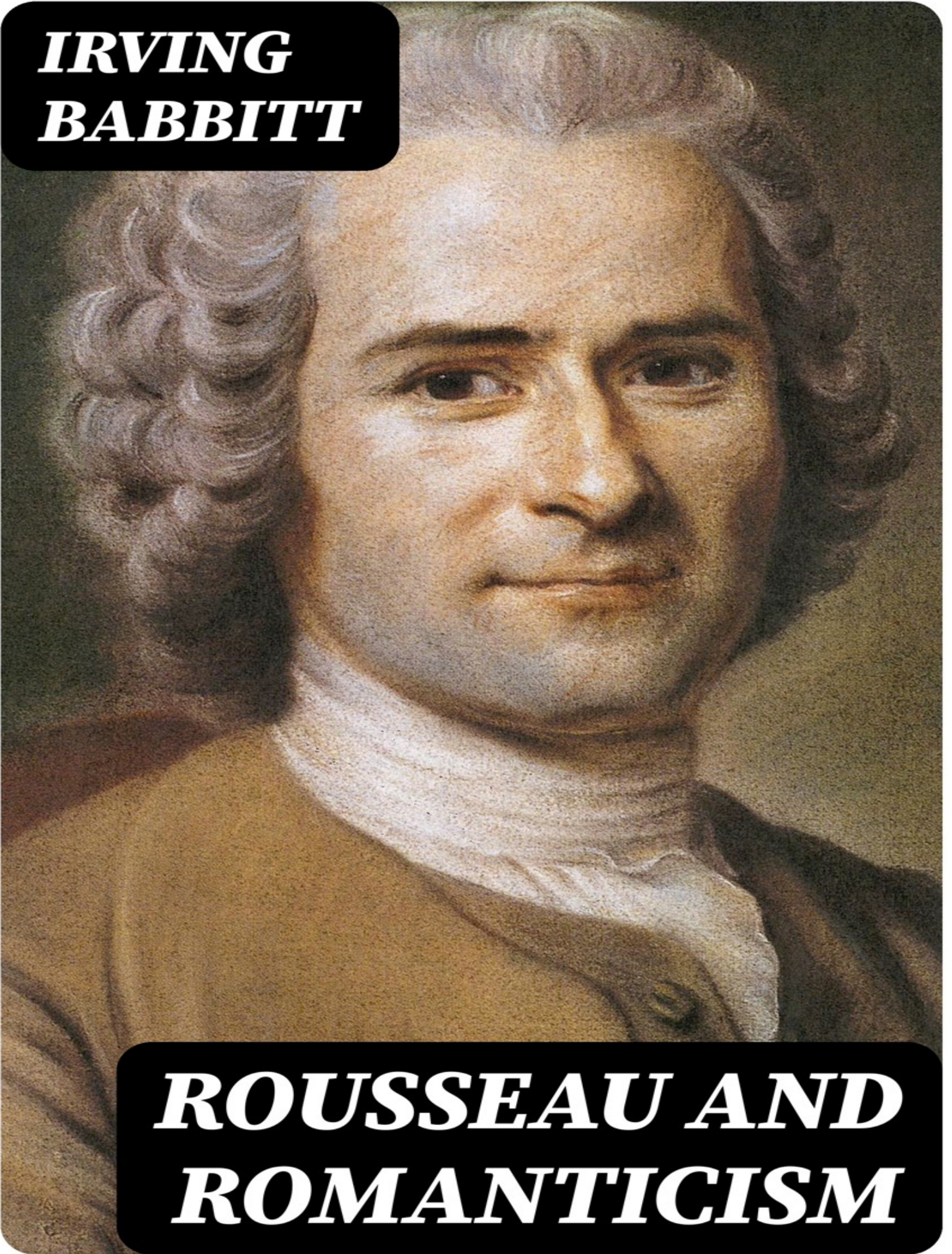


***IRVING
BABBITT***



***ROUSSEAU AND
ROMANTICISM***

Irving Babbitt

Rousseau and Romanticism

EAN 8596547254492

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

[INTRODUCTION](#)

[ROUSSEAU AND ROMANTICISM](#)

[CHAPTER I THE TERMS CLASSIC AND ROMANTIC](#)

[I](#)

[II](#)

[III](#)

[IV](#)

[CHAPTER II ROMANTIC GENIUS](#)

[CHAPTER III ROMANTIC IMAGINATION](#)

[CHAPTER IV ROMANTIC MORALITY: THE IDEAL](#)

[CHAPTER V ROMANTIC MORALITY: THE REAL](#)

[CHAPTER VI ROMANTIC LOVE](#)

[CHAPTER VII ROMANTIC IRONY](#)

[CHAPTER VIII ROMANTICISM AND NATURE](#)

