

The Imperfect Look of Romanticism

Laura Gemma Flores García

Abstract: *In this short communication, we start from the novel *The Young Werther*, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, where the main characteristics of German Romanticism are specified and how they impacted both other areas of art (music, poetry, painting) and in different European cities. Romanticism and the particularities that derived from it are addressed, such as: sentimentalism, the concept of the sublime, the picturesque, symbolism and nationalism. Through quotes from contemporary or later authors, Romanticism is presented as that movement opposed to the logic of the Enlightenment as an imperfect view that left an indelible mark even today.*

Keywords: Romanticism, sentimentalism, sublime, nationalism.

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How the image of him haunts me! Whether I am awake or asleep, that image fills my entire soul. Here when I close my eyelids; here on my forehead where all the visual force is concentrated, I always find his black eyes. Here...I don't know how to express it to you. Am I in the dark? They immediately appear to me like an abyss that opens before me: they occupy all the sinuses of my brain. What is man, this so-considered demi-God? Does he not lack the strength precisely for those things for which he would need it most? Whether he is carried away by joy or overwhelmed by pain, is he not equally compelled to recognize the sad condition of his being when he proudly aspired to delight in the fullness of the infinite?

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
"The sorrows of young Werther"

With this letter Werther ends a letter addressed to his friend Wilhelm where he narrates the desolation and deep sadness that he suffers when he realizes that Charlotte, in love with her husband Albert, will never be able to reciprocate him. These paragraphs summarize the work written by Goethe at the age of 24 and which would cause great upheaval in European society. Goethe presents "The sorrows of young Werther" as an autobiographical writing that at the end of his life would create some discomfort, especially upon learning of the phenomenon that it caused among the young people of his time: everyone imitated the Werther of the novel, dressing like him, acting as the unhappy lover and even committing suicide as the protagonist did. These reasons forced the editors to take precautions in the dissemination and original version of the novel in order to protect the vulnerability of the young people who read it and - it is true that if Faust came to erase that image - Goethe would have a greater impact on life with that work than with his immortal Faust.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was born and died (1749-1832) during the period of the German movement called Sturm und Drang (translated as storm and impetus) inserted in the beginnings of German romanticism. "The sorrows of young Werther", presented as a collection of letters, are addressed to his friend Wilhelm, where he reveals details of his stay in the fictional town of Wahlheim. There he narrates the traditions

of the peasants, where at a dance he meets and falls in love with Charlotte, who takes care of her brothers when her mother dies, but she is already engaged to Albert. Eventually he visits her and when he is certain that Lotte (Charlotte) will not reciprocate, he asks her for Albert's weapon, with which her existence will culminate.

Romanticism constitutes, in the opinion of some authors, a stubborn reaction against neoclassicism and is one of the essential signs of the 19th century, exalting individualism as the powerful force that alone would achieve divine revelations. "Starting in 1780, it assumed the signs of a movement that reaffirmed itself throughout Western Europe, driven by young thinkers, mostly poets, and acquired the contours of a historical period with the suggestive name of Romanticism."¹ Socially and politically, this thought is assumed as a bourgeois movement where the emergence of the middle class was the cause of its strengthening against the aristocracy and nobility² that had supported the enlightenment as a means of expression of the State and that exalted the advances scientific, economic, political and social of the time. Romanticism, on the other hand, which tries to break with such archetypes, constructs this stage as a reaction to the paradigm of reason where spiritualism and mysticism would be the main ideas opposed to the rationalism of the previous era. It presupposes above all a state of outburst and passionate exacerbation where there is no room for serenity. Among one of its driving axes are the love of the night, death and the past. Thus, everything that has to do with pain, sadness, nostalgia for what has been lost and the evasion of reality becomes the great obsession of romantics. People dream of distant and never imagined countries, emotion and intuition are overvalued rather than reason, the individual, the personal and the subjective are emphasized. The authors turn to the previous past, which conceptually could not be a neoclassical or Renaissance stage because of its pragmatic nature, but rather a medieval one to recover everything it hides: the poetic, the vague, the religious, but also the exotic, the fantastic and the hidden. The medieval era and other unknown and distant places so fascinated, seducing the contemplation of the primitive and the natural world, that the taste for exotic cultures aroused a lively interest, both in painters, musicians and writers. The romantic trend would cause a reevaluation of the nature of art and the role of the artist in society.

¹ Alberto Yegres Mago, *Filosofía, Ilustración y Romanticismo*, Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador, Venezuela, Revista de Investigación, vol. 39, núm. 86, 2015, pp. 11-38.

² Arnold Hauser, *Historia social de la literatura y el Arte*, Barcelona, Editorial Labor, S.A., 1993, (Nueva Serie No. 20) Vol. 3, P. 7

Romanticism emerged as a movement in literary circles around 1790 but was soon reflected in other arts, including the visual arts, music, and decorative arts. Later these literary circles would occupy the same function as the Salons in Paris, such as the Salon of 1846 and that of 1849 where many little-known artists would portray everything from battles, war encounters, nautical scenes to biblical episodes with characters dressed in bright or slick colors. , “this pale and sickly painting in which the characters look more like shadows than living beings, is usually defined as painting of feeling”³

Precisely, contemporary with romanticism, the other known as *empfindsamkeit* (sentimentalism) would take shape in Germany, which was born within the pietist church around the years 1740-80 and which, like that, reacted against the excessive rationalism of the Enlightenment. It emphasized feelings and emotions, a physical appreciation of God and nature, and – unlike logical thinking – emphasized “sensible” proximity to things.

