pure Classical period of Louis XIV. Sterne was whimsical, but never mocking or derisive, and Tristram was as much the target of his own absurdity and satire as everyone else. In short, Sterne was heralded for reuniting them with the easygoing sentimentality and humor of their own Rabelais.\footnote{Finch and Peers, \textit{The Origins of French Romanticism}, 64.}
CHAPTER 3

ROUSSEAU THROUGH ENGLISH ROMANTICISM

Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in Geneva into a Protestant middle-class household in 1712, and lived the life of a restless intellectual. He moved to Paris in 1742 where he converted to Catholicism and had limited success as a French man of letters. He returned to Geneva and Protestantism in 1754, but in 1762 had to flee to the remote Swiss town Môtiers due to the religious views he expressed in the novel Émile. In 1765, he was chased from Môtiers by a mob and took refuge in Britain at the invitation of David Hume, but Rousseau’s eccentricity had begun to manifest itself as paranoia and he argued with Hume. He returned to Paris in 1767 where he lived until his death in 1778.¹

Rousseau is primarily known as a philosopher. He was a humanist and man of the Enlightenment, immersed in the same problems as the philosophes. However, he was never accepted by the French thinkers of the age because he was seen as too much of a charismatic. He had no credentials, no mentors, and had a wide body of knowledge but no specialty. This is not the space to assess his philosophy, but one could say that that he wrote from instinct and inspiration, and one might accuse him of being a bit self-serving. In his autobiography Confessions, a “persecution mania” is apparent, and in places he ceases he recognize the validity of counter arguments to his ideas, and levels accusations

of personal conspiracy. These were not the best traits of a new man of philosophy or science, but would be the qualities of the new man of art.

Rousseau’s most important contribution to fiction was the novel Julie, ou La Nouvelle Heloise, a work that could not quite be called Romantic, although its form, “diffuse . . . with lengthy digressions” had something of a later Romantic quality to it. As mentioned, he borrowed the epistolary form and other structures from Richardson, but in it he does more to explore the psychology and depict the suffering of the heroine. Richardson’s Clarissa is a virtuous character who is victimized by circumstances and fate, fitting well within one orthodox model of tragedy. In Rousseau’s novel, Julie is a married woman with two children whose former lover Saint-Preux re-enters her life. Saint-Preux had been her tutor with whom she had conceived and miscarried a child, metaphorically just as their love had itself had not lived past its conception. Saint-Preux had been forced to travel for various assignments to cure him of passion, and Julie devotes herself to the duties of her household. Although the lovers remain chaste, Julie cannot escape the feeling of emptiness in her life, “the first feeling that made me live . . . is embedded in my heart.” She sacrifices herself to save her child from drowning, an act that demonstrates her “austere notion of duty” and allows her to escape the continuous pains in her heart. It had been taken for granted in literature that virtue was happiness,

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2 Ibid., 267.
4 Ibid.
5 Cazamian, A History of French Literature, 266.
but this new portrayal of the frequent incompatibility of the two, perhaps apparent to every human who had ever lived, would be another characteristic of the Romantic hero.

Thematicall[y] pointing toward Romanticism, *Julie* was also a “lyrical poem of passion and Nature.”⁶ The Swiss countryside is portrayed as a “romantic landscape” of “grandeur and virgin freshness,”⁷ a source of innocence and healthy impulses.

Rousseau’s concept of primitivism, that happiness could be found in retrogression from civilization, hangs over the entire novel. Although Julie ultimately meets her social obligations, as Rousseau writes in *Confessions*, her story highlights the disharmony between innocence and obligation:

> Besides morality and conjugal fidelity, which are radically connected with all social order, I had another and deeper objective in view—harmony and public peace, an object greater and perhaps more important in itself. . . The storm aroused by the “Encyclopédie,” far from subsiding, was at that time at its height. The two parties, let loose at each other with desperate frenzy, were more like mad wolves ready to tear each other to pieces in their rage, than Christians and philosophers desirous of mutually enlightening, convincing, and leading each other back to the way of truth. . . I sketched the two characters of Wolmar and Julie in a state of rapture, which made me hope that I should succeed in making both [factions] amiable, and, what is more, by means of each other.⁸

Rousseau is looking forward toward Romanticism: both the Christian past and the Enlightenment that would challenge it were failing to live up to their obligations to enrich the happiness of human lives. Judging by the success of the book, Rousseau seems to

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have followed his instinct to a place that resonated in the imaginations and souls of readers.

Rousseau presented ideas that even the Romantic poets would not adequately address. Both Christianity and the Enlightenment were preoccupied with meaning rather than feeling. Neither was necessarily corrupt, but both needed to restate their missions, because virtue and material well-being were incomplete measures of happiness. The Romantic poets were, however, equivocal in their focus on simple feeling, and they often had the impulse to press their case by elaborating on emotion. Rousseau believed that human happiness was instinctual and needed no further justification, and for this reason, stylistically Rousseau did not leave so much of a mark on Romantic poetry. The story of the heart could be told with simplicity that was still capable of depicting rapture, but it did not need to embellish feeling with symbolism and metaphor. His restraint is apparent even in his own autobiography Confessions where “[h]e sacrifices the glamor of literature to serve the stark but noble principle of truth”\(^9\) and was “paradoxically, a brilliant writer who disapproves of the whole activity of literature.”\(^10\) Feeling is real and not the product of the poet’s imagination to create new principles, and his argument is based in “his fidelity to the contradictory facts of his own experience.”\(^11\) Rousseau even includes a description of the event of his reading the book to his friends, thus capturing the moment when his compendium of events was first publicly revealed: “Madame d’Edgmont was


\(^10\) Ibid., 7.

\(^11\) Ibid., 22.
the only person who appeared to be affected; she trembled visibly, but she quickly
recovered herself and remained silent, like the rest of the company.”

A final moment

that Sterne would have appreciated, when the reader questions if this event, and not those
described in the hundreds of pages that precede it, was Rousseau’s true purpose.

The *Confessions* also offer a new model for the persona of the literary artist that
would be adopted and modified by the Romantic poets. His writing is often
unabashedly biased, and leading to mistaken charges of egotism. It is more accurate to
say that Rousseau writes without self-consciousness. He does not present a list of ideas
or events that prove him a great person, but spends time considering his misjudgments
and mistakes. Egotism itself is the form of self-consciousness that manifests itself from
the position of superiority, and this is not Rousseau. In his autobiographical essays
*Lettres à Malesherbes* written before *Confessions*, he describes himself as “a lazy soul,
afraid of any exertion, and ardent and bilious temper, easily moved and excessively
sensitive.” Rousseau is simply self-aware. To break from adherence to accepted taste,
style, form, and expression, and to substitute for them a confidence in the inner life of the
artist, would be important for liberating the poet.

*Nature*

Rousseau also took a big step toward investing nature with a capital “N.”

According to his own words, he preferred reconciliation among religion, reason, and

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nature, and it is perhaps due to the stubbornness of the first two that artists would elevate
Nature to a stature that superseded both of them. Rousseau’s depictions of Nature in *La
Nouvelle Heloise*, however, were very much in vogue at the time. Nature’s distance from
common people was increasing due to urbanization and the middle class materialism,
which heightened its appeal. The art of landscape gardening flourished in England and
made its way to France, and it was undertaken not only for decoration but for the same
moral purpose stated by Rousseau, it “purified the emotions, it counteracted the baneful
existence of cities, it set a premium on domestic affections.”

14 This need was pervasive: even that archetype of aristocratic snobbery Marie Antoinette had her own bucolic retreat
within Versailles where she would dress down in simple frocks to play with animals and
pretend to be a shepherdess.

15 A full break with society would not be proposed until Bernadin Saint-Pierre’s
*Paul et Virginie*, published in 1787. Saint-Pierre had been a colonial administrator in
Mauritius and had also traveled widely, developing his “pioneering advocacy of wild
nature” independently, although he was a friend of Rousseau.  

16 His novel is the story of
the two children of its title and their mothers, two women who end up in Mauritius due to
commonplace misfortunes in France and find a remote asylum where they subsistence-
farm and spin wool for trade. Unlike Defoe’s hero, Saint-Pierre’s characters do not have
to civilize nature to survive; it accommodates and sustains them in its primitive state.


16 Peter Mortensen, *British Romanticism and Continental Influences: Writing in an Age of
The children live an innocent life as siblings, but catastrophe strikes when Virginie goes to France to claim an inheritance, and finds that she must return to Mauritius empty-handed to avoid an arranged marriage. Unfortunately, she dies in a shipwreck. Paul falls ill and dies two months later, and their mothers die a month after that.17

The timing of its publication placed it in the hands of the English Romantic poets just as they were coming into maturity. However, the English Romantic poets’ view of Nature would be limited compared to Saint-Pierre’s; Nature was a source of inspiration to the poet, but not necessarily a cure for what was wrong with society. Any kind of political statement, for that matter, was not in keeping with the purpose of poetry. Saint-Pierre’s true talent lay in painting; he was particularly fond of colors, and his attraction to nature and exotic places was due mainly to their visual appeal.18 Consequently, his attempts to evoke the sensuality of the environment—“the golden apricots, brown peaches, and cottony quinces exhaled the sweetest perfume”—would be somewhat simple to the English poets and, they would not follow him so innocently where the eye and nose took them. But they also would not attempt to express Nature’s psychological utility rationally. Wordsworth, who perhaps better any other English poet captures their view of Nature, writes in “The Tables Turned: An Evening Scene on the Same Subject”:

One impulse from vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and good,
Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;

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17 Ibid., 98.

Our meddling intellect  
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:--  
We murder to dissect.

Enough of Science and of Art;  
Close up those barren leaves;  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives.  

These lines tend toward both Saint-Pierre’s total abandonment to Nature and Rousseau’s sense of it imbuing moral health. But Wordsworth writes in the final stanza of “Daffodils”:

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

The poet does not need to flee civilization. He could “watch and receive” the lessons of Nature, take them home with him and, on his quite civilized couch, when mood and memory work together just right, evoke the immediacy of the original feeling. Nature could not be the ultimate pursuit of Romantic poetry because that role was already filled by a triumvirate of inspiration, imagination and emotion, and Nature was just one source feeding them.

The theme of Nature in English poetry would not be reimported to France by Chateaubriand, and it is noticeably understated in French Romantic poetry. As will be discussed in the next chapter, French Romantic poetry lacks a full connection with

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Nature. The era of this poetry was 1820 to 1860, forty years, revolution, war, and several governments after *Paul et Virginie*. Moreover the generation of these poets’ fathers had participated in one way or another in Napoleon’s army’s treading over the vast European countryside. That brought them in contact with different cultures and landscapes, but they retained the francocentric world view. Moreover, industrialization and wealth had made the middle-class mobile. By 1830, railroads had begun to cross Britain and France, and wild and remote places were popular tourist destinations, necessarily making them less wild and remote. Although Victor Hugo would grumble about the spoilage of the countryside, Nature’s moment had passed before the French poets came of age, and they would instead focus their attention on finding feeling in the civilization around them.

*The French Revolution*

A full accounting for the causes of the French Revolution and the events in its aftermath are beyond the scope of this research. France had what was known as a system of Estates-General since medieval times to serve as an advisory body for the King. They were organized by divine order, the first being the clergy, the second the aristocracy, and the third the commoners. This system had had no real governing power and had been ignored for over a century. In 1789, representatives of the Third Estate began to reorganize to demand a constitution, and after three years of resistance from King Louis XVI against forming a constitutional monarchy, declared a republic and executed the king in January 1793. Although the American Revolution was still a recent memory,

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France was finally undergoing the change in government and culture more similar to the English revolution in the mid-seventeenth century.

France immediately came under attack from other European monarchies, and the French people united behind a hitherto unknown patriotism, “faith in humanity, in France, in virtue, in justice, in benevolence.”22 “Rousseau” was the name most often invoked in reference to a variety of vague ideas on individualism and progress, although he himself was skeptical of progress, and it is doubtful that his ideas lead one to the oxymoron of a united group of individualists that many revolutionaries hoped France could become.23 Most importantly, the French were desperately looking for a new way to educate themselves, and Rousseau’s ideas on that topic, that education should engender the development of the individual rather than the servant of the social order, were carefully considered.24

With regard to new French literature, all one needs to know about the French Revolution is that most progress toward a modern literature was halted. However, this event was just before the dawn of English Romantic poetry, and gained ardent support from the English poets, who were arrested by “pervasive feeling that this was an age of new beginnings when, by discarding inherited procedures and outworn customs, everything was possible, and not only in the political and social realm but in intellectual

22 Ibid., 119.
23 Ibid., 121.
24 Ibid., 123.
and literary enterprises as well.”²⁵ The French Revolution, however, proved to be a continual disappointment. Wordsworth, who had lived in France during the Revolution, describes in the “Prelude” a kind of projection of his and his contemporaries’ hopes onto France:

To aspirations then of our own minds
Did we appeal; and, finally, beheld
A living confirmation of the whole
Before use, in a people from the depth
Of shameful imbecility uprisen,
Fresh as the morning star. . .²⁶

Wordsworth in that poem also explains his swings from optimism to disappointment.

From the Revolution sprang the Reign of Terror, which Wordsworth forgives as a cathartic act to “stamp the final seal”²⁷ on the Republic’s authority and to purge it of its bitterness toward the aristocracy, a justification also voiced by William Blake and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.²⁸ Wordsworth’s optimism, however, would not survive the Revolutionary wars, in which France by 1794 had already “. . . changed a war of self defence / For one of conquest, losing sight of all / Which they had struggled for.”²⁹

What we see in Wordsworth is maybe a youthful idealist’s fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of revolution. The French Revolution first and foremost, like many broad social revolutions, was about standards of living, that is, the Third Estate


wanted more comfortable lives and more to eat. Rousseau cared about the heart and soul, but the commoners’ first concern was the stomach. And according to that goal, the French Revolution was an unmitigated success: a prosperous bourgeoisie sprang up within a generation, and created the landscape in which the French Romantic poets would have to find their way. Moreover, in a development that would most assuredly have vexed Rousseau, the middle-class would seem to become satiated by its materialism. Nevertheless, the French Revolution would create at least one Romantic poet, as

Wordsworth would be guided by his disappointments to his true vocation:

Misguided, and misleading. So I fared,
Dragging all precepts, judgments, maxims, creeds,
Like culprits to the bar; calling the mind,
Suspiciously, to establish in plain day
Her titles and her honours; now believing,
Now disbelieving; endlessly perplexed
With impulse, motive, right and wrong, the ground
Of obligation, what the rule and whence
The sanction; till, demanding formal 'proof',
And seeking it in every thing, I lost
All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,
Sick, wearied out with contrarieties,
Yielded up moral questions in despair.

This was the crisis of that strong disease,
This the soul's last and lowest ebb; I drooped,

Depressed, bewildered thus, I did not walk
With scoffers, seeking light and gay revenge
From indiscriminate laughter, nor sate down
In reconcilement with an utter waste
Of intellect; . . .
. . . Then it was--
Thanks to the bounteous Giver of all good!--
That the beloved Sister in whose sight
Those days were passed, now speaking in a voice
Of sudden admonition--like a brook
That did but 'cross' a lonely road, and now
Is seen, heard, felt, and caught at every turn,
   Companion never lost through many a league
Maintained for me a saving intercourse
With my true self; for, though bedimmed and changed
Much, as it seemed, I was no further changed
   Than as a clouded and a waning moon:
She whispered still that brightness would return;
She, in the midst of all, preserved me still
   A Poet, made me seek beneath that name,
And that alone, my office upon earth;
And, lastly, as hereafter will be shown.\(^{30}\)

The French Revolution was necessary to disabuse the English Romantic poets of the unrealistic importance of their ideas in material application. They would revise their expectations for free expression turning them toward their art to try change the imaginative world rather than the material one.

*Lyrical Ballads*

When Wordsworth and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, the poetic careers to two writers whose works would be the earliest examples of the Romantic style were already finished, William Blake and Robert Burns. However, Burns was a specialist in poems of the Scots dialect, and Blake was primarily a cult figure whose lifetime output of poetry numbered in the dozens of volumes. Blake’s language and themes are often archaic and cryptic, which differentiates him from the bulk of Romantic poetry in any language published at the time or that would follow. *Lyrical Ballads* is significant because it clearly enunciates the new principles and poetry, and did it so

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\(^{30}\) Ibid., lines 292-350.
effectively that it proved to be a popular success.\(^{31}\) In the preface to the second addition, Wordsworth states a simple agenda:

The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. . . . The Reader will find that personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes; and are utterly rejected, as an ordinary device to elevate the style, and raise it above prose. My purpose was to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men; and assuredly such personifications do not make any natural or regular part of that language.\(^{32}\)

Wordsworth’s goal is to excite the imagination through common incidents and common language. Yet *Lyrical Ballads* contains one of the most famous Romantic poems of all, Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” an exception to the pure application of this thesis. Moreover, Romantic poets that followed, such as Shelley, would use neither common incidents nor common language.

Wordsworth is perhaps too specifically referring to his own poetry. More generally, Romantic poetry would allow itself to be shaped by the form and language deemed best suitable by the poet. Before Romantic poetry, language and style were prescribed by certain orthodox formulae pertaining to all aspects of the work: subject, rhyme, meter, language, metaphor, simile, and allusion. A poet had to fit his or her creativity into these conventions, and a poet’s quality was judged by how much elegance


\(^{32}\) Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” in *Norton Anthology*, 142-143.
and ingenuity his or her work demonstrated. Romantic poetry would work in reverse, requiring poetry to be malleable around the poet’s inspiration or imagination, which, although poets had certain shared experiences, were often idiosyncratic. What inspired Wordsworth was just a selection of the possibilities, and many English and French Romantic poets simply did not share his disposition.

Wordsworth was an optimist and to some degree a moralist. The suffering he describes in the “Prelude” is that of a stubborn idealist, and rather than surrender that idealism, he turns it to poetry. Romantic poetry, however, would also be known for an opposing strain, the *mal de siècle*, the “illness of the times,” best described as a longing for some ephemeral, more intense level of human experience that is persistently unattainable. Wordsworth does have that same longing, but unlike many other Romantic poets, he finds it, usually in Nature, and is satisfied. It is the Shelley’s and Byron’s poetry of *unfulfilled* longing that would speak to the French poets who followed a generation later.
Cazamian describes Chateaubriand as the French arch-Romantic. His life itself is that of a Romantic hero: an aristocrat, he traveled to America to avoid the Revolution, returned to France to fight for the Royalist army, fled to England during the Reign of Terror, returned to France in 1800, was a vocal opponent of Napoleon, and after Napoleon’s ultimate defeat at Waterloo, was a prominent public and literary figure until his death in 1848. He made contact with the English Romantic poets and brought back with him an appreciation of Shakespeare, Milton, and Byron, whom he singles out as “the greatest poet that England has produced since Milton.” French Romanticism, for better or worse, began with Chateaubriand’s conception of it, and for him, it was to be dominated by the Romantic persona of Byron:

. . .he is a fatal and suffering genius, placed between the mysteries of matter and intelligence, who sees not a word in the enigma of the universe, who considers life as a horrible irony without cause, as a perverse smile of the Evil One: he is the eldest son of Despair, who despises and denies; who, having within him an incurable sore, revenges himself by leading all that approach him to misery through pleasure; a man who has not passed through the age of innocence, who never had the advantage of being rejected and cursed of God; a man who, having sprung a reprobate from the bosom of nature, is the damned of nothingness. Such is the Byron of heated imaginations.

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3 Ibid., 341-342.
Chateaubriand wrote this at the end of his life when he is deploring, perhaps inaccurately, that he and Byron had brought Romantic poetry to a “field [where] there is nothing left to glean.”\footnote{Ibid., 341.} Chateaubriand came to realize that the number of ways to express suffering and sorrow was limited, and that many Romantic writers simply failed to innovate, leading to a preponderance of cliché that eventually doomed Romanticism.

Chateaubriand’s own works, primarily novels, are more profound and nuanced, and he had identified the dangers of the tendency toward the perverse hero in his earlier essays defending Christianity. He perhaps unfairly lays blame on Rousseau and \textit{Julie} for engendering indulgences in self-pity and solitude in lives that most people would be perfectly content with.\footnote{Angelica Gooden, “The Eighteenth Century” in \textit{Cassell Guide to Literature in French}, ed. Valerie Worth-Stylianou (London: Cassell, 1996), 116.} Chateaubriand, by portraying the suffering of the Romantic hero, did not intend to glamorize this life, but wanted to show that this condition was redeemable through simple Christian devotion. However, his understanding of Christianity is fundamentally superficial and sentimental, and is a rather weak advocacy of the peaceful feeling of religion and not of the philosophical system of theology.\footnote{M. B. Finch and E. Allison Peers, \textit{The Origins of French Romanticism} (London: Constable and Company, 1920), 194.}

Events in his own life perhaps compelled him to try to reconcile a pre-Enlightenment conservatism with the existential problems of the day. It is this posture, one of ostensibly
a royalist conservative, that gave Chateaubriand an advantage in fostering the Romantic movement in France, because few noticed his subversion of literature from the inside.\(^7\)

Chateaubriand also fully realizes the Romantic style in France, and *René* is one of the earliest and purest expressions of the *mal de siècle*, a suffering that is continuous and innate.\(^8\) René is a naturally lonely and forlorn individual with a single friend, his sister Amélie, but there is something unnatural about their affection, and she enters a convent to purge her feelings. Now completely alone, René falls into complete dissolution, and flees to America to live among the Natchez Indians. The novel contains many autobiographical elements of the author’s own travels, and these same travels became the basis of Byron’s “Childe Harold's Pilgrimage.” This is exactly the “sickly” style of Romanticism Wordsworth and Coleridge decried and what Chateaubriand would reflect upon and regret. His language, full of “grandiloquent flamboyance,” “lush rhythms,” and “overblown sonorities”\(^9\) are intended to convey as much internal torment as possible:

> How you must pity me! How wretched my eternal disquiet must seem to you! You who have exhausted all the sorrows of life, what can you think of a young man without strength or virtue, who finds his own torment in himself, and can only complain of ills he himself has engendered? Oh, do not condemn him; he has been punished more than enough!\(^10\)


\(^9\) Ibid., 115.

This has little resemblance to the writing of Rousseau, who did not glamorize feelings and chose to express himself matter-of-factly. Chateaubriand is unequivocal about using language to amplify emotion. Moreover, Julie, unlike René, is not innately melancholy, and her sadness is due to being deprived of a seemingly attainable goal, true love, not an altogether perverse world view.

It is with Chateaubriand that England loses its connection with France. He and Byron continued their mutual admiration, the result of which was Byron’s becoming a key figure in French Romantic poetry. However, Chateaubriand’s influence in England ended with Byron. French Romantic poetry would also process other contemporary and older English literature, as well its own literary past. Chateaubriand prepares the way for French Romantic poetry, but it would have to first suffer through the Napoleonic era and the wave of *nouveau bourgeoisie* conservatism that followed it.

Chateaubriand had a partner in the salad days of Romanticism named Germaine de Staël. De Staël was the daughter of Louis XVI’s Minister of Finance, and fled to Switzerland during the Reign of Terror, despite having sympathized with the Revolution. She lived the life of a thoroughgoing Romantic as much as Chateaubriand, which included political intrigue, extensive travel, a marital estrangement, and love affairs. In the Swiss town of Coppet, situated on the shore of Lake Geneva, she began the activities that would leave her mark on Romanticism, writing Romantic novels, travel essays, and literary criticism, and hosting an influential literary salon that became the humble gathering place for the few Romantic writers writing during Napoleon’s rein. She not only advocated the Romantic style, but also vocally disparaged the artistic tastes of the
Napoleonic regime, which led to her continual, albeit loosely enforced, exile in Switzerland. Her conceptualization of Romanticism was both humanistic and aristocratic, and she believed literature should be accessible to and enrich and elevate the common people.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Napoleon}

Leo Tolstoy in his lengthy digressions on history in \textit{War and Peace} elegantly makes the case that Napoleon was as much a historical phenomenon as he was an individual genius. Both of these aspects of the man would loom over the French imagination well into the Romantic era. Exceeding anyone’s wildest expectations, the French Revolution had in just a few years made it possible for a thirty-year-old man of modest background to assume leadership of a country that briefly was to be the most powerful in all of Europe. The realization of ultimate possibility was, however, no match for the same forces that engendered the \textit{mal de siècle}, making wholly permanent achievement and happiness unattainable.

Napoleon also professed a reorganization of military and civil service into meritocracies. Although Napoleon did install himself as Emperor, it is important to note that his power derived from the same principles that governed all of French public service. That is, he ruled not by divine right, but according to ability, and when his ability failed him at Waterloo, he was deposed with no recourse. Because most French theaters had been properties of the King, the Republic made civil servants out of all

\textsuperscript{11} Cazamian, \textit{A History of French Literature}, 288.
performers. This in effect put control of most of the arts in the government hands, and, because print media was not sufficiently developed, forced French writers to focus their attention on drama to make a living. The quality of “merit” is debatable, but during this period art was directed to have a specific utility. To the credit of the regime, the theater’s role was not to spread pro-government propaganda.

The Napoleonic regime did not necessarily curb artistic freedom, but it did take care to make sure the demands of the middle class were met. All that was required of the theater were suitable middle-class diversions, pleasant, light, comprehensible, non-controversial entertainments, “machine made and undistinguished.”

A country rapidly changing needed a place for spiritual relief. The Empire also controlled its own journal of literary criticism, which advocated inoffensive classical drama without tears and laughter, and poetry that was momentarily moving and pleasing, but not overly contemplative.

The two greatest, and only great writers of the Empire, Chateaubriand and De Staël, were both advocates of Romanticism and open enemies of Napoleon.

Finch and Peers attribute the deplorable state of French literature to Napoleonic vanity, a wildly successful general’s belief that his expertise extended to all realms of human endeavor. However, data about the material the state of French literature at the time indicate that de Staël’s dream of a new national modern literature was unrealistic and premature, regardless of Napoleon’s tastes. Most of the population still had not even

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13 Ibid., 144.

14 Ibid., 141.
had access to the classics. Literature in the Empire had to be practical. The top domestic priorities for the First Republic and Napoleon were to bring French industry and education up to world standards. Every aspect of printing technology was shockingly outdated: France had only 25 manually run paper mills at the beginning of the century, had no domestic producer of ink until 1808, and relied almost entirely on four-hundred-year-old Gutenberg press technology. A French man had invented a paper-making machine in 1798, but due to lack of financial backing, sold his patent to an English firm that realized his invention in 1803. This technology found its way back to France only in 1811 in the form of just one machine, and by 1827, the number had increased to just four. The Stanhope press, which sped up production by replacing with a lever the large screw to press the typeset onto paper, was invented in England in 1800, but not introduced to France until 1818.15

The lack of a printing industry was almost beside the point due to the abysmal level of literacy, and despite Napoleon’s intentions, little progress was made to address this problem. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the total number of students in France at all levels of education numbered in the tens of thousands, compared to a population of around twenty million. By 1819, the rate of literacy was still estimated to be a dismal forty percent.16 By comparison, England had already surpassed that rate by 1750.17 Moreover, literacy was of the most basic kind, and the percentage of the

16 Ibid., 22.
population with a level of reading comprehension required to understand poetry was much lower. Only from 1830 did France begin to attack the problem, and in just a few decades, the education system was radically reformed and able to educate millions of children.

To sum up, the literary landscape for the French Romantics was primitive but improving. Not only had French literature become outdated and overly formal, its quality had also deteriorated since the Revolution. The industry for producing literature barely existed, and there were very few consumers of the product outside of the cities. The debates about the modern style in De Staël’s salon were irrelevant to almost the entire country, which is perhaps why her and Chateaubriand’s works were often ignored by the critics and the censors. However, the Romantics also had several valuable assets. From 1814 and 1820, the number of books published in France doubled, and increased another 50 percent by 1814. These were not works by established authors, but new works by new writers: in 1820, the typical age of a writer was forty-eight, but by 1830, it had dropped to thirty-six. In just a decade, writers in their twenties and thirties had ousted a significant percentage of writers over fifty, their main competition. These young writers had little or no connection to aristocratic France, no first-hand experience of the

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 2.
22 Ibid., 82.
Revolution, no adult awareness of the living Napoleon. All kinds of vague notions of French history and the worries about ongoing social changes in France were perfectly suited for these writers, and almost all of the new literature of note for the entire first half of the nineteenth century would be associated with the Romantic style.

At Last, French Romantic Poetry

Until 1820, debates on style focused mainly on the genre that France traditionally specialized in, drama and, to a lesser extent, novels. Poetry was something of a lost art, and one of the only, if not the only, eighteenth-century poets of note, André Chénier, was not published until 1819, twenty-five years after his execution during the Reign of Terror. Such was the irony of the Revolution, not only did it lead to a stifling of literature for two to three decades, it also killed one of France’s most significant writers and a member of the endangered species of poets. In form, Chénier was technically a classicist, usually writing in perhaps the most traditional of French forms, alexandrine couplets, but he reinvigorated poetry by returning to ancient bucolic themes,23 as in “A Vesper”:

O quel que soit ton nom, soit Vesper, soit Phosphore,  
Messager de la nuit, messager de l'aurore,  
Cruel astre au matin, le soir astre si doux!  
Phosphore, le matin, loin de nos bras jaloux,  
Tu fais fuir nos amours tremblantes, incertaines,  
Mais le soir, en secret, Vesper, tu les ramènes.  
La vierge qu’à l'hymen la nuit doit présenter  
Redoute que Vesper se hâte d'arriver.  
Puis, au bras d'un époux, elle accuse Phosphore  
De rallumer trop tôt les flambeaux de l'aurore.  
Brillante étoile, adieu, le jour s'avance, cours.