[CHAPTER IX ROMANTIC MELANCHOLY](#)

[CHAPTER X THE PRESENT OUTLOOK](#)

[APPENDIX CHINESE PRIMITIVISM](#)

[BIBLIOGRAPHY](#)

[ENGLISH FIELD](#)

[FRENCH FIELD](#)

[GERMAN FIELD](#)

[INDEX OF NAMES](#)

INTRODUCTION

[Table of Contents](#)

Many readers will no doubt be tempted to exclaim on seeing my title: "Rousseau and no end!" The outpour of books on Rousseau had indeed in the period immediately preceding the war become somewhat portentous.[\[1\]](#) This preoccupation with Rousseau is after all easy to explain. It is his somewhat formidable privilege to represent more fully than any other one person a great international movement. To attack Rousseau or to defend him is most often only a way of attacking or defending this movement.

It is from this point of view at all events that the present work is conceived. I have not undertaken a systematic study of Rousseau's life and doctrines. The appearance of his name in my title is justified, if at all, simply because he comes at a fairly early stage in the international movement the rise and growth of which I am tracing, and has on the whole supplied me with the most significant illustrations of it. I have already put forth certain views regarding this movement in three previous volumes.[\[2\]](#) Though each one of these volumes attempts to do justice to a particular topic, it is at the same time intended to be a link in a continuous argument. I hope that I may be allowed to speak here with some frankness of the main trend of this argument both on its negative and on its positive, or constructive, side.

Perhaps the best key to both sides of my argument is found in the lines of Emerson I have taken as epigraph for "Literature and the American College":
There are two laws discrete

Not reconciled,—
Law for man, and law for thing;
The last builds town and fleet,
But it runs wild,
And doth the man unking.

On its negative side my argument is directed against this undue emphasis on the “law for thing,” against the attempt to erect on naturalistic foundations a complete philosophy of life. I define two main forms of naturalism—on the one hand, utilitarian and scientific and, on the other, emotional naturalism. The type of romanticism I am studying is inseparably bound up with emotional naturalism.

This type of romanticism encouraged by the naturalistic movement is only one of three main types I distinguish and I am dealing for the most part with only one aspect of it. But even when thus circumscribed the subject can scarcely be said to lack importance; for if I am right in my conviction as to the unsoundness of a Rousseauistic philosophy of life, it follows that the total tendency of the Occident at present is away from rather than towards civilization.

On the positive side, my argument aims to reassert the “law for man,” and its special discipline against the various forms of naturalistic excess. At the very mention of the word discipline I shall be set down in certain quarters as reactionary. But does it necessarily follow from a plea for the human law that one is a reactionary or in general a traditionalist? An American writer of distinction was once heard to remark that he saw in the world to-day but two classes of persons,—the mossbacks and the mountebanks, and that for his part he preferred to be a mossback. One should think twice before thus consenting to seem a mere

relic of the past. The ineffable smartness of our young radicals is due to the conviction that, whatever else they may be, they are the very pink of modernity. Before sharing their conviction it might be well to do a little preliminary defining of such terms as modern and the modern spirit. It may then turn out that the true difficulty with our young radicals is not that they are too modern but that they are not modern enough. For, though the word modern is often and no doubt inevitably used to describe the more recent or the most recent thing, this is not its sole use. It is not in this sense alone that the word is used by writers like Goethe and Sainte-Beuve and Renan and Arnold. What all these writers mean by the modern spirit is the positive and critical spirit, the spirit that refuses to take things on authority. This is what Renan means, for example, when he calls Petrarch the “founder of the modern spirit in literature,” or Arnold when he explains why the Greeks of the great period seem more modern to us than the men of the Middle Ages.[\[3\]](#)

Now what I have myself tried to do is to be thoroughly modern in this sense. I hold that one should not only welcome the efforts of the man of science at his best to put the natural law on a positive and critical basis, but that one should strive to emulate him in one's dealings with the human law; and so become a complete positivist. My main objection to the movement I am studying is that it has failed to produce complete positivists. Instead of facing honestly the emergency created by its break with the past the leaders of this movement have inclined to deny the duality of human nature, and then sought to dissimulate this mutilation of man under a mass of intellectual and

emotional sophistry. The proper procedure in refuting these incomplete positivists is not to appeal to some dogma or outer authority but rather to turn against them their own principles. Thus Diderot, a notable example of the incomplete positivist and a chief source of naturalistic tendency, says that “everything is experimental in man.” Now the word experimental has somewhat narrowed in meaning since the time of Diderot. If one takes the saying to mean that everything in man is a matter of experience one should accept it unreservedly and then plant oneself firmly on the facts of experience that Diderot and other incomplete positivists have refused to recognize.