Among the categories attached to romanticism and linked to the traditional concept of beauty, the sublime was also found. The understanding of the sublime was essential for both the representation of the horrible and the heroic. That acquired various meanings, since it was not only equated with beauty, but with qualities such as darkness, greatness, magnificence. Furthermore, according to Kant the difference between beauty and the sublime would be given by the presence or absence of form. The beautiful concerns the form of the object, which consists of limitation, while the sublime, on the contrary, “will be found in an object devoid of form.” Hence the presence of the sublime in what is not, will not be or was, as Charlotte would never be in Werther's life or the strictly defined nuances in the masses of color in Turner's work. William Turner, english engraver and watercolorist, who traveled through Europe: France, Switzerland and Venice, studied at the Louvre in 1802 and stood out for his color palette and atmospheric painting. Similar to John Constable, he did not seek exact realism in the representation of things, despite his great ability to capture light and realism; rather, he focused on showing through his inexhaustible palette of colors the magnitude that things have to suggest ideas and emotions. The non-existence or nostalgia of what was not possible was what elevated the implicit content of feelings to the quality of sublime. While the beautiful was finite, finished and measurable, the sublime would surpass all measurement.

Another important development was the concept of the picturesque which was born in the late 18th century in Britain. Although the sublime had a literary origin, the picturesque had a visual origin that rested on the contemplation of rural landscapes and the nostalgic memory of english gardens, which had offered another vision of nature contained in the space of men. Well, despite the fact that neoclassicism and the frenchization of the time had configured the urban complexes and the large extensions of gardens in geometric arrangements, granting order, symmetry and axial axes to all the perfectly delineated parts; the english gardens - built

under the principle of freedom, exoticism and wild nature - had established another parameter of the hidden, the unknown and the ready to be discovered. Roots of colossal trees devouring the earth between rocky sections, spectacular foliage hiding dark and long dirt roads, abandoned stone fountains hidden among areas of undergrowth, awakened in the artist the desire to reproduce in his careful engravings or trace in the masses of color the fantastic *vedutas ideatas* recreated in their consciences. The category of the picturesque was also due to the visual movement of the discoveries. Based on the idea of travel, they promoted interest in the unknown. Thus, the contemplation of nature, ruins and the past could inspire strong and more tangible experiences such as that of nationalism. Therefore, while Romanticism became a movement concerning personal experience, enrichment became - in most cases - a reinforcement of traditional culture and nationalism. The recognition of otherness reinforced the idea of one's own and in this sense nationalism gained the strength that neoclassicism had not generated, since the principle of individuality was the resource of the romantics. In architecture, Romanticism will be linked to the Gothic revival, but it can also be related to other styles including classical. The most significant contribution of Romanticism in the visual field was the treatment of color. This was explored for its optical effects and for its symbolic associations. Many artists associated with this movement were interested in Color Theory and such interest was for the painters as the quintessence of the visual arts that focused on the masses of branches and foliage as well as on the expanse of meadows and hills.

In the field of literature, a figure is presented who has been attributed not only in France, but throughout the Western world, as the precursor of the modern novel and it is Charles Baudelaire with his work: “The Flowers of Evil” . Between the period of this author and 1900, a key era of modern art extends, which is “symbolism.” Baudelaire's disciples were: Verlaine, Rimbaud and Mallarmé,⁴ but not only literature was dressed in symbolism; also the plastic arts and the minor arts. When this approach to the arts is important, it also receives criticism: “it becomes a fashion, it sparks controversy, it generates anthologies, manifestos, etc. and it is incorporated by poetry into turn-of-the-century aesthetics.”⁵ Such a movement seems to be the effect of the unstable circumstances that its authors went through: mental imbalances due to alcohol consumption, crises of nervous disorders caused by turbulent childhoods, abandonments, political instability, poverty and links with literary circles where the brutal ones increased. friction between one another. The essence of the movement was to follow the principles of metaphysics, mystery and mysticism, opposing above all to any realistic approach, exalting the incomprehensible and often sacrificing the laws of composition to claim the expressionist effect of the artist's ideal.

This violent, cryptic and original poetry was going to be presented to the most contradictory interpretations, when, long after his death, Rimbaud was discovered.

³ Chamfleury Su mirada y la de Baudelaire. Presentación y selección de los textos de Geneviève y Jean Lacambre, Madrid, La Balsa de la Medusa, 1990, (Col. Visor 56), p. 110.

⁴ Historia Universal de la Literatura, La literatura del siglo XIX, II, Navarra, Ediciones Orbis, 1990, (Grupo Libro No. 88) p. 73

⁵ Idem.

For the surrealists it was a precursor, as well as a symbol of absolute rebellion against the human condition; others saw in him a great revolutionary whose enigmatic work can only be explained with political keys; There was no shortage of people who spoke about the influences of Eastern religions, and Claudel, who considered herself his disciple, called him a “wild mystic,” attributing to him a radically Christian spirit.⁶

Another aspect that was treated in the aesthetics of Romanticism was the exaltation of nationalism. “In the literary sense, French Romanticism can be studied in three dimensions, perfectly delineated in the creative field: individualism, the religious and sentimental renaissance after the Revolution, and the influence of the contemplation of nature.”⁷ While in painting, both in Delacroix and in Francisco de Goya and Lucientes, the themes of the revolution were captured in the disasters and triumphs of national and local wars, embodying the struggle of the people in brightly colored brushstrokes. Regarding the dark presence of the first Champfleury states:

But Delacroix has a shiny black look that only belongs to the great colorists: already in years, he retains a shock of black hair, a sign of strength. Do not dