NORBERT WOLF

ROMANTICISM

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE SUBLIME IN ART

PRESTEL
MUNICH LONDON NEW YORK

PREFACE

The aphorism 'Classicism is health, Romanticism is sickness' may be found among JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE's* *Maximen und Reflexionen* (*Maxims and Reflections*, no. 863). He continues: 'The Romantic has already lost its way in its own abyss; one can hardly imagine something sinking any lower than its quite horrid recent productions.' Here was the view of that poet-prince, long celebrated in Germany as the great Classicist, whose *Faust* is nevertheless ranked abroad as a typical manifestation of German Romanticism.

Yet why is it so difficult to think away this 'sickness' from our collective consciousness? Why do the terms 'Romanticism' and 'Romantic' retain such a broad, powerful presence, encompassing emotional and aesthetic depths alongside trivialities and kitsch? Why do exhibitions of pictures by JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER, EUGÈNE DELACROIX or CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH continue to cast a spell on hundreds of thousands of museum visitors the world over? Why have 'icons' of Romantic painting such as THÉODORE GÉRICAULT's *The Raft of the Medusa* (FIG. 107) and DELACROIX's *Liberty Leading the People* (FIG. 93) given rise to so many modern paraphrases – a phenomenon explored in the final chapter of this book? Why do the fantastical creations of English 'Dark' Romanticism populate so many horror films as contemporary revenants?

When WALT DISNEY's 1940 animated feature *Fantasia* portrays a train of nuns through a forest that seems to transfigure into the pointed arches of Gothic architecture, recalling the procession of monks and the church ruin of FRIEDRICH's *Abbey among the Oaks* (FIG. 48), he strove to evoke the fairy-tale magic of Romantic visual fantasy. Ever since the arguments presented by Robert Rosenblum's *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, published in 1975 (from which I have borrowed the reference to WALT DISNEY), art historians have been preoccupied with the impulses that Modernism and contemporary art have drawn from Romanticism – but certainly not because it has been perceived as, in some sense, 'sick'. This issue, too, will be explored in the following pages. My core focus, however, remains the phenomenon of Romanticism and its fascination for us – from its artistic and intellectual precursors in the eighteenth century, to its highpoint during the first half of the nineteenth century, to its dying echoes later in the century.

The forward-looking character of the Romanticist interpretation of the world and its innovative expression in imagery – which is to say, everything the later GOETHE, despite his earlier guarded sympathy, either could not or would not perceive – is recognized today as the unbounded unleashing of subjective fantasy. It is regarded as an intellectual as well as spiritual force capable of exploiting contradiction as a creative element, one that saw the poeticization of life through art as an opportunity to elevate the creative *Self* into transcendental, universal spheres, reconciling the Christian religion with philosophical subjectivism. And Romanticism clung firmly to these aspirations – albeit always with an awareness of the possibility of shipwreck on the shoals of political and social reality, which could not simply be conjured away. Which is why melancholy, 'Weltschmerz' (interestingly, the German word, coined by JEAN PAUL, has been adopted by numerous other languages), was associated with the loss of Self in sleep and dreams, as well as with the dramatic Romantic preoccupation with our 'dark side', with the destructive passions of the human psyche. In nearly all of the major artistic landscapes of Romanticism, with the exception of French works, the primary thematic narrative is the relationship between humanity and the landscape, between the subject and nature, the utopian desire to reconcile an impermanent individual identity with nature as a greater, universal whole.

NORBERT WOLF

That Romanticism was far from a purely ‘German destiny’, as widely claimed over a period of time, was underscored as early as 1959 by the Council of Europe exhibition *The Romantic Movement* at the Tate Gallery and the Arts Council Gallery in London, which presented CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH on equal terms alongside the ‘home-grown’ artist J. M. W. TURNER and works by French Romantics. Ever since, the biggest names in the painting of Romanticism – the Germans FRIEDRICH and RUNGE, the British artists TURNER and BLAKE, the Englishman by choice FUSELI, the French artists GÉRICAULT and DELACROIX – have enjoyed a growing presence from an art-historical perspective. And in the succeeding years, many additional names – not always without controversy – have been absorbed into a progressively expanding canon of Romantic art. Readers will encounter a few of them in the subsequent chapters on various individual countries. Not least of all, these artists – whether in Scandinavia, in Eastern Europe and Russia, in Italy and Spain, or across the Atlantic in the United States – were once regarded and are often still regarded as representatives of national heritage and national greatness, and at times also of national unity and political liberalism.