The man who plants himself, not on outer authority but on experience, is an individualist. To be modern in the sense I have defined is not only to be positive and critical, but also—and this from the time of Petrarch—to be individualistic. The establishment of a sound type of individualism is indeed the specifically modern problem. It is right here that the failure of the incomplete positivist, the man who is positive only according to the natural law, is most conspicuous. What prevails in the region of the natural law is endless change and relativity; therefore the naturalistic positivist attacks all the traditional creeds and dogmas for the very reason that they aspire to fixity. Now all the ethical values of civilization have been associated with these fixed beliefs; and so it has come to pass that with their undermining by naturalism the ethical values themselves are in danger of being swept away in the everlasting flux. Because the individual who views life positively must give up unvarying creeds and dogmas “anterior, exterior, and superior” to

himself, it has been assumed that he must also give up standards. For standards imply an element of oneness somewhere, with reference to which it is possible to measure the mere manifoldness and change. The naturalistic individualist, however, refuses to recognize any such element of oneness. His own private and personal self is to be the measure of all things and this measure itself, he adds, is constantly changing. But to stop at this stage is to be satisfied with the most dangerous of half-truths. Thus Bergson's assertion that "life is a perpetual gushing forth of novelties" is in itself only a dangerous half-truth of this kind. The constant element in life is, no less than the element of novelty and change, a matter of observation and experience. As the French have it, the more life changes the more it is the same thing.

If, then, one is to be a sound individualist, an individualist with human standards—and in an age like this that has cut loose from its traditional moorings, the very survival of civilization would seem to hinge on its power to produce such a type of individualist—one must grapple with what Plato terms the problem of the One and the Many. My own solution of this problem, it may be well to point out, is not purely Platonic. Because one can perceive immediately an element of unity in things, it does not follow that one is justified in establishing a world of essences or entities or "ideas" above the flux. To do this is to fall away from a positive and critical into a more or less speculative attitude; it is to risk setting up a metaphysic of the One. Those who put exclusive emphasis on the element of change in things are in no less obvious danger of falling away from the

positive and critical attitude into a metaphysic of the Many. [4] This for example is the error one finds in the contemporary thinkers who seem to have the cry, thinkers like James and Bergson and Dewey and Croce. They are very far from satisfying the requirements of a complete positivism; they are seeking rather to build up their own intoxication with the element of change into a complete view of life, and so are turning their backs on one whole side of experience in a way that often reminds one of the ancient Greek sophists. The history of philosophy since the Greeks is to a great extent the history of the clashes of the metaphysicians of the One and the metaphysicians of the Many. In the eyes of the complete positivist this history therefore reduces itself largely to a monstrous logomachy.

Life does not give here an element of oneness and there an element of change. It gives a *oneness that is always changing*. The oneness and the change are inseparable. Now if what is stable and permanent is felt as real, the side of life that is always slipping over into something else or vanishing away entirely is, as every student of psychology knows, associated rather with the feeling of illusion. If a man attends solely to this side of life he will finally come, like Leconte de Lisle, to look upon it as a "torrent of mobile chimeras," as an "endless whirl of vain appearances." To admit that the oneness of life and the change are inseparable is therefore to admit that such reality as man can know positively is inextricably mixed up with illusion. Moreover man does not observe the oneness that is always changing from the outside; he is a part of the process, he is himself a oneness that is always changing. Though

imperceptible at any particular moment, the continuous change that is going on leads to differences—those, let us say, between a human individual at the age of six weeks and the same individual at the age of seventy—which are sufficiently striking: and finally this human oneness that is always changing seems to vanish away entirely. From all this it follows that an enormous element of illusion—and this is a truth the East has always accepted more readily than the West—enters into the idea of personality itself. If the critical spirit is once allowed to have its way, it will not rest content until it has dissolved life into a mist of illusion. Perhaps the most positive and critical account of man in modern literature is that of Shakespeare:

We are such stuff

As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep.

But, though strictly considered, life is but a web of illusion and a dream within a dream, it is a dream that needs to be managed with the utmost discretion, if it is not to turn into a nightmare. In other words, however much life may mock the metaphysician, the problem of conduct remains. There is always the unity at the heart of the change; it is possible, however, to get at this real and abiding element and so at the standards with reference to which the dream of life may be rightly managed only through a veil of illusion. The problem of the One and the Many, the ultimate problem of thought, can therefore be solved only by a right use of illusion. In close relation to illusion and the questions that arise in connection with it is all that we have come to sum up in the word imagination. The use of this word, at least in anything like its present

extension, is, one should note, comparatively recent. Whole nations and periods of the past can scarcely be said to have had any word corresponding to imagination in this extended sense. Yet the thinkers of the past have treated, at times profoundly, under the head of fiction or illusion the questions that we should treat under the head of imagination.^[5] In the “Masters of Modern French Criticism” I was above all preoccupied with the problem of the One and the Many and the failure of the nineteenth century to deal with it adequately. My effort in this present work is to show that this failure can be retrieved only by a deeper insight into the imagination and its all-important rôle in both literature and life. Man is cut off from immediate contact with anything abiding and therefore worthy to be called real, and condemned to live in an element of fiction or illusion, but he may, I have tried to show, lay hold with the aid of the imagination on the element of oneness that is inextricably blended with the manifoldness and change and to just that extent may build up a sound model for imitation. One tends to be an individualist with true standards, to put the matter somewhat differently, only in so far as one understands the relation between appearance and reality—what the philosophers call the epistemological problem. This problem, though it cannot be solved abstractly and metaphysically, can be solved practically and in terms of actual conduct. Inasmuch as modern philosophy has failed to work out any such solution, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that modern philosophy is bankrupt, not merely from Kant, but from Descartes.

The supreme maxim of the ethical positivist is: By their fruits shall ye know them. If I object to a romantic philosophy it is because I do not like its fruits. I infer from its fruits that this philosophy has made a wrong use of illusion. "All those who took the romantic promises at their face value," says Bourget, "rolled in abysses of despair and ennui."[\[6\]](#) If any one still holds, as many of the older romanticists held, that it is a distinguished thing to roll in abysses of despair and ennui, he should read me no further. He will have no sympathy with my point of view. If any one, on the other hand, accepts my criterion but denies that Rousseauistic living has such fruits, it has been my aim so to accumulate evidence that he will be confronted with the task of refuting not a set of theories but a body of facts. My whole method, let me repeat, is experimental, or it might be less ambiguous to say if the word were a fortunate one, experiential. The illustrations I have given of any particular aspect of the movement are usually only a small fraction of those I have collected—themselves no doubt only a fraction of the illustrations that might be collected from printed sources. M. Maigron's investigation[\[7\]](#) into the fruits of romantic living suggests the large additions that might be made to these printed sources from manuscript material.

My method indeed is open in one respect to grave misunderstanding. From the fact that I am constantly citing passages from this or that author and condemning the tendency for which these passages stand, the reader will perhaps be led to infer a total condemnation of the authors so quoted. But the inference may be very incorrect. I am not trying to give rounded estimates of individuals—delightful

and legitimate as that type of criticism is—but to trace main currents as a part of my search for a set of principles to oppose to naturalism. I call attention for example to the Rousseauistic and primitivistic elements in Wordsworth but do not assert that this is the whole truth about Wordsworth. One's views as to the philosophical value of Rousseauism must, however, weigh heavily in a total judgment of Wordsworth. Criticism is such a difficult art because one must not only have principles but must apply them flexibly and intuitively. No one would accuse criticism at present of lacking flexibility. It has grown so flexible in fact as to become invertebrate. One of my reasons for practicing the present type of criticism, is the conviction that because of a lack of principles the type of criticism that aims at rounded estimates of individuals is rapidly ceasing to have any meaning.

I should add that if I had attempted rounded estimates they would often have been more favorable than might be gathered from my comments here and elsewhere on the romantic leaders. One is justified in leaning towards severity in the laying down of principles, but should nearly always incline to indulgence in the application of them. In a sense one may say with Goethe that the excellencies are of the individual, the defects of the age. It is especially needful to recall distinctions of this kind in the case of Rousseau himself and my treatment of him. M. Lanson has dwelt on the strange duality of Rousseau's nature. "The writer," he says, "is a poor dreamy creature who approaches action only with alarm and with every manner of precaution, and who understands the applications of his boldest doctrines in

a way to reassure conservatives and satisfy opportunists. But the work for its part detaches itself from the author, lives its independent life, and, heavily charged with revolutionary explosives which neutralize the moderate and conciliatory elements Rousseau has put into it for his own satisfaction, it exasperates and inspires revolt and fires enthusiasms and irritates hatreds; it is the mother of violence, the source of all that is uncompromising, it launches the simple souls who give themselves up to its strange virtue upon the desperate quest of the absolute, an absolute to be realized now by anarchy and now by social despotism.”[8] I am inclined to discover in the Rousseau who, according to M. Lanson, is merely timorous, a great deal of shrewdness and at times something even better than shrewdness. The question is not perhaps very important, for M. Lanson is surely right in affirming that the Rousseau who has moved the world—and that for reasons I shall try to make plain—is Rousseau the extremist and foe of compromise; and so it is to this Rousseau that as a student of main tendencies I devote almost exclusive attention. I am not, however, seeking to make a scapegoat even of the radical and revolutionary Rousseau. One of my chief objections, indeed, to Rousseauism, as will appear in the following pages, is that it encourages the making of scapegoats.

If I am opposed to Rousseauism because of its fruits in experience, I try to put what I have to offer as a substitute on the same positive basis. Now experience is of many degrees: first of all one’s purely personal experience, an infinitesimal fragment; and then the experience of one’s

immediate circle, of one's time and country, of the near past and so on in widening circles. The past which as dogma the ethical positivist rejects, as experience he not only admits but welcomes. He can no more dispense with it indeed than the naturalistic positivist can dispense with his laboratory. He insists moreover on including the remoter past in his survey. Perhaps the most pernicious of all the conceits fostered by the type of progress we owe to science is the conceit that we have outgrown this older experience. One should endeavor, as Goethe says, to oppose to the aberrations of the hour, the masses of universal history. There are special reasons just now why this background to which one appeals should not be merely Occidental. An increasing material contact between the Occident and the Far East is certain. We should be enlightened by this time as to the perils of material contact between men and bodies of men who have no deeper understanding. Quite apart from this consideration the experience of the Far East completes and confirms in a most interesting way that of the Occident. We can scarcely afford to neglect it if we hope to work out a truly ecumenical wisdom to oppose to the sinister one-sidedness of our current naturalism. Now the ethical experience of the Far East may be summed up for practical purposes in the teachings and influence of two men, Confucius and Buddha.[\[9\]](#) To know the Buddhistic and Confucian teachings in their true spirit is to know what is best and most representative in the ethical experience of about half the human race for over seventy generations.

A study of Buddha and Confucius suggests, as does a study of the great teachers of the Occident, that under its

bewildering surface variety human experience falls after all into a few main categories. I myself am fond of distinguishing three levels on which a man may experience life—the naturalistic, the humanistic, and the religious. Tested by its fruits Buddhism at its best confirms Christianity. Submitted to the same test Confucianism falls in with the teaching of Aristotle and in general with that of all those who from the Greeks down have proclaimed decorum and the law of measure. This is so obviously true that Confucius has been called the Aristotle of the East. Not only has the Far East had in Buddhism a great religious movement and in Confucianism a great humanistic movement, it has also had in early Taoism[\[10\]](#) a movement that in its attempts to work out naturalistic equivalents of humanistic or religious insight, offers almost startling analogies to the movement I am here studying.

Thus both East and West have not only had great religious and humanistic disciplines which when tested by their fruits confirm one another, bearing witness to the element of oneness, the constant element in human experience, but these disciplines have at times been conceived in a very positive spirit. Confucius indeed, though a moral realist, can scarcely be called a positivist; he aimed rather to attach men to the past by links of steel. He reminds us in this as in some other ways of the last of the great Tories in the Occident, Dr. Johnson. Buddha on the other hand was an individualist. He wished men to rest their belief neither on his authority[\[11\]](#) nor on that of tradition. [\[12\]](#) No one has ever made a more serious effort to put religion on a positive and critical basis. It is only proper that

I acknowledge my indebtedness to the great Hindu positivist: my treatment of the problem of the One and the Many, for example, is nearer to Buddha than to Plato. Yet even if the general thesis be granted that it is desirable to put the "law for man" on a positive and critical basis, the question remains whether the more crying need just now is for positive and critical humanism or for positive and critical religion. I have discussed this delicate and difficult question more fully in my last chapter, but may give at least one reason here for inclining to the humanistic solution. I have been struck in my study of the past by the endless self-deception to which man is subject when he tries to pass too abruptly from the naturalistic to the religious level. The world, it is hard to avoid concluding, would have been a better place if more persons had made sure they were human before setting out to be superhuman; and this consideration would seem to apply with special force to a generation like the present that is wallowing in the trough of naturalism. After all to be a good humanist is merely to be moderate and sensible and decent. It is much easier for a man to deceive himself and others regarding his supernatural lights than it is regarding the degree to which he is moderate and sensible and decent.

The past is not without examples of a positive and critical humanism. I have already mentioned Aristotle. If by his emphasis on the mediatory virtues he reminds one of Confucius, by his positive method and intensely analytical temper he reminds one rather of Buddha. When Aristotle rises to the religious level and discourses of the "life of vision" he is very Buddhistic. When Buddha for his part turns

from the religious life to the duties of the layman he is purely Aristotelian. Aristotle also deals positively with the natural law. He is indeed a complete positivist, and not, like the man of the nineteenth century, positive according to the natural law alone. The Aristotle that should specially concern us, however, is the positive and critical humanist—the Aristotle, let us say, of the “Ethics” and “Politics” and “Poetics.” Just as I have called the point of view of the scientific and utilitarian naturalist Baconian,[\[13\]](#) and that of the emotional naturalist Rousseauistic, so I would term the point of view that I am myself seeking to develop Aristotelian. Aristotle has laid down once for all the principle that should guide the ethical positivist. “Truth,” he says, “in matters of moral action is judged from facts and from actual life. ... So what we should do is to examine the preceding statements [of Solon and other wise men] by referring them to facts and to actual life, and when they harmonize with facts we may accept them, when they are at variance with them conceive of them as mere theories.”[\[14\]](#)

It is in this sense alone that I aspire to be called an Aristotelian; for one risks certain misunderstandings in using the name of Aristotle.[\[15\]](#) The authority of this great positivist has been invoked innumerable times throughout the ages as a substitute for direct observation. Aristotle was not only the prop and mainstay of dogma for centuries during the Middle Ages, but dogmatic Aristotelianism survived to no small extent, especially in literature, throughout the neo-classical period. It was no doubt natural enough that the champions of the modern spirit should have rejected Aristotle along with the traditional order of which

he had been made a support. Yet if they had been more modern they might have seen in him rather a chief precursor. They might have learned from him how to have standards and at the same time not be immured in dogma. As it is, those who call themselves modern have come to adopt a purely exploratory attitude towards life. "On desperate seas long wont to roam," they have lost more and more the sense of what is normal and central in human experience. But to get away from what is normal and central is to get away from wisdom. My whole argument on the negative side, if I may venture on a final summing up, is that the naturalistic movement in the midst of which we are still living had from the start this taint of eccentricity. I have tried to show in detail the nature of the aberration. As for the results, they are being written large in disastrous events. On its constructive side, my argument, if it makes any appeal at all, will be to those for whom the symbols through which the past has received its wisdom have become incredible, and who, seeing at the same time that the break with the past that took place in the eighteenth century was on unsound lines, hold that the remedy for the partial positivism that is the source of this unsoundness, is a more complete positivism. Nothing is more perilous than to be only half critical. This is to risk being the wrong type of individualist—the individualist who has repudiated outer control without achieving inner control. "People mean nowadays by a philosopher," says Rivarol, "not the man who learns the great art of mastering his passions or adding to his insight, but the man who has cast off prejudices without acquiring virtues." That view of philosophy has not ceased

to be popular. The whole modern experiment is threatened with breakdown simply because it has not been sufficiently modern. One should therefore not rest content until one has, with the aid of the secular experience of both the East and the West, worked out a point of view so modern that, compared with it, that of our young radicals will seem antediluvian.

ROUSSEAU AND ROMANTICISM

[Table of Contents](#)

CHAPTER I

THE TERMS CLASSIC AND ROMANTIC

[Table of Contents](#)

The words classic and romantic, we are often told, cannot be defined at all, and even if they could be defined, some would add, we should not be much profited. But this inability or unwillingness to define may itself turn out to be only one aspect of a movement that from Rousseau to Bergson has sought to discredit the analytical intellect—what Wordsworth calls “the false secondary power by which we multiply distinctions.” However, those who are with Socrates rather than with Rousseau or Wordsworth in this matter, will insist on the importance of definition, especially in a chaotic era like the present; for nothing is more characteristic of such an era than its irresponsible use of general terms. Now to measure up to the Socratic standard, a definition must not be abstract and metaphysical, but experimental; it must not, that is, reflect our opinion of what a word should mean, but what it actually has meant. Mathematicians may be free at times to frame their own definitions, but in the case of words like classic and romantic, that have been used innumerable times, and used not in one but in many countries, such a method is inadmissible. One must keep one’s eye on actual usage. One should indeed allow for a certain amount of freakishness in this usage. Beaumarchais, for example, makes classic synonymous with barbaric.[\[16\]](#) One may disregard an occasional aberration of this kind, but if one can find only confusion and inconsistency in all the main uses of words like classic and romantic, the only

procedure for those who speak or write in order to be understood is to banish the words from their vocabulary.

Now to define in a Socratic way two things are necessary: one must learn to see a common element in things that are apparently different and also to discriminate between things that are apparently similar. A Newton, to take the familiar instance of the former process, saw a common element in the fall of an apple and the motion of a planet; and one may perhaps without being a literary Newton discover a common element in all the main uses of the word romantic as well as in all the main uses of the word classic; though some of the things to which the word romantic in particular has been applied seem, it must be admitted, at least as far apart as the fall of an apple and the motion of a planet. The first step is to perceive the something that connects two or more of these things apparently so diverse, and then it may be found necessary to refer this unifying trait itself back to something still more general, and so on until we arrive, not indeed at anything absolute—the absolute will always elude us—but at what Goethe calls the original or underlying phenomenon (*Urphänomen*). A fruitful source of false definition is to take as primary in a more or less closely allied group of facts what is actually secondary—for example, to fix upon the return to the Middle Ages as the central fact in romanticism, whereas this return is only symptomatic; it is very far from being the original phenomenon. Confused and incomplete definitions of romanticism have indeed just that origin—they seek to put at the centre something that though romantic is not central

but peripheral, and so the whole subject is thrown out of perspective.

My plan then is to determine to the best of my ability, in connection with a brief historical survey, the common element in the various uses of the words classic and romantic; and then, having thus disposed of the similarities, to turn to the second part of the art of defining and deal, also historically, with the differences. For my subject is not romanticism in general, but only a particular type of romanticism, and this type of romanticism needs to be seen as a recoil, not from classicism in general, but from a particular type of classicism.

I

Table of Contents

The word romantic when traced historically is found to go back to the old French *roman* of which still elder forms are *romans* and *romant*. These and similar formations derive ultimately from the mediæval Latin adverb *romanice*. *Roman* and like words meant originally the various vernaculars derived from Latin, just as the French still speak of these vernaculars as *les langues romanes*; and then the word *roman* came to be applied to tales written in the various vernaculars, especially in old French. Now with what features of these tales were people most struck? The reply to this question is found in a passage of a fifteenth-century Latin manuscript:[17] “From the reading of certain romantics, that is, books of poetry composed in French on military deeds which are for the most part fictitious.”[18] Here the term romantic is applied to books that we should

still call romantic and for the very same reason, namely, because of the predominance in these books of the element of fiction over reality.

In general a thing is romantic when, as Aristotle would say, it is wonderful rather than probable; in other words, when it violates the normal sequence of cause and effect in favor of adventure. Here is the fundamental contrast between the words classic and romantic which meets us at the outset and in some form or other persists in all the uses of the word down to the present day. A thing is romantic when it is strange, unexpected, intense, superlative, extreme, unique,[\[19\]](#) etc. A thing is classical, on the other hand, when it is not unique, but representative of a class. In this sense medical men may speak correctly of a classic case of typhoid fever, or a classic case of hysteria. One is even justified in speaking of a classic example of romanticism. By an easy extension of meaning a thing is classical when it belongs to a high class or to the best class.

The type of romanticism referred to in the fifteenth-century manuscript was, it will be observed, the spontaneous product of the popular imagination of the Middle Ages. We may go further and say that the uncultivated human imagination in all times and places is romantic in the same way. It hungers for the thrilling and the marvellous and is, in short, incurably melodramatic. All students of the past know how, when the popular imagination is left free to work on actual historical characters and events, it quickly introduces into these characters and events the themes of universal folk-lore, and makes a ruthless sacrifice of reality to the love of

melodramatic surprise. For example, the original nucleus of historical fact has almost disappeared in the lurid melodramatic tale “Les quatre fils Aymon,” which has continued, as presented in the “Bibliothèque Bleue,” to appeal to the French peasant down to our own times. Those who look with alarm on recent attacks upon romanticism should therefore be comforted. All children, nearly all women and the vast majority of men always have been, are and probably always will be romantic. This is true even of a classical period like the second half of the seventeenth century in France. Boileau is supposed to have killed the vogue of the interminable romances of the early seventeenth century which themselves continue the spirit of the mediæval romances. But recent investigations have shown that the vogue of these romances continued until well on into the eighteenth century. They influenced the imagination of Rousseau, the great modern romancer.

But to return to the history of the word romantic. The first printed examples of the word in any modern tongue are, it would seem, to be found in English. The Oxford Dictionary cites the following from F. Greville’s “Life of Sidney” (written before 1628, published in 1652): “Doe not his Arcadian romantics live after him?”—meaning apparently ideas or features suggestive of romance. Of extreme interest is the use of the word in Evelyn’s “Diary” (3 August, 1654): “Were Sir Guy’s grot improved as it might be, it were capable of being made a most romantic and pleasant place.” The word is not only used in a favorable sense, but it is applied to nature; and it is this use of the word in connection with outer nature that French and German literatures are going

to derive later from England. Among the early English uses of the word romantic may be noted: "There happened this extraordinary case—one of the most romantique that ever I heard in my life and could not have believed,"[\[20\]](#) etc. "Most other authors that I ever read either have wild romantic tales wherein they strain Love and Honor to that ridiculous height that it becomes burlesque,"[\[21\]](#) etc. The word becomes fairly common by the year 1700 and thousands of examples could be collected from English writers in the eighteenth century. Here are two early eighteenth-century instances:

“The gentleman I am married to made love to me in rapture but it was the rapture of a Christian and a man of Honor, not a romantic hero or a whining coxcomb.”[22]

Whether the charmer sinner it or saint it
If folly grow romantick I must paint it.[23]

The early French and German uses of the word romantic seem to derive from England. One important point is to be noted as to France. Before using the word *romantique* the French used the word *romanesque* in the sense of wild, unusual, adventurous—especially in matters of sentiment, and they have continued to employ *romanesque* alongside *romantique*, which is now practically used only of the romantic school. A great deal of confusion is thus avoided into which we fall in English from having only the one word romantic, which must do duty for both *romantique* and *romanesque*. An example of *romantique* is found in French as early as 1675;[24] but the word owed its vogue practically to the anglomania that set in about the middle of the eighteenth century. The first very influential French example of the word is appropriately found in Rousseau in the Fifth Promenade (1777): “The shores of the Lake of Bienne are more wild and romantic than those of the Lake of Geneva.” The word *romantique* was fashionable in France especially as applied to scenery from about the year 1785, but without any thought as yet of applying it to a literary school.

In Germany the word *romantisch* as an equivalent of the French *romanesque* and modern German *romanhaft*, appears at the end of the seventeenth century and plainly as a borrowing from the French. Heidigger, a Swiss, used it several times in his “Mythoscopia romantica,”[25] an attack

on romances and the wild and vain imaginings they engender. According to Heidigger the only resource against romanticism in this sense is religion. In Germany as in France the association of romantic with natural scenery comes from England, especially from the imitations and translations of Thomson's "Seasons."

In the second half of the eighteenth century the increasingly favorable use of words like Gothic and enthusiastic as well as the emergence of words like sentimental and picturesque are among the symptoms of a new movement, and the fortunes of the word romantic were more or less bound up with this movement. Still, apart from its application to natural scenery, the word is as yet far from having acquired a favorable connotation if we are to believe an essay by John Foster on the "Application of the Epithet Romantic" (1805). Foster's point of view is not unlike that of Heidigger. Romantic, he says, had come to be used as a term of vague abuse, whereas it can be used rightly only of the ascendancy of imagination over judgment, and is therefore synonymous with such words as wild, visionary, extravagant. "A man possessing so strong a judgment and so subordinate a fancy as Dean Swift would hardly have been made romantic ... if he had studied all the books in Don Quixote's library." It is not, Foster admits, a sign of high endowment for a youth to be too coldly judicial, too deaf to the blandishments of imaginative illusion. Yet in general a man should strive to bring his imagination under the control of sound reason. But how is it possible thus to prevail against the deceits of fancy? Right knowing, he asserts very un-Socratically, is not enough to ensure right doing. At this

point Foster changes from the tone of a literary essay to that of a sermon, and, maintaining a thesis somewhat similar to that of Pascal in the seventeenth century and Heidigger in the eighteenth, he concludes that a man's imagination will run away with his judgment or reason unless he have the aid of divine grace.



[Table of Contents](#)

When Foster wrote his essay there was no question as yet in England of a romantic school. Before considering how the word came to be applied to a particular movement we need first to bring out more fully certain broad conflicts of tendency during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, conflicts that are not sufficiently revealed by the occasional uses during this period of the word romantic. In the contrast Foster established between judgment and imagination he is merely following a long series of neo-classical critics and this contrast not only seemed to him and these critics, but still seems to many, the essential contrast between classicism and romanticism. We shall be helped in understanding how judgment (or reason) and imagination came thus to be sharply contrasted if we consider briefly the changes in the meaning of the word wit during the neo-classical period, and also if we recollect that the contrast between judgment and imagination is closely related to the contrast the French are so fond of establishing between the general sense (*le sens commun*) and the private sense or sense of the individual (*le sens propre*).

In the sixteenth century prime emphasis was put not upon common sense, but upon wit or conceit or ingenuity (in the sense of quickness of imagination). The typical Elizabethan strove to excel less by judgment than by invention, by “high-flying liberty of conceit”; like Falstaff he would have a brain “apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble, fiery, and delectable shapes.” Wit at this time, it should be remembered, was synonymous not only with imagination but with intellect (in opposition to will). The result of the worship of wit in this twofold sense was a sort of intellectual romanticism. Though its origins are no doubt mediæval, it differs from the ordinary romanticism of the Middle Ages to which I have already referred in being thus concerned with thought rather than with action. Towards the end of the Renaissance and in the early seventeenth century especially, people were ready to pursue the strange and surprising thought even at the risk of getting too far away from the workings of the normal mind. Hence the “points” and “conceits” that spread, as Lowell put it, like a “cutaneous eruption” over the face of Europe; hence the Gongorists, and Cultists, the Marinists and Euphuists, the *précieux* and the “metaphysical” poets. And then came the inevitable swing away from all this fantasticality towards common sense. A demand arose for something that was less rare and “precious” and more representative.

This struggle between the general sense and the sense of the individual stands out with special clearness in France. A model was gradually worked out by aid of the classics, especially the Latin classics, as to what man should be. Those who were in the main movement of the time