23 Cazamian, A History of French Literature, 284.
Ramène-moi bientôt la nuit et mes amours.  

However it is not his form that separates him from the Romantics—Baudelaire often wrote in alexandrine couplets—but his affinity for nature that is refreshing and simple without indulging in Romantic rhapsodies, a Renaissance rather than a Romantic spirit.  

Nevertheless, both Charles Augustin Saint-Beuve, the editor of the most prominent pro-Romantic journal of the time, and Victor Hugo, the master of all things French-Romantic, claim that the new poetry was born in Chénier.

Chénier undoubtedly reminded French writers of the possibilities of French poetry, and the following decade saw an outpouring of new work, all in the Romantic style. Among the first were Marceline Desbordes-Valmore’s *Elegies*, published in 1819 and Alphonse La Martine’s *Meditations Poetique*, published in 1820. It is an interesting historical accident that makes for a pleasing transition that Chateaubriand and de Staël, born with two years of each other in the 1860s, would cede their leadership to another pair from the second generation of Romantics, who happened to have been born just four years apart, both just before the Revolution. Both Desbordes-Valmore and La Martine’s poetry can be characterized as lyrical expressions of many of the typical Romantic themes, love, nature, despair, often in light of personal experience.  

After Desbordes-Valmore and La Martine, French Romantic poetry is taken firmly into the hands of

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nineteenth century youth, one of the earliest among them being Victor Hugo, who published his *Odes et Ballades* in 1822.

The weight of the Romantic Movement was undeniably carried on the back of Hugo. The estimate of his published poetic output is a staggering 158,000 lines, not counting several plays written in verse.\(^{27}\) To put that in perspective, the total number of lines in Dante’s *Commedia* is just over 14,000 lines, and Wordsworth, also quite prolific, produced probably less than a third of Hugo’s quantity. He left after his death such a large backlog of poetry, some of it his best, that it took his literary executors over a decade to finish publishing it,\(^{28}\) and his complete works comprise as many as thirty volumes. In his spare time, Hugo also sketched and painted, producing hundreds of works.\(^{29}\) Nevertheless, it seems that outside of France, most people know him only as the author of *Les Misérables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

Gautier writes that the name the Romantics gave to Hugo was simply “Master.” He, more than any other figure, brought a modern French national literature to fruition. In his poetry, we find the Romantic ideology expressed in more ways than other poets dared to conceive, from the perspective of a son, an artist, a lover, a French citizen, a father, a political figure, a grandfather. The minutest details of his entire autobiography are disorderly written into his poetry. In addition, he never missed an opportunity to


\(^{28}\) Ibid., xxiv.

expound on the critical theories of French literature. There are poems, essays, prefaces, whole plays expressly designed to illustrate a single critical point. The most famous of the last category was the play *Hernani*.

In the 1820’s, Romanticism finally had enough prominence to threaten the conservative tastes deemed to be more suitable for the middle classes. It is also in this decade that the market for French literature was sufficiently developed to allow poets in the new style a wide enough audience to financially sustain themselves, and that unaltered performances of Shakespeare began turning up on the French stage. This also led to the development of literary factions, sustained by their own critics in the press, where conservative classicists and liberal Romantics defended their own styles and disparaged their opponents’. French Romantics had their greatest initial successes publishing poetry and novels, but the stage, where the greatest of classical French literature had traditionally been displayed, remained staunchly defended. Hugo’s first play, *Cromwell*, was not allowed to be performed, but in 1830, at last a showdown between the Romantics and conservatives occurred when the Comedie Francaise agreed to stage *Hernani*.

The true controversy around the play seems trivial today. It harks back to Wordsworth’s idea in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that verse should express itself in the common language. The reaction from the Classicists was unbridled outrage: “Verse is smashed up and the pieces thrown out the window,” Gautier quotes an unnamed

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Classicist as complaining. 31 From the hindsight of four decades after the event, Gautier cannot quite fathom the controversy, writing, “[N]owadays the very innovations that were then considered barbarisms are accounted classical [but] it also must be carefully borne in mind that in France, at that time, abhorrence of plain speaking and of the use of crude words was carried to a fairly unimaginable extent.” 32 One specific example Gautier mentions is the audacity that a king should discuss the time in such normal language as “Est-il minuit?—Minuit bientôt” (“Is it midnight? Midnight soon”), when orthodox drama would have a king instead speak in rhyming couplets in this sort of manner: “. . . l’heure / Atteindra bientôt sas dernière demeure” (“. . . the time / will soon have reached the latest hour”). 33 Factions assembled during the performance, Classicists there to hiss and boo the outrageous use of language and poetic expression, and Hugo’s partisans, his peers and young admirers, the eighteen-year old Gautier included, there to shout down the hecklers. Inevitably, the French public cast the deciding vote, and Hernani would run for thirty performances, albeit stormy ones, and receive good reviews by the impartial French press.

_Baudelaire_

Baudelaire, born almost the moment French Romantic poetry was born, set out to distinguish himself and to outshine the many great Romantic poets of the time. He

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32 Ibid., 149.

33 Ibid., 151.
succeeded. Baudelaire is the first French poet who achieved truly global acclaim,\(^{34}\) and is a suitable poet to conclude with because, contrary to Chateaubriand’s fears, he would show that Romanticism did not lead to a dead end, but evolved through him into the modern poetry of the industrial age. He is “bitter, insistent, and can be gruesome,”\(^{35}\) and sheds every vestige of self-consciousness, all the tatters of egotism, self-pity, grief, plaintiveness, and longing that the Romantics still clung to, and truly bared his soul. In terms of form, he turned a Classicist’s eye toward Romantic subject matter, removed emotional amplification and embellishment, and relied on simple forms and lexicon to create poems that are graphic and real. He is a poet Rousseau would have read.

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Nature is often considered an important theme in Romantic poetry, but like the concept of “Romantic” itself, “Nature” cannot be narrowly defined. It is a prominent feature of eighteenth century Romantic poetry that precedes and includes Wordsworth, but it retreats somewhat with the second generation that includes Byron, who gave the Romantic hero a more favored position. Similarly, the French poets who began writing immediately in the wake of the revival of French poetry were sparked by the publication of André Chénier’s bucolics and had a greater affinity for Nature (albeit a Nature radically different than Wordworth’s) than the second generation of French Romantic poets. However, Nature never achieved the same popularity in France as it did in England, where the Nature lyric had developed slowly over the course of the last part of the eighteenth century. French Romantic poetry, beginning almost abruptly in 1820, was being pushed by progress and by the rising talent and influence of the generation of poets born into post-Revolutionary, post-Napoleonic France. Within just a few decades, industrialization and urbanization were inescapable facts of life. Baudelaire rarely features a forest, a mountain, or a pasture, but does write eclogues that are urban, where he can “hear in reverie the hymns / Of all the neighboring belfries, carried on the wind.”

Nevertheless, his disconnection from Nature is an important theme, because it drives him to compress and project it onto the female body.

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Perhaps the oldest use of Nature is in pastoral poetry, something the Romantics tried to avoid, probably because of its association with Renaissance or neoclassical poetry, and also because of resistance to “reduplicating comforting clichés” and not “representing the real exigencies of rural living.” ² By the end of the eighteenth century, both humanism and the rise of the middle class had raised the level of sophistication and awareness about the countryside, and the pastoral was a legacy for the sheltered aristocrat. Consequently, the British Romantic poets, in particular the Lake Poets, did explicitly state, as Wordsworth writes in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, that by “choos[ing] incidents and situations from common life . . . in a selection of language really used by men,”³ his objective was to look out from within, rather than down on, rural society. Wordsworth’s depictions of country life are ambivalent, about simple, happy scenes as well as hardship, as in “The Last of the Flock,” a lyrical poem about a once-prosperous shepherd whose entire flock inexplicably dies off, or “The Thorn,” which describes a peasant woman’s despair and the mysterious loss of the child she conceived with a lover who jilted her. Wordsworth’s poetic narrator is never a full participant in these scenes; he maintains a distance, and is an aloof, curious, non-judgmental observer. When the poet does engage Nature, it is not in the persona of the common man, but as Wordsworth himself, the Nature worshipper. However, as in “Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey,” often the poet who is writing is apart from the


poet who is experiencing (the former, younger self), and the writer nostalgically looks back on his earlier emotional response:

--That time is past,  
And all its aching joys are now no more,  
And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this  
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts  
Have followed, for such loss, I would believe,  
Abundant recompense. For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue.  

Wordsworth revisits who he was in 1793, just as his adventures in revolutionary France had come to a close. He does not prescribe Nature as some universal cure, but as a means to “chasten and subdue” through its own ambivalence, simplicity and austerity. Wordsworth looks to Nature for humility rather than reverie.

Why Wordsworth, as eminent as he was to later scholars, had limited influence on subsequent Romantic poets can be partially explained by a public relations attack he was the target of. One contemporary critic, Thomas Love Peacock, satirizing the entire genre of romantic Poetry, states that the “egregious confraternity of rhymesters . . . the lake Poets . . . saw rocks and rivers in a new light . . . remaining studiously ignorant of history, society, and human nature, cultivated the phantasy only at the expense of the memory and the reason.”

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midwife,” doubts whether he ever got drunk, and in several digressions in “Don Juan,”
criticizes him for being insipid:

-Wordsworth sometimes wakes,—
  To show with what complacency he creeps,
  With his dear "Waggoners," around his lakes.
  He wishes for "a boat" to sail the deeps—
  Of Ocean?—No, of air; and then he makes
  Another outcry for "a little boat,"
  And drivels seas to set it well afloat.7

It is no exaggeration that Byron was wrestling for the soul of poetry, perhaps the devil
sitting on one shoulder, while Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, and others in their
generation who has revolted against all that was “sickly and stupid”8 were the angels
sitting on the other.

Byron, albeit with a chauvinistic flair, provides an oversimplification of the two
styles that is nevertheless useful in illustrating the differences. The two competing strains
of Romanticism were the innocent, childlike form that prominently featured Nature, and
the adult, sexual version of Chateaubriand, Byron, and a generation of French youth.
Lyric Nature poetry was an eighteenth century phenomenon that did, in fact, attract many
women poets, such as Joanna Baillie, Mary Robinson, Anna Seward, Anna Letitia
Barbauld, and Charlotte Smith, Wordsworth’s contemporaries or precursors (many of
whom Walter Scott, a novelist with tastes similar to those of Wordsworth, often lent
critical support to).9 It is also worth noting that Barbauld and Smith also wrote literature

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8 Mortensen, British Romanticism and Continental Influences, 10-12.
9 Ibid.
for children and, in fact, Barbauld’s *Hymns in Prose for Children* was one of the most popular books in any genre at the time, printed in English twenty-eight times by her original publisher. It remained popular in translation on the European continent throughout the nineteenth century.\(^\text{10}\) Certainly the choice of proper subject matter was more limited for women writers (a limitation that Desbordes-Valmore, writing in post-Revolutionary France, seems to have escaped), so we do not know where truly their hearts lay. Nevertheless, Byron’s stereotypes had a kernel of truth to them.

Wordsworth style, compared to the Byronic school, is more nurturing and parental, at times motherly, and mothers and mother-child relationships often figure into his poetry. It is no surprise that his “Daffodils” has had a prominent position in the elementary school canon of poems to learn, memorize and recite. But this is perfectly consistent with the metaphor of Nature at the time and as Wordsworth understood it: it was not where one went to revel in mature sexual knowledge—Wordsworth’s poetry was certainly not Bacchanalian—but to escape back to a state of childlike innocence. This conception of the moral value of Nature is in Rousseau’s and Saint-Pierre’s works, which explicitly address the line between childhood and adulthood: Rousseau’s Nature was the basis of elementary education, and the tragedy in Saint-Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie* coincides with the sexual maturity of the two main characters. Whether or not they realized it, Wordsworth and others sought to recapture something childlike that they regretted losing in themselves. They perhaps failed to consider the possibility of the

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 53.
inevitably of this loss, and instead placed blame on humanity’s physical and intellectual move from the countryside to the city.

The French poets of the 1820s, Desbordes-Valmore, Lamartine, and Hugo, those who were at the vanguard of French Romantic poetry, also looked to Nature as a source of emotion. However, they felt Nature not nostalgically, but imminently, “viscerally present and psychically essential,”11 as a place where mature, fallen, and suffering men and women could find meaning for the current conditions of their lives. Nature is “the living symbol of the enigma of all questions of continuity and finality,” where “the whole of life can be perceived: birth, growth, fructification, and death.”12 It loses all of its instructive and moralizing qualities, but is a pantheistic place of spiritual healing. It is a place where, like Chateaubriand’s Emile, the French Romantic poets go to seek refuge from turmoil, to achieve dissolution, or to psychologically confront reality. For example, Desbordes-Valmore, her personal life storied by tumultuous relationships, turns to Nature in “The Sick Butterfly” as a reminder of the inevitably of decay:

Tired of his flowers, fatigued by loves long spent,
An aging, time-worn butterfly—
Gone now spring’s fairest days!—dour, malcontent,
Gazed on the loves of youth with jaundiced eye;
And lovers, brash but tender, newly born,
Who, flitting, grazed the blossom buds bedewed.

. . .
I can scarce even look on lest I be
Distressed at nature, grown so dull, so jaded!
The bird has lost his song; time was when we
Butterflies were a charming race: no flower

11 Michael Bishop, Nineteenth Century French Poetry, 41-42.
12 Ibid., 40.
Was there but bowed before our glorious power!13

We do not need to speculate on Byron’s influence on Desbordes-Valmore, for she occasionally quotes him in epigraphs to her verse. The melancholy echoes many lines of Byron’s, such as in “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage”:

I live not in myself, but I become
Portion of that around me; and to me,
High mountains are a feeling, but the hum
Of human cities torture: I can see
Nothing to loathe in Nature, save to be
A link reluctant in a fleshly chain,
Classed among creatures, when the soul can flee,
And with the sky, the peak, the heaving plain
Of ocean, or the stars, mingle, and not in vain.14

However, one is not struck by a sense of hopelessness and pessimism in either of these poets. Human beings come to the temple to learn, to meditate, and to celebrate as well as to grieve, to realize that even a tragic life is not exceptional. Nature is a place where all of these psychological needs can be fulfilled. I believe that both the Wordsworth and the Byron factions understood this, and that their differing thoughts on Nature are not the confrontation of mutually exclusive positions, but are pieces of a complete idea.

The French poets find much more in Nature than Wordsworth or Byron did. It is there they can seek and find God again. Byron’s poetry does not express a spiritual crisis per se, that is, his poetic personae or heroes do not long for God, and the absence of God is a personal choice, neither celebrated nor lamented. The French Romantic poets, however, dealt with a spiritual crisis on a national scale. Not only had the Enlightenment


eroded the explanatory powers of the Church, the Republic had made the clergy enemies of the state. Although the Catholic Church was restored to some influence, it had reentered the same ideological battles that Rousseau had lamented. More importantly, however, the sheer amount of blood shed by the French over two decades—Revolution, Reign of Terror, civil wars, Napoleonic wars—was staggering. One might say that Nature in English Romantic poetry fulfilled an ethical yearning that is present even in Byron. It moves imagination and the intellect, but not piety and faith. However, in French poetry, it often fulfills a spiritual yearning, a desire identified early by Chateaubriand that persists through to Baudelaire.

Hugo and Lamartine use the language of worship to describe Nature. It is a place of wonder, where “death and immortality converge in an experience of the divine.”\textsuperscript{15} But this is a meeting according to the mood of the ancient and mysterious Catholic orthodoxy, of awe and submission. Lamartine writes in “Vallombreuse Abbey,” “nature speaks to the heart of the wretched” and that love of nature is “the first hymn to the Creator.”\textsuperscript{16} Likewise, Hugo writes in “Summer Rain” how his thoughts turn to the inaccessibility of heaven:

\begin{quote}
Ah! life, with all its tiresome ways,  
Life is the sun that follows rain . . .  
Look at it sinking lower now!  
The town is deluged in its rays,  
Lighting up every windowpane  
Like eyes set on a castle’s brow.
\end{quote}

A rainbow! See the rainbow rise—

\textsuperscript{15} Bishop, \textit{Nineteenth Century French Poetry}, 42.

How pure its curve is, in the air!
What riches the Lord God supplies
After the thunder’s growl and glare!
That far-extended arch, that high
Span of a bridge across the sky—
To what strange planet does it go?
How often, ageless spheres, have I
Longed for a pair of wings, to fly
With some Ithuriel, and know! 17

The poem depicts a commonplace scene without any exaggeration or the supernatural. However, it is enough to allow the speaker to imagine the natural phenomenon of a setting sun as a symbol of “ tiresome” life, while simultaneously celebrating God’s goodness through the ancient metaphor of the rainbow, His promise never to punish the world again. It is not rhapsodic, but reverent, and Hugo understands his relationship to the divine is defined by both presence and distance. Wordsworth’s emotional experience is also at a distance, that of time, but in a poem such as “ Daffodils,” he can claim to have once experienced full participation in an imaginative rhapsody of Nature that gave him the sensation of floating, a feeling he can still access through memory. Hugo is permanently separate from that degree of emotion because Nature is not a path inward to his own psyche, but a path through his imagination to God, and he does not claim to have experienced the rapture of the saints. Hugo’s feet remain on the ground, from where in many of his poems he looks skyward, away from the land, and expresses his admiration for and envy of the birds.

Charles Baudelaire was born in 1821 into Romanticism and a France rapidly growing out of its provincial past. He wrote primarily about Paris, imagining Nature

from the city, and finding a route for his spiritual and imaginative yearning to follow in sexual attraction. Baudelaire’s Romanticism is explicit and direct; its muse is not an abstract idea about art or Nature, but a specific person who is the focus and source of his experiences of imagination and divinity. Although tinged with irony and melancholy, there is a suggestion of a medieval Romanticism, albeit a chivalry borne by the least honorable and most inept of knights, the Byronic poet.

Humanity’s separation from Nature and its failure to reignite genuine emotion or feeling (as opposed to sentiment) are both foregone conclusions to Baudelaire. The inevitability and permanence of the loss of innocence is unquestionable. Moreover, the wilderness is wise and serious, focusing on what matters most, survival, as he writes in “Owls,” describing the stillness and vigilance of these birds:

They teach a sage lesson here,
That in the world he ought to fear
All movement, uproar, turbulence;

But, drunk on shadows, our strange race
Carries within the punishment
Of having yearned for change of place.18

“Drunk on the shadows” of any of those places that are mysterious, extraordinary, outside of everyday human existence, mankind is continually seeking to satisfy its restless senses and imagination, which is the opposite of what it should have learned or should be doing. What can one find out in Nature? At best, prosaic sweetness, which only incurs his spite in “To One Who Is Too Cheerful”:

Your head, your air, your every way

Are scenic as the countryside;
The smile plays in your lips and eyes
Like fresh winds on a cloudless day.

Sometimes within a park, at rest,
Where I have dragged my apathy,
I have felt like an irony
The sunshine lacerate my breast.

And then the spring’s luxuriance
Humiliated so my heart
That I have pulled a flower apart
To punish Nature’s insolence.\(^{19}\)

In the remainder of this poem, Baudelaire writes that these thoughts merely excite his passion for carnal sensuality. That is what much of Baudelaire’s poetry is about, the emotions of most primitive instinct, expressed graphically and unadorned with cloying euphemisms.

Nature is deficient because it is merely a proxy, very much a Classical one, for the type of rapture the unsaintly poet really wants, sexual love. That is the real root of Romantic suffering. Desbordes-Valmore sits among the trees remembering unfaithful lovers, Chateaubriand and Byron write about melancholy Romantic heroes who suffer not from guilt, but from squandered love or their exile for having violated propriety.

Baudelaire’s raptures over Nature are intertwined with pure sexuality:

When, eyes closed, on a pleasant autumn night,
I breathe the warm scent of your breast, I see
Inviting shorelines spreading out for me
Where steady sunlight dazzles in my sight!

An idle isle, where friendly Nature brings
Singular trees, fruit that is savory,

\(^{19}\) Baudelaire, “To One Who is Too Cheerful,” in *The Flowers of Evil*, lines 1-4, 17-24.
Men who are lean and vigorous and free,  
Women whose frank eyes are astonishing.

Led by your fragrance to these charming shores  
I see a bay of sails and masts and oars,  
Still wearied from the onslaught of waves—

While verdant tamarind’s enchanting scent,  
Filling my nostrils, swirling to the brain,  
Blends in my spirit with the boatmen’s chant.  

Sexual passion is physical, but is also emotionally human and not animalistic, evoking thoughts of Nature and feelings of peace. However, Baudelaire’s poetry recognizes the dichotomy that love “bestows both kindnesses and crimes,” which are the struggles between simple feeling and intellect. He is self-aware, believes that love is merely the attraction of the “the candour of the flesh,” and is a willing participant in the illusion.

The feeling of love and physical contact are sufficient, “I know that there are eyes . . . / That hide no precious secrets, neither truths not lies; / . . . What if you are inane . . . / Beauty, I worship you!” Sentimental indulgences he also discards: “Let us love gently. Eros in his den, / . . . I know his arsenal, his worn-out bolts.”

Love depersonified into Nature creates the lush, peaceful landscapes that Baudelaire imagines. But this process, imposed on the suffering of love, allows Desbordes-Valmore to cope with and write about disappointments and betrayal, with especially potent and frank images. She compares her suffering to a “thorn, poisoned of

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23 Ibid., lines 9 and 11.
sap” that was predestined to its barrenness.\textsuperscript{24} Her over-exuberant love that her lover cannot experience with the same intensity is a too large bundle of flowers that spills and blows away.\textsuperscript{25} However, Desbordes-Valmore uses this imagery for exoneration, because while she accuses herself of bad judgment, she never admits fault. Love is like Nature because it cannot be controlled, and the poet is merely guilty of not being careful enough. Hugo, however, makes a more general and profound insight about the suffering of love by invoking the story of Narcissus:

Love, child, is first of all a mirror where  
Girls like to see themselves, flighty and fair;  
There they pause, playful or demure;  
Like virtue, next, it takes hold of the heart,  
Drives away sin, makes sneering vice depart,  
And leaves your spirit white and pure;  

Then you go down a step, you start to slide—  
And it’s a chasm! Vain to grip the side:  
In the flood you go whirling down!—  
Pretty, pure, fatal—don’t rely on it!  
Children, drawn to a river bit by bit,  
Admire themselves, and bathe, and drown.\textsuperscript{26}

The collection in which this poem appears contains many contemplations on Dante and, in fact, the poem that follows this is appropriately entitled “After Reading Dante.” Hugo, following Dante, is trying to make the distinction between passion and egotistical love, “a yoked couple, ever burning, wounded,”\textsuperscript{27} and an ennobling, healthy love that in every relationship reflects the humble love one should have for God. In “Love, child, is first of

\textsuperscript{24} Desbordes-Valmore, “The Bramble,” in French Women Poets of Nine Centuries, line 2.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., “The Roses of Saadi.”
\textsuperscript{26} Hugo, “Love, child, is first of all a mirror,” in Selected Poems of Victor Hugo.
\textsuperscript{27} Hugo, “After Reading Dante,” in Selected Poems of Victor Hugo, line 15.
all a mirror,” the children drown when they look down and inward at Nature, because they are looking only for reflections. Like Dante’s dark wood, or Narcissus’ pool, places we look inward or downward at are associated with the immature psyche, still self-centered. In many of Hugo’s other poems, the poet searches for a spiritual connection, standing and looking out across or up away from the landscape, a gaze from that signals the desire for self-awareness.

One last question we should consider with regards to Nature and love is how Romantic poetry came from the simple, yet expansive, lyricism of the eighteenth century to the sensual realism of the nineteenth century. Citing social progress is an oversimplification, and crediting the genius of individual artists is a bit extravagant. Obviously great poetry is affected by both, but writers are also aware of the work that came before. All the arts were trending—from Classicism to Enlightenment humanism through Romanticism—to greater specificity. Romantic poetry began with the individual experiences of Nature, life, love, and suffering, but the physical world became crowded, leaving the poet a much smaller universe in which he or she would have experiences so acute and intimate that they would emerge as realism. Baudelaire is the turning point where reality is itself Romantic. His “Sorrows of the Moon” is a particularly beautiful poem in which the poet captures the posture and gestures of his lover with incredible authenticity in his musings on moonlight:

The moon tonight dreams vacantly, as if
She were a beauty cushioned at her rest
Who strokes with wandering hand her lifting
Nipples, and the contour of her breasts;

Lying, as if for love, glazed by the soft
Luxurious avalanche, dying in in swoons,
She turns her eyes to visions—clouds aloft
Billowing hugely, blossoming in blue.

When sometimes from her stupefying calm
On to this earth she drops a furtive tear
Pale as an opal, iridescent, rare,

The poet, sleepless watchman, is the one
To take it up within his hallowed palm
And in his heart to hide it from the sun. 28

CHAPTER 6
ROLE OF THE POET

Poetic Style

The preceding chapters have shown how English and French Romantic poets developed similar, but not identical, aesthetic ideas and themes. In this chapter I will focus more closely on the style of and inspiration for their works, again highlighting differences and the characteristics that unite them as “Romantic.” How did these poets use form and language? How were they affected by socioeconomics and culture, and how did they view their position in society? These questions cannot be definitively answered, but I will present what I consider to be important from my own observations and research.

I have already discussed some of the Romantic poets’ ideas about art, but here I will cover them more comprehensively. Early English Romantic poetry was part of a movement to revive lyrical poetry, and consequently much of the poetry followed the rhythm and rhyme schemes of song lyrics. Many of the best and most widely recognized poems of mid-eighteenth century Romantic poets, such as Robert Burns are, in fact, songs. However, one small but critical innovation of Romantic poetry was the promotion of the artistic lyric, which was never intended to be sung. These poems were melodious and retained other song-like qualities: a fairly simple rhyme and meter, common language, and punctuated and unpunctuated natural pauses at the ends of lines rather than enjambment. That is why the first poem to appear in Lyrical Ballads, Coleridge’s “The
Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” however new and imaginative the subject of it is seems familiar and almost traditional: “It is an ancient Marinere / And he stoppeth one of three: / ‘By thy long grey beard and thy glittering eye / ‘Now wherefore stoppest me?’”¹ The poem is in the form of a ballad (alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and trimeter) with a common balladic rhyme scheme of ABCB, and could be set to music—numerous ready-made melodies could accommodate it—if it were not for the sheer length and complexity of the work. This form, as Coleridge must have been aware, was also suitable for the situation, a cursed sailor waylaying a random wedding guest, which could be any common person, with what seems to be a simple folk tale or folk song. Consequently, one can imagine the new English reader of the time believing her or he was settling into some kind of newly-conceived traditional lyric, but within it finding sophisticated questions of morality, fate, and justice.

Wordsworth states in in the “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” that his aim was to write about common life in common language “purified from what appear to be its real defects” while avoiding the poet’s “arbitrary and capricious habits of expression” and limiting the use of poetic diction.² With regard to Nature and his choice of rural subject matter, Wordsworth states that in those “condition[s] . . . elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and


more forcibly communicated.”³ What does this have to do with Coleridge’s contribution? Almost nothing besides perhaps some similarities in form. Coleridge himself explains that the collaboration was really a clearly defined division of labor, that he was to write on the supernatural and Wordsworth on everyday subjects, with the only unifying theme being experimentation with the traditional forms.⁴ Coleridge also believed that *Lyrical Ballads* was imbalanced to the extent that his poems seem misplaced, and that Wordsworth’s Preface to the second edition only made the critical principle of the work appear even more muddled, because Coleridge’s four contributions are not in the scope of Wordsworth’s thesis. Moreover, contemporary critics, not to mention Byron several years later, believed Wordsworth was asserting the superiority of this aesthetic over all styles of poetry, despite the fact that his work struck some as “silly” and “childish.”⁵

This first critical assertion of English Romantic poetry was widely misinterpreted. The conditions of Classical criticism had loosened such that poetry could comfortably encompass many styles of poetry, and Wordsworth’s could co-exist with Coleridge’s and others’ without any conflict or dominance of a particular poet. The problem with describing Romantic poetry is that application of that term by modern critics can lead to an “overdetermination” of the concept and strained explanations of subject matter and style, which has generally been done to have a compact, coherent product for teaching

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³ Ibid., 143.
⁵ Ibid.
As discussed here and in preceding chapters, Romantic poets would likely have rebelled against being so tightly grouped. But traits that express difference—individuality, partial influences, marked generational differences, to name a few—make it difficult to neatly describe this poetry and are precisely the characteristics that define it. Théophile Gautier, the vigilant watchman of French Romanticism, captures this idea in “Art”:

More fair the work, more strong,  
Stamped in resistance long,—  
Enamel, marble, song.

Poet, no shackles bear,  
Yet bid thy Muse to wear  
The buskin bound with care.

A fashion loose forsake,—  
A shoe of sloven make,  
That any foot may take.

Sculptor, the clay withstand,  
That yieldeth to the hand,  
Though listless heart command.

Contend till thou have wrought,  
Till the hard stone have caught  
The beauty of thy thought.

Borrow from Syracuse  
The bronze's stubborn use,  
Wherein thy form to choose.

Painter, put thou aside  
The transient. Be thy pride  
The colour furnace-tried.

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Limn thou, fantastic, free
Blue sirens of the sea,
And beasts of heraldry.

Things perish. Gods have passed.
But song sublimely cast
Shall citadels outlast.

For Art alone is great:
The bust survives the state,
The crown the potentate.

Carve, burnish, build thy theme,—
But fix thy wavering dream
In the stern rock supreme.⁷

Artists are free to choose their form; the poet can wear the “buskin” of tragedy, follow a formal style, or experiment with a loose, common style. What is important is for the artist to impose his or her will on the medium of choice and the impression of his or her “wavering,” “sloven,” “listless” imagination to create art that will last forever.

As the modern style of its time, Romanticism, with its individuality and freedom of form, did not lead to obscurity and abstraction, a complaint often leveled at modern art today. In addition to ballads and other lyrical forms, Romantic poets revived the sonnet, and employed traditional Petrarchan, Shakespearian, and Spenserian rhyme schemes; used traditional forms in the first two quatrains and experimented with the concluding sestet; or created new forms altogether. Shelley’s “Ozymandias” is of this last group, a stand-alone, one-of-a-kind sonnet structure:

I met a traveller from an antique land

Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
`My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away”

The irregular rhyme scheme does still set apart the concluding sestet and gives it its traditional function, the closing argument, in this poem first as a turn from the present to the ancient, audacious words inscribed on the pedestal, then a turn back to the present and the ironic, decrepit condition of the monument. However, applying parsing to the first eight lines is difficult, because the rhyme scheme changes from lines five to six, but there is enjambment there, signaling a continuation in the middle of the change. More detailed analysis adds little more to our appreciation of the poem. The language is clear and almost as accidental as regular speech. It is unique, insightful, well-wrought, and simultaneously formal and experimental. It is an excellent example of a Romantic poem.

English Romantic poets also adopted the ode, also with innovative rhyme schemes, and irregular forms. For much of their poetry, however, they used no specific stanza form, but nevertheless continued to use regular rhyme and meter. French poetry had generally not relied on regular stanza forms or metered verse, but on syllabic verse, the workhorse being the alexandrine (twelve syllables), although shorter lines,

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decasyllables and octosyllables, were regularly used. The alexandrine, however, was further constrained with a required caesura in the middle of the line, thereby compressing the space in which each separate statement or clause could be made, that is, the poet built a poem on units of six syllables. Rhymes were to be precise and usually occurred in couplets or alternating lines. French Romantic poets, even Hugo in his rapid flourishes of inspiration, produced many lines of rhymed alexandrines or other common syllabic lines, although they always strictly kept the syllable count, used approximate rhymes, and did not mind the caesura. But they also began to use much shorter and irregular lines to great effect: “Adieux, patrie! / L’onde est un furie, / Adieu, patrie, / Azur.”⁹ Baudelaire later reintroduced the sonnet to French poetry, although not in any of the traditional forms, and often without regular rhyme, meter, or syllables, only keeping the basic structure of two quatrains and the sestet.

Romantic poetry in England was an outgrowth of middle class culture, and a battle over language did not need to occur. However, the most controversial changes in French poetry, as they were in drama, were in language, and Hugo gladly accepted the moniker of “ogre . . . [who] trampled good taste,”¹⁰ a reference to his introduction of common language into the play Hernani. This was not merely a struggle for stylistic freedom; it was a metaphor for democracy. Hugo writes “words . . . rode to Versailles in the king’s own carriages,”¹¹ and, “. . . lines, like shuttlecocks, / Wearing a dozen equal

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¹⁰ Hugo, “Reply to a Bill of Indictment,” in Selected Works, line 1.
¹¹ Ibid., lines 40-44.
feathers, bounced incessantly / Between two rackets—Prosody and Etiquette.”

In “Reply to a Bill of Indictment” and its “Continuation,” all the frustration and anxiety of France deprived of a national literature pours out of Hugo, and he compares the state control of words to depriving the people of God and life. The premier of Hernani was the literary storming of the Bastille, and he believed that freeing words were paramount to finishing the Revolution: “. . . to the words I said: “Be a republic! / Be one vast anthill—work! Believe, love, live!” Hugo was not exaggerating: the French Monarchy had had a monopoly on all theater performances, and had banned performers from speaking or singing in theaters not licensed by the state. This is the origin of the French mime, a testament to the French people literally having been robbed of their voice by an autocrat.14 Romanticism, contrary to Gautier’s claim that art exists for itself, gave “life and spirit, / Tempest and fire and virtue”15 to the people, and was nothing less than another hero of the Revolution.

Poets and the Public

As stated, English Romantic poetry was an extension of a popular trend and contemporary foreign influences that were given a formal critical theory, or multiple theories. In France, an overt culture war was ongoing, dating from the conflict between

12 Ibid., lines 183-185.

13 Ibid., lines 175-176.


Germaine De Staël and Napoleon. The French bourgeoisie was new and had little cultural tradition, which De Staël believed Romanticism would rectify. However, middle-class culture had been stamped with the imprint of Napoleonic materialism and utilitarianism. Moreover, the attraction of the middle-classes to a separate vein of low culture, Napoleon notwithstanding, was persistent. Rather than a theater tradition like that of England springing up, vaudeville arose instead. Newly-formed lending libraries carried books catering to popular tastes rather than works that earned serious critical praise.16 Adolphe Nourrit, the most prominent opera singer of the 1820s, opera librettist, and credible spokesmen for high French culture, had this to say about the situation, “[T]he bourgeoisie is killing us . . . it has taken on all the vices of the old decrepit aristocracy without inheriting any of its virtues.”17 The French artist continually fretted over the venality and indiscriminate tastes of the public.

Nourrit’s invocation of the aristocracy bespeaks to French Romanticism’s roots in Chateaubriand and De Staël, and no doubt explains at least some of the affinity for Byron. Ironically, although the first generation of English Romantic poets tried to summon the common voice, Romantic poetry eventually became infected with artistic snobbery. Hugo would remain true to his populism and out of the fray, but his young partisans took anything progressive and utilitarian, “proprieters . . . the machine, progress and prose,” to be their enemies. This put poets in a self-reinforcing cycle: by being uncompromising, they alienated publishers and the public and limited their own


circulation and ability to earn a living, which proved to them that the public was ungrateful and undeserving. In response, they continued to be uncompromising. Many of them, in order to shock middle class sensibilities, would be drawn to the themes of perversion, blood, and Satanism, which was linked to Byron, further enhancing his popularity. “Byron” refers to an idea, not his actual poetry, because to label Byron as “Satanic” is a gross oversimplification of this work—the term, in fact, was first applied by Byron’s rival Southey as an insult—and Byron never actually used Satan as a character in any of his poetry. Rather, so-called Satanic elements, pride, inner conflict, impropriety, were characteristics of the Byronic hero, and Byron referred to Satan as an inversion of Milton’s in “Paradise Lost” to refer to a creative superman.

Ironically, Byron himself was also not the ideal Byronic hero, but the young French poets seemed content with worshipping the persona. His letters and satiric poetry exhibit the wit and conservatism of a neo-Classicist aristocrat. Wordsworth, he writes, is “crazed beyond all hope,” and Coleridge, a “drunk.” He was an ardent defender of Dryden—“Thou shalt believe in . . . Dryden”—that archetype of English neoclassicism. Byron’s lyrical poems are “old-fashioned . . . in the gentlemanly mode of witty extemporization . . . or continue the Cavalier tradition of the elaborate development of a compliment to a lady.”

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20 Ibid., line 1633.

aristocratic propriety. The French Romantic poets, however, were not particularly interested in the style of Byron’s poetry, but its exotic subject matter, which they could use to lift themselves out of dreary, middle-class French themes. “Lord Byron's poems, ‘The Corsair,’ ‘Lara,’ ‘The Giaour,’ ‘Manfred,’ ‘Beppo,’ ‘Don Juan,’ brought [us] the East,” writes Gautier,\(^\text{22}\) and his “dandyism and sarcasm have to be exaggerated if it is desired to make the public accept reproductions of the life it sees every day,”\(^\text{23}\) that is, to break the hold of mundane bourgeoisie routine. Completing Byron’s allure, his literary career, beginning at the age of 22 and ending with his death at 36, was, as far as the French Romantic poets were concerned, wholly contained within the period of youth; there never was a mature, wizened Byron or Byronic poetry.

How Byron integrated Napoleon into the Romantic hero would also appeal to the French Romantic poets. The French emperor’s life and impact on society and culture is full of ambiguities that are a rich source of material for artists. Jacques de Norvins, one of Napoleon’s early historians, writes, “The study of Napoleon’s life . . . is dominated by three great characteristics: the excess of genius, the excess of fortune, and the excess of misery . . . The writer . . . trembles before dimensions so colossal.”\(^\text{24}\) To the English poets, he is the corrupter of the French Revolution and the enemy of democracy, but his defeat came at the hands of the league of greater oppressors who required from the


\(^{23}\) Ibid., 333.

people “lowly gaze / And servile knees to thrones.”

To Chateaubriand and De Staël, Napoleon was responsible for everything wrong with middle class tastes, tastes that would prove to be the largest obstacles to the young French Romantic poets. However, Napoleon would also serve as a model for the artist, a mythological superman representing the uppermost potential of achievement through brilliance and will.

Byron, neither idolizing nor damning him, explained his life in Romantic terms as the problem of ability and the restless mind:

There sunk the greatest, nor the worst of men,
Whose spirit antithetically mixed
One moment of the mightiest, and again
On little objects with like firmness fixed;

Oh, more or less than man—in high or low,
Battling with nations, flying from the field;
Now making monarchs' necks thy footstool, now
More than thy meanest soldier taught to yield:
An empire thou couldst crush, command, rebuild,
But govern not thy pettiest passion, nor,
However deeply in men's spirits skilled,
Look through thine own, nor curb the lust of war,
Nor learn that tempted Fate will leave the loftiest star.

'Tis but a worthless world to win or lose;
So hath it proved to thee, and all such lot who choose.

In the last two lines I have quoted, Byron imputes resentment and disdain that, despite Napoleon’s faults, the world that ultimately defeated him was not worth his effort. This sentiment is very much echoed in the complaints of the French Romantic poets, that the

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failure in the art to reach wide circulation (and thus their failing to achieve Napoleonic stature) was the fault of an unworthy, unread public. To take the idea of the Byron’s Napoleonic hero literally requires one to ignore the wit, irony, and exaggeration Byron interjected into his work. His neoclassicism, as already discussed, is explicit, and it is possible that he intends for his hero he to be admired, pitied, and ridiculed simultaneously, quite within the long tradition of English wit. This satirizes the French Romantic poets who saw themselves as geniuses misunderstood by an undeserving public. One could imagine the ghost of Byron viewing the restless, ambitious, suffering writers of the 1830s and 1840s with a wry smirk on his face.

The English Romantic poets were able to carry their enterprise through to its completion with the deaths or withdrawal of its primary actors and the dawn of the Victorian era. However, socioeconomics were inescapable for the French, and Desbordes-Valmore, Lamartine, Hugo, and others had only been able to begin the movement, and the next generation was conscious that its moment was slipping away, if not already been missed.²⁸ Gautier, who veered toward fantasy but not the macabre tendencies of his contemporaries, wrote a desperate essay beseeching King Louis-Philippe to suppress newspapers and promising a copious supply of poetry to meet the demand for reading material.²⁹ Hugo, despite his own hopes for liberating the minds of the people through poetic language, suppressed his poetry and delayed its publication to

²⁸ George, Development of French Romanticism, 78-79.
²⁹ Ibid.
prevent it from stigmatizing him and overshadowing his plays and novels.\textsuperscript{30} Hardship also helped fortify genuine devotion to art and expression; the French Romantic poets were certainly not spoiled by success. Aloysius Bertrand, a young, impoverished, consumptive poet, and Romantic hero in his own right, presented the first fully realized concept of the prose poem with his work \textit{Gaspard de La Nuit}, a series of vignettes on the nature of art—“What is art?” the narrator repeatedly asks in the preface—written in prose using poetic metaphor and imagery.\textsuperscript{31} The form became popular and offered some reconciliation between prose and poetry, giving the Romantic poets a form that allowed them to expand their publication and readership. Form and craftsmanship also came back into fashion, and the young French poets, despite their rebelliousness, were less inclined to follow pure inspiration, and “preferred to lavish time and lovingkindness [sic] on their lines.”\textsuperscript{32} Poets were not rapidly piling up thousands of feverishly-inspired lines like Hugo, but were honing their Romantic verse with the devotion of Classicists.

\textit{Inspiration and Imagination}

The discussions about culture and history finally lead to consideration of how the poet felt about his or her own power. Within English and French Romanticism, inspiration and imagination do not gain the permanent advantage over more Classical aesthetics of creativity and labor. Imagination in Gautier’s poem “Art” does not sustain itself; he juxtaposes the poet with the sculptor and the painter to show that perseverance

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 74.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Aloysius Bertrand, \textit{Gaspard de la Nuit} (Encino, CA: Black Coat Press, 2004).
\item \textsuperscript{32} George, \textit{Development of French Romanticism}, 85.
\end{itemize}
and craftsmanship are needed to permanently capture the idea. Byron also tilts toward formalism and away from raw emotion.

“Creativity” and “imagination” seem more to be synonyms rather than opposing concepts, and I intend to discuss them as the Romantic poets did. To Coleridge, imagination is “not to think of what I needs must feel,” that is, it is a function of emotion and is not summoned by rational thought. Lack of imagination does not preclude creativity, but does force the poet to rely on “research,” or philosophy. Once thought takes over imagination, it becomes “habit,” and regardless of the poet’s intelligence or skill, a noticeable difference or decline in the emotional force of the poetry is inevitable. This occurred within the lives of Coleridge and Wordsworth, but this pattern is also imprinted on English and French Romantic poetry as a whole. Coleridge refers to his tendency to think too much as that which “suspends what nature gave me at my birth, / My shaping spirit of Imagination.” One can imagine that the French Romantic poets, finding themselves mired in monetary problems and aesthetic debates, quickly found their youthful inspiration quashed, and therefore created works that had more planning, thought, and work put into them. However, at the end of this decline is Baudelaire, who, rather than waiting out his troubles for moments receptive to full

34 Ibid., line 89.
35 Ibid., line 93.
feelings and beauty, drew inspiration from his problems and ill temper. Inspiration did not come from places outside his life, exotic, occult places, or idyllic vistas that offered a spiritual escape. His ordinary life was full of things that instilled in the richness of emotion that was the key ingredient of his poetry.

Imagination itself does not lead to a uniform intensity of feeling and expression. To see the subtle differences in the degrees of pure feeling, it is useful to contrast the poetry of Wordsworth and Hugo. So engrossed in his reverie was Wordsworth that Byron thought him crazy. In Wordsworth, there is a genuine expression of “a loss of Selfhood, and the subsequent merging of the poet’s identity into the identity of the person or thing being contemplated.”  

38 Wordsworth writes in “The Prelude,” “To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower, / Even the loose stones that cover the high-way, / I gave a moral life: I saw them feel, / or linked them to some feeling.”  

Hugo, although his tone often is declamatory as he writes rapidly to capture an idea, in fact, only seems to have “a modest conception of the poet’s spiritual power.”  

39 If one believes Wordsworth’s relationship to the source of his poetry is superlative, Hugo, perhaps the best analog in French poetry, falls short:  

The Victorians saw that Hugo failed to create an effective French version of Wordsworthian sublimity. . . [However,] [t]he main convictions behind English Romantic vision remain alien to Hugo. . . .Hugo relies on poetic devices that are

38 Van der Vat, Fabulous Opera, 121.  


not only different but even opposed to the concept of imaginative vision in English Romanticism.\textsuperscript{41}

Sabin suggests that the force and believability of Wordsworth’s reverie comes from the fact that he is specific, that is, we know exactly where he is and how he got there.\textsuperscript{42} By scanning his titles and his poetry, one can almost recreate his route and sit at the same spot that he did when inspiration came to him. With Hugo, as Sabin points out, we have no idea where he is or even if what he is writing about is real.\textsuperscript{43} He may or may not have ever been to the place he sees, and it is just as likely that he is writing from the memory of an event or journey as it is that he is describing a feeling with a fictional event or scene. He could also be projecting his inspiration onto a real situation, its meaning and emotional significance only apparent in hindsight. As compared to Wordsworth, the flow of Hugo’s imagination is inverted: Wordsworth draws inspiration from reality, but Hugo feels inspiration from within and uses reality as a metaphor for expressing it. Contrary to criticism, this does not make Hugo less a visionary: because his imagination is more prophetic, he “appears to dwell habitually in the sublime.”\textsuperscript{44} Prophetic vision \textit{begins} in the abstract, and requires the seer to shape it into something expressible through parable and metaphor.

These characteristics of Hugo’s imagination are manifest in his work. He is unique even within French poetry because his work is almost exclusively moral. Very

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[41]{Ibid., 129.}
\footnotetext[42]{Ibid., 129-130.}
\footnotetext[43]{Ibid., 130.}
\footnotetext[44]{Ibid., 131.}
\end{footnotes}
little of his writing comes from any source other than a deeply ingrained Christianity and
humanism, both of which are seemingly natural and not derived from theology or
philosophy. Even his advocacy of the common French language in literature is invested
with a moral tone, and his style and lexicon are appropriate for his parables. Last, there is
his deep affinity for Dante, perhaps the poet par excellence who devoted his art to
expressing a powerful spiritual vision.
CONCLUSION

England entered the Victorian era in 1837, reinforcing the status of the middle class and its favorite literary entertainment, the novel. The wild rhapsodies of its Romantic poets would give way to themes that were more portentous, practical, and real. French Romantic poets worked diligently to outrun the same cultural changes that had already overtaken England, but the artistic era that had taken so long to unfold, like movements before, succumbed to the cycle of new ideas for expression. Baudelaire, straddling the middle of the nineteenth century and the changing aesthetics, eulogized Romantic poetry in the sonnet “The Setting of the Romantic Sun”:

How lovely is the sun fresh in the skies,  
Blasting his good day to the world below!  
—Happy the one who can with passion know  
The sunset’s glory, dreamlike to the eyes!

I have seen all: the flower, furrow, spring  
Swoon in his beaming like a throbbing heart . . .  
—Now it is late, run westward, let us start,  
To trap one ray, at least one fading thing.

But I pursue the dying God in vain;  
Remorseless Night establishes her reign,  
Black, damp and baneful, full of shivering;

At the swamp’s edge swim odours of the tomb,  
And where my bruising foot, there in the gloom,  
Steps fearful, snails and toads are quivering.  

The noontime of the “fresh,” “dreamlike,” Romantic imagination was past, and poor Baudelaire lived through its dusk, hopelessly chasing its lingering rays. It is during poetry’s night that he believes he writes, among lesser writers. He did not live long

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enough to see that he had persisted until the dawn of symbolism and subsequent modern poetic movements, all of which would look to him, the capstone of Romantic poetry, as their source.
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