The fact that I confine myself to the painting of Romanticism (with drawings and studies on paper mentioned only in exceptional cases) is attributable to the uncontested hegemony of that medium. During the Romantic era, sculpture – in contrast to the proceeding Neoclassical period – was deprived of its paramount role, although certain ‘romanticizing-sentimentalizing’ examples could be mentioned – in Germany, for example, with artists like JOHANN GOTTFRIED SCHADOW and CHRISTIAN FRIEDRICH TIECK (the brother of the early Romantic poet LUDWIG TIECK), while the works of the Danish sculptor BERTEL THORVALDSEN display affinities with the paintings of the ‘Nazarenes’. From the perspective of the history of style, Romanticism in architecture simply does not exist; at most, earlier building forms – classical antique temples, Gothic churches, medieval castles, historicizing, which is say, artificially created ruins as attention-grabbing follies in English gardens or incorporated into a wider landscape or as a memorial – were *romanticized*; typically, however, this occurred most frequently in ‘picturesque’ views found in paintings.

In order to remain within the confines of the present publication, I have avoided offering either comprehensive monographic studies on individual artists or synopses of their oeuvres, and have instead related them, based on specific examples, to the various stylistic tendencies and national schools of Romanticism. In some instances, this proved problematic enough, as such choices are never completely free of necessarily subjective valuations.

With that said, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the responsible team at Prestel Verlag for the remarkably smooth production of this book – first and foremost Markus Eisen, who supervised it with great expertise all the way from the initial planning to the final corrections. Iris Seemann and José Enrique Macián assumed responsibility for editing, improving my text in many places with their knowledgeable and insightful suggestions. The accomplished translation for the English edition was the work of Ian Pepper, and Cilly Klotz was responsible for production management. And last, but not least, my thanks go to the creativity of Mario Lombardo and David Heuer, whose book design and arrangement of images has resulted in an impressive visual experience.

* *The years of birth and death for individuals discussed at length can be found in the index.*

1

THE SPIRIT OF ROMANTICISM

PIERRE-HENRI
DE VALENCIENNES

The Eruption of Vesuvius on 24 August AD 79 during the Reign of Titus,
1813, OIL ON CANVAS, 148 X 196 CM, MUSÉE DES AUGUSTINS, TOULOUSE

I

FIG. 1

JOHANN PETER HASENCLEVER

The Sentimental One, 1846, OIL ON CANVAS, 36.5 X 30.5 CM,
STIFTUNG MUSEUM KUNSTPALAST, DÜSSELDORF

BEYOND

the blue mountains, wrote E. T. A. HOFFMANN in 1817 in his fairy tale *Das fremde Kind* (*The Strange Child*), we must seek the magical land of wandering imagination; beckoning us behind its peaks, to be sure, are more remote expanses, all the way to an unattainable horizon.[1]

Meanwhile, mass tourism has littered these dream destinations beyond the blue mountains with romantic hotels; cruises promise romantic experiences on dream beaches under palm trees; themed 'romantic routes' offer unforgettable excursions into the 'good old days', enhanced by wine tasting; while romantic dalliances before sunrises, or else sunsets, are obligatory for every on-screen soap opera. By now, the spirit of Romanticism is ubiquitous and is found everywhere people attempt to escape from everyday life, even if just in the idyll of a garden arbour or allotment. It is exploited in exaggerated ways, including within the media. The yearning of the 'strange child' has been drowned out by commercialized kitsch.

While HOFFMANN's magical fairy tale fantasies also harboured the melancholy of the yearned-for yet unattainable, the newly fashionable sensibility would soon provoke a considerable amount of ridicule. JOHANN PETER HASENCLEVER's 1846 painting *The Sentimental One* (FIG. 1), for instance, can only be interpreted as a satirical pastiche: gazing at the moon, the young beauty, her shoulders decoratively exposed, dreams of the dapper young hussar whose portrait hangs next to the window; lying on the table, appropriately, is JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE's tragic love story *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and alongside it, a popular romance of the kind often found on girls' bedside tables.[2] HASENCLEVER, a realistic genre painter of the Düsseldorf School, derived amusement not so much from Romanticism as such, but instead from its swan song in the culture of Biedermeier. In German painting, the term 'Biedermeier' (under this pseudonym, two writers published their parodic poetry in the *Fliegende Blätter* between 1855 and 1857 – in which 'bieder' means plain, conventional or indeed respectable, with an air of stuffiness, and 'Maier' is a common surname) refers to the phase between Romanticism and the mindset of the 1850s and 1860s, and is characterized by complacency and nostalgic escapism in the face of political immaturity. The 'Biedermeier style' therefore refers to the temper of the time, which preferred to dream within its own four walls, while the petit bourgeois philistine sought to reduce everything mysterious or profoundly seductive to the same tame level.

‘ROMANTICISM […] LIVES FROM CONTRASTS’

Oftentimes, publications exemplifying the most diverse tendencies identify the terms ‘Romanticism’ or the ‘Romantic’ with an attitude towards life that has been encountered in virtually every recent cultural epoch. The heyday of Romanticism, which lasted from 1790 until 1840, was only its culmination: always, not least of all in painting, it is a question of a melange of the maudlin and the cosy, the moodily atmospheric and the sentimental, of yearning, reverie, poetry and fantasy – but also of the fantastical and the extravagant. ‘In short: “Romanticism” and the “Romantic” are protean words that […] cannot be generally defined or pinned down to a specific meaning’ – not even within scholarly contexts![3] In fact, unlike the Renaissance, the Baroque, Neoclassicism and so forth, the artists of Romanticism adhere to no normative creative codex. Instead, they cultivated an irritating breadth of visual possibilities: CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH’s painting *Seashore in Moonlight* (FIG. 2),[4] with its geometricizing structure that negates all sense of depth, and its reduced chromatic scale, stands in contrast alongside JOHANN FRIEDRICH OVERBECK’s *The Virgin and Child* (FIG. 5),[5] its subject matter characterized by ‘popular’ piety, its composition oriented towards RAPHAEL and vibrant local colours and a slick, enamel-like surface. EUGÈNE DELACROIX’s *Arab Horses Fighting in a Stable* (FIG. 3)[6] is characterized by opulent colour harmonies, compositional dynamism as well as a dramaturgy that is reminiscent of PETER PAUL RUBENS. In a completely different way, TURNER dynamizes his *Sun Setting Over a Lake* (FIG. 4), condensing vigorous brushwork to form an almost abstract mass of paint, as though ‘seeing the world for the first time – a world of colour and light.’[7]

As I hope to demonstrate, it is understandable that art historians continue to discuss the lingering survival of Romantic painting, even right up to the present day – and in a way that resonates with the genuinely Romantic conception of interminable progression[8] – but at the same time, there are difficulties in any attempt to grasp Romanticism as a historically definable system.

Is the stylistic construct known as Romanticism then simply a chimera? What if precisely this coexistence of contrasts was to be understood as *the* unifying, binding stylistic feature of the movement?

Let us recall a statement from AUGUST WILHELM SCHLEGEL’s Jena lecture on *Philosophische Kunstlehre* (*The Philosophical Doctrine of Art*) from 1798: ‘Romanticism as such lives from contrasts.’ In my opinion, the conclusion that Gerhard Schulz draws from this applies not only to early German Romanticism at around 1800, but also fundamentally to European Romanticism during the first half of the nineteenth century in general: ‘As contrasting pairs, outer and inner, nature and spirit, object and subject, in the psyche, but also in hell and heaven, define the Romantic imagination, which is supplemented and fulfilled by the urge to overcome such oppositions.’[9] Accordingly, it is the conceptual and artistic experimentation with charged contrasts, which are resolvable dialectically, that evokes the Romantic realm of experience and breathes life into it as a novel intellectually and artistically polarized openness; an openness that, conversely, invites subjective and controversial interpretations outright.[10] The criteria proposed by Umberto Eco for the ‘open’ work of art can, I believe, be transferred to Romanticism as an ‘open style’, which is to say, to a field of ‘interpretive possibilities, a configuration of stimuli whose substantial indeterminacy’ that gives rise to ever-changing readings; that ‘invites us to conceive, feel, and thus see the world as possibility’, correlating with a ‘search for suggestiveness’, so that every interpretation implies ‘the full emotional and imaginative resources brought to it by the interpreter.’[11]

FIG. 2

CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH

Seashore in Moonlight, 1835/36, OIL ON CANVAS, 169.2 X 134 CM,
HAMBURGER KUNSTHALLE, HAMBURG

I

FIG. 3

EUGÈNE DELACROIX

Arab Horses Fighting in a Stable, 1860, OIL ON CANVAS, 64.5 X 81 CM, MUSÉE D'ORSAY, DÉPÔT DU DÉPARTEMENT DES PEINTURES DU MUSÉE DU LOUVRE, PARIS

FIG. 4

J. M. W. TURNER

Sun Setting Over a Lake, CA. 1840, OIL ON CANVAS, 91.1 X 122.6 CM, TATE, LONDON

FIG. 5

FRIEDRICH OVERBECK

The Virgin and Child, 1818, OIL ON WOOD, 65.8 X 47.1 CM, THORVALDSENS MUSEUM, COPENHAGEN

TENOR OF THE EXTRAORDINARY

The term ‘Romanticism’ finds its roots in the Old French word ‘romanz’, which refers to the vulgar Romance language (as opposed to scholarly Latin). Soon, Provençal verse and prose narratives featuring chivalric adventures came to be known as ‘romances’. In 1650, when the Englishman THOMAS BAILEY was the first to use the adjective ‘romantick’, it was with the intention of criticizing every form of fantastical exaggeration, such as those found in ‘the old romances’.[12] At the same time, the term ‘romantic’ could also be used in an emphatically *positive* sense for unusual, exceptional scenery, for example, depictions of castle ruins or solitary untouched places in nature; it was also applicable to the sensual charm of landscape paintings by artists like CLAUDE LORRAIN and SALVATOR ROSA. A delight in storytelling, so characteristic of the world of the novel (‘Roman’ in modern French and German), was hence joined *avant la lettre* by the ‘picturesque’ or the ‘scenic’, by emotionally charged depictions of the natural world. In the eighteenth century, horror stories came into fashion, adding the qualities of the eccentric, the uncanny and the eerie, coinciding with the period when the sentimental, maudlin romantic novel came into its own as a literary genre. In 1776, the SHAKESPEARE translators ÉTIENNE-FRANÇOIS LETOURNEUR and RENÉ-LOUIS DE GIRARDIN referred to the emotional and exalted quality of a scene as ‘romantique’. And in 1777, the philosopher JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU – a friend of GIRARDIN – finally gave Romanticism a home in France with his celebrated *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (*Reveries of the Solitary Walker*).[13]

In Germany,[14] the word ‘Romantik’ surfaces for the first time in 1790 in a novel by JOHANN GOTTWERTH MÜLLER for the literary effusions of its protagonist, a writer; and in early 1799, when Friedrich von Hardenberg – known beginning in 1798 under the pseudonym NOVALIS – ‘was the first to speak of “Romantiker” [romantics], he was simply referring to nothing more than the authors of novels. By the same token, Friedrich Schlegel, one of the earliest and most brilliant theoreticians of Romanticism, [still] understood the culture of Romanticism around 1800 variously as a culture of the novel, whose prose had displaced the epic of antiquity’.[15]

Romanticism is neither an exclusively ‘German destiny’ (to reference the title of the book *Romantik als deutsches Schicksal*, published in 1947 by FERDINAND LION, a friend of THOMAS MANN), nor was it solely the result of a typically German inwardness (as claimed by the American author Gordon A. Craig in his 1982 book *The Germans*), and was instead a widespread phenomenon, as shown by numerous international and intercultural interconnections. In his *Harold en Italie* (*Harold in Italy*), composed in 1834, for example, the French composer HECTOR BERLIOZ draws upon the epic poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* by George Gordon, LORD BYRON (SEE P. 23), and in his *Symphonie fantastique* (*Fantastic Symphony*), BERLIOZ draws upon – among other authors – FRANÇOIS-RENÉ DE CHATEAUBRIAND (SEE P. 26), VICTOR HUGO (SEE P. 153) and THOMAS DE QUINCEY.[16] JACQUES OFFENBACH’s opera *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* (*The Tales of Hoffmann*), premiered posthumously in Paris in 1881, offered a musical echo of E.T.A. HOFFMANN’s fantastical tales. GÉRARD DE NERVAL’s French prose translation of GOETHE’s *Faust*, which appeared in 1828, was among the first works of French Romanticism and proved a source for a number of composers, among them CHARLES GOUNOD with his *Faust* opera (which received its premiere in Paris in 1859) and BERLIOZ with his *Huit scènes de Faust* (*Eight Scenes from Faust*) – which the godlike German poet GOETHE punished from his Olympus not with a thunder bolt, but instead with silence – although he did approve of EUGÈNE DELACROIX’s *Faust* lithographs (FIG. 6).[17] That Romantic painting thrived not least of all on the migrations of ideas and concepts is a central theme of the present book.

Yet the sheer breadth of this horizon of investigation should not distract from the fact that it was indeed German intellectuals, along with German artists, who pioneered the genesis and consolidation of Romanticism. Not for nothing did the Scottish scholar THOMAS CARLYLE write in 1827 that art criticism had assumed a new quality in Germany, now touching upon the deepest layers of philosophy.[18]

FIG. 6

EUGÈNE DELACROIX

Mephistopheles Flying Over the City, Faust SERIES, PLATE 1, PUBLISHED 1828, LITHOGRAPH, 27 X 23 CM, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE, CABINET DES ESTAMPES, PARIS

I

FIG. 7

THOMAS PHILIPPS

George Gordon Byron, CA. 1835, OIL ON CANVAS, 76.5 X 63.9 CM,
NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

'Insofar as I give the commonplace a higher meaning, the ordinary a mysterious appearance, the familiar the dignity of the unfamiliar, the finite the semblance of eternity, then I romanticize it.'[19] With this definition, NOVALIS saw a connection with the transcendental philosophy of IMMANUEL KANT, and even more that of JOHANN GOTTLIEB FICHTE, which, stated simply, elevates the subjective to the centre of all knowledge, converting the interior space of consciousness into a mirror of the divine act of creation and to the resonance chamber of a responsive cosmos that is 'animate', in the Neoplatonic sense.[20] In this 'glass bead game', all of the arts and sciences are to converge.[21] It is a question of reconciling the world in which one lives with the world that lives within one. In 1922, HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL paraphrased this in the aphorism 'Das kluge Kind' (The Clever Child) in his *Buch der Freunde* (Book of Friends), when a child is asked, 'Can you touch a star?', he replies, 'Yes', and bends down to touch the earth.[22]

NOVALIS worked at the literary magazine *Athenaeum*, published in Berlin between 1798 and 1800 and edited by the brothers AUGUST WILHELM and FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL, the first publication to call the attention of a wider public to the emerging Romantic movement. His *Hymnen an die Nacht*[23] (*Hymns to the Night*) appeared there and quickly came to be considered the quintessence of a 'mystical, death-enamored strain of Romanticism'.[24] In them (as well as in the unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*,[25] published in 1802, a year after his death, where the blue flower, 'blaue Blume', becomes a metaphor for Romantic yearning), he generates a rich fund of Romantic myths through the conjunction of an antique past and a Christian present and future, through the juxtaposition of sexuality and spirituality, love and death.[26]

LUDWIG TIECK was not published in the *Athenaeum*, although he had already provided the model of the Romantic artist's novel in 1798 with his *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen* (Franz Sternbald's Wanderings), and the following year, concluded his *Phantasien über die Kunst für Freunde der Kunst* (Fantasies on Art for Friends of Art), which he had edited, and which included – alongside his own texts – a number by his late friend WILHELM HEINRICH WACKENRODER, with the arch-Romantic appeal: 'Let us […] transform our lives into a work of art, and then we can boldly claim that, on earth, we are immortal.'[27] He remained an outsider, although he broke new ground when it came to Romantic nihilism, and a no less Romantic form of irony, while creating an archetype with his Tannhäuser tale, whose influence would extend all the way to RICHARD WAGNER and the Venusberg fantasies of THOMAS MANN. Important as well was his contribution to 'the philological as well as the poetical rediscovery of the old German chapbooks, of the *Nibelungenlied*, and the European Minnesang.'[28] And it was also TIECK who edited the *Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders* (*Outpourings of an Art-Loving Friar*), authored by his prematurely deceased (1798) friend WACKENRODER. There, we read that art represents the highest human value, and that RAPHAEL and ALBRECHT DÜRER remained unsurpassed in this regard. The Nazarenes (PP. 97 FF.) were to take note!

In 1835, HEINRICH HEINE's essay *Die romantische Schule* (*The Romantic school* – on the German one, of course) was a farewell to its religious spirituality and political 'stupidity'.[29] But 'the fantastic excesses, the sense of the uncanny […], the love of narrative invention – all this Heine reckoned to a tradition that he had no desire to forego'.[30] E.T.A. HOFFMANN's figures, torn to a grotesque degree between an inner human richness and the utilitarian thinking of the outer world, encountered an international resonance, particularly in France and Russia. Even the nihilistic *Rede des todten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, daß kein Gott sey* (Speech of the Dead Christ from atop the World's Edifice that there Is No God), which opened the first edition of JEAN PAUL's novel *Siebenkäs* (Seven-cheese; 1796/97), had a sustained impact on the French Romantics, in particular GÉRARD DE NERVAL.[31]

In 1798, AUGUST WILHELM SCHLEGEL's Jena lectures on *The Philosophical Doctrine of Art* called attention not only to the classics of antiquity, but also to celebrated poets of the Trecento and the late Renaissance, including DANTE ALIGHIERI and TORQUATO TASSO, Baroque writers such as WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE and JOHN MILTON, and eighteenth-century writers such as ROUSSEAU, along with contemporaries like FRIEDRICH GOTTLIEB KLOPSTOCK and GOETHE.[32] Around 1800, and the decades to follow, a return to these and comparable traditions was a common European tendency. SHAKESPEARE and MILTON were studied everywhere, ROUSSEAU and HENRY FIELDING were regarded as edifying reading. The novelist SIR WALTER SCOTT, who had been examined and translated by German writers during the 1790s,[33] rocketed to became one of the most widely read authors in Germany. LORD BYRON, that eccentric and exemplary symbol of Romantic melancholy, undertook expeditions to Albania and Greece, where in 1823, he joined the struggle for independence against the Ottoman Turks (FIG. 7),[34] in the process transforming the conventional travelogue – which featured increasingly remote and exotic places – into a lived reality that could be enjoyed vicariously by readers throughout Europe. AUGUST WILHELM SCHLEGEL's lectures had an impact in Italy, Spain, Poland and Russia, but primarily in France, where MADAME GERMAINE DE STAËL, with her longstanding salon, had served as a guide to German philosophy since 1804. This self-assured lady had fled France before the Revolution, and her book *De l'Allemagne* (*On Germany*), which promoted German Romanticism, received much attention in London in 1813 during her exile there and was greatly acclaimed in

I

FIG. 8

ARY SCHEFFER

Lenore, The Dead Travel Fast, 1820–1825, OIL ON CANVAS, 56 X 98 CM,
MUSÉE DE LA VIE ROMANTIQUE, PARIS

Paris in 1814 after the fall of Napoleon. Already in 1807, her 'feminist' novel *Corinne ou l'Italie* (*Corinne, or Italy*) had caused a sensation: in it, social conventions force the eponymous heroine – a young poetess who searches for true love – to renounce her marriage.[35] She also commended GOTTFRIED AUGUST BÜRGER's ballad *Lenore* (1774) to her French readers; its frenetic ending, Leonore's wild midnight ride to the cemetery with her dead lover, was depicted in a painting by Ary Scheffer (FIG. 8).[36] Made from such stuff were the dreams through which Romantics everywhere sought to unearth primordial treasures, mainly in the fund of time-honoured, traditional ballads, fairy tales and legends: bent into shape, if necessary, like *The Poems of Ossian,* that mixture of ancient Gaelic bardic traditions and late-eighteenth-century taste, which would serve in Europe a few decades later as a synonym for Romanticism under the label 'Ossianic'.[37]

The dissemination of such texts – sketched here only summarily – commenced around 1800, at a time when the middle classes, broadly for the first time, had been seized by a hunger for reading material and a rage for writing, often in the form of light fiction. The genre of the novel flourished accordingly. The depths and shallows of 'dark', 'gothic' or 'horror' Romanticism were fathomed by a broad public. In Germany, this included tales by TIECK, JEAN PAUL and E.T.A. HOFFMANN – long escaping notice, however, was ERNST AUGUST FRIEDRICH KLINGEMANN's oppressive and twisted *Die Nachtwachen von Bonaventura* (*The Night-watches of Bonaventura*) of 1804.[38] The primary domain of the genre was, however, the Anglo-Saxon countries, where the Gothic novel had flourished since the 1780s.[39] Still much read today – and filmed multiple times – is MARY SHELLEY's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), the story of a hubristic scientist who seeks to create a new human. Equally familiar are the tales of the American writer EDGAR ALLAN POE, whose works betray the influence of BYRON and E.T.A. HOFFMANN, as well as FRIEDRICH DE LA MOTTE FOUQUÉ, the German creator of the fairy tale *Undine*.

FIG. 9

EUGÈNE DELACROIX

Greece Dying Upon the Ruins of Missolonghi, 1826, OIL ON CANVAS, 213 X 142 CM,
MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS, BORDEAUX

But how did the systematic 'openness' of Romanticism fare when confronted with sociopolitical reality? What did FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL mean when he wrote in 1798, 'The French Revolution, Fichte's Science of Knowledge, and Goethe's Meister [the bildungsroman *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 1795/96] are the greatest tendencies of our age'?[40] GOETHE, fine, he was the irreproachable intellectual giant of Weimar! And FICHTE, also fine, he shone – building on KANT – like a new star in Germany's philosophical firmament! But the French Revolution? It was more than an upheaval within the feudal system – it was the overthrow of the system itself. Essentially, it provided the impetus for the massive subsequent turmoil and reactions whose political coordinates defined the space of Romanticism: the rise and fall of Napoleon, the subsequent chaos in France, restoration in the sovereign German states following the 1814/15 Congress of Vienna, the Greek struggle for independence against the Ottoman Turks between 1821 and 1829 (FIG. 9),[41] the July Revolution in France of 1830, and the German Revolutions of 1848/49. Of course, SCHLEGEL could not have known all of this – and incidentally, he was not thinking of a *political* revolution.

The major question was: What had moved the French masses to engage in such tremendous and violent acts? It was the 'spirit', or so believed certain German poets and thinkers, which is to say the ideas held by the numberless new egos that had been awakened to self-awareness. And it was precisely this 'ego' – this *I* – that formed the centre of FICHTE's philosophy: the ego recognizes itself as self-generated, and all other knowledge emerges from this self-awareness. In a ceaselessly changing world, the ego is the engine of events and is able to transcend itself in the absolute.[42] 'The popularized Fichte became a crown witness for the spirit of subjectivism and limitless doability',[43] of the power of doing. To be sure, the postulate of subjective omnipotence propelled the subject – as a social being – into a paradoxical contradiction, suspended namely between the de facto incorporation of the sovereign ego in a governmental order and the conceptual self-empowerment of this ego as the source of the state. In 1992, Gerald N. Izenberg analysed this paradox and its aporias with reference to the theories of FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER, FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL, WILLIAM WORDSWORTH and FRANÇOIS-RENÉ DE CHATEAUBRIAND.

In 1799, in his *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (*On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*), the German Reformed theologian SCHLEIERMACHER demanded that the spiritual core of Christianity be surrendered to the free, individual choice of each person.[44] FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL 'defused' this paradox within the arena of artistic conflict by choosing a typically Romantic version of irony as mediator. This 'both/and' mediates between the individuality of a work and its claim to incarnate the absolute.[45] Every ironic compromise between claims to absoluteness and individuality must, however, fail when it encounters social reality.[46] WORDSWORTH, ultimately disappointed by the outcome of the French Revolution, and in view of the growth of the metropolises, regarded nature and poetry as the sole possibility for the individual to assert himself within the reality of modern life.[47] In 1801, CHATEAUBRIAND published the novella *Atala*, followed by *René* in 1802, the two of which he incorporated the same year into the first edition of his treatise *Le Génie du christianisme* (*The Genius of Christianity*).[48] Both narratives about people who abandon 'civilization' are set in the North American wilderness. They are regarded as foundational texts for French 'romantisme' – less however for their amorous content than for their sentimental tone. Nevertheless, they enjoyed popularity beyond France, and left noticeable traces on literature as well as painting (FIG. 10).[49] In the indigenous peoples of the New World, CHATEAUBRIAND had hoped to discover individual autonomy in a free society[50] but found himself profoundly disillusioned by a trip to America. Back in France, he joined the army of emigrants in opposition to the Revolution, previously looked upon with such favour, to ultimately, in 1802, assert the superiority of a pantheistically transfigured Christianity[51] above other previous religions.

The strategy of a self-formation and self-transformation of the ego that strives towards the absolute within a larger stabilizing power was a hybrid phenomenon, and – according to Izenberg's conclusion – soon turned into its opposite, into banal commonalities, resignation and the renunciation of political action.[52] The term 'absolute' is derived from Latin, where it means 'detached' or 'disengaged' – the ego, in its desire to become absolute, can never detach itself from *everything* in its quest for deliverance.

In the eyes of many contemporary witnesses, Napoleon had betrayed the aspirations of the present moment, sacrificing formerly cosmopolitan and republican ideals to his craving for power. In the wake of the Napoleonic campaigns, consequently, European politics harboured and cultivated nationalistic tendencies. In Germany, Romanticism toppled into 'a bigoted Protestantism reeking of ink, or into a renewed Catholicism, and helped to foster the nationalism that emerged from the Wars of Liberation, but soon became mildewed and surly, turning […] the cosmopolitanism of early Romanticism into its opposite, ultimately leading during the succeeding decades towards the nationalistic pathos of the Germans'.[53] In Great Britain, WORDSWORTH converted from idealism to conservatism, and SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), fulminates 'that whoever ceased to act as an individual by making himself a member of any society not sanctioned by his Government, forfeited the rights of a citizen'.[54]

FIG. 10

FRANZ LUDWIG CATEL

Night Scene on a Stormy Sea – Young Man Meditating by the Sea (The Concluding Scene in Chateaubriand's 'René'),
1821, OIL ON CANVAS, 62.8 X 73.8 CM, THORVALDSENS MUSEUM, COPENHAGEN

IN THE PRISM OF PAINTING

Painting was the primary artistic medium for Romanticism; and this meant mainly oil painting, followed by watercolour, initially cultivated for the sake of studies on paper, but soon acquiring greater prestige as an artistic medium, in particular after the formation of the British Society of Painters in Water Colours in 1804, and culminating in the works of J.M.W. TURNER (FIG. 11). The categories of the picturesque and the scenic developed during the eighteenth century, which is to say an aesthetic devoted to appraising visual and optical moods, were cultivated further to the point of favouring pictorial values that occasionally went so far as to obscure form.[55]

These aesthetic qualifications corresponded to specific semantic fields. I will not, however, be enumerating a list of themes and motifs. Instead, I will attempt to remain true to a sentiment from MARCEL PROUST's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*): 'For the quality of depth is not inherent in certain subjects, as those novelists believe who are spiritually minded only in a materialistic way: they cannot penetrate beneath the world of appearances'.[56] Not every picture where the moon shines is genuinely Romantic, nor is every couple that kisses in an arbour; histrionics and schmaltz may be found anywhere. I am in search of that thematic depth that communicates through the principle of an open style (SEE P. 16).

From the thematic 'depth', I emphasize first of all – relying upon NOVALIS's definition of Romanticism (P. 20) – the possibilities of transcending proximity and distance along the surface. A major instance of this highly Romantic play and counterplay is the view through a window out from an interior. A view from the proximate, the – intimate and sheltering, or confining – interior into the depth and expanse of the landscapes or the sky suggests a polarity that is interpretable in a psychological or transcendent way.

With regard to CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH's 1822 painting *Woman at a Window* (FIG. 12),[57] some have been tempted to interpret the room as the young woman's 'prison', whose austere confines underscore her yearning gaze through the window (presumably from FRIEDRICH's Dresden studio on the Elbe) by means of contrast; the view of the tips of the masts of two boats, 'beyond the altar-like privacy and enclosure of the shuttered window, can conjure up […] a mood of mysterious longing for voyages to uncharted regions that may be geographic, spiritual, or both'.[58] For Werner Hofmann, the room does not confine the woman in a typical role, but instead visualizes, through the liminal motif of the window, the dialectic of image and imagelessness, between that which the viewer actually sees and that which they can only intuit; hovering over the image is a hint of the spiritual, with the lower part of the window resembling a triptych, or winged altarpiece, while a cross, with its symbolic import, is outlined in the upper part.[59] In a comparable way, and relying upon the image's geometry and the way in which the window has become a picture within the picture, Johannes Grave asserts that the presence of the woman is the actual subject of the painting – to which I would add, presented as a figure seen from the rear, obscuring her facial identity in favour of the motif of *showing*. In any event, one thing seems certain: 'The objectively given is qualitatively surpassed by the uncertain, which is present beyond it, in all of its irreducible remoteness.'[60]

Things are very different with MORITZ VON SCHWIND's window picture, entitled *The Morning Hour* (FIG. 13). He incorporates a view of nature outside the window that is now topographical in character, and which takes the form of a mountain landscape, into the room as a parallel motif of the painting itself and of the mirror that hangs alongside the window, which, incidentally, avoids any association with a cross or triptych. The light does not remain outside but instead serves to illuminate the interior in a very empirical sense, albeit imbued with a picturesque, painterly sense of reality. The young woman's attitude conveys to the viewer that she delights in this simple view of the sunny morning. She is part of a casually observed episode from everyday life, not a figure full of meaning that points towards an irreducible distance.[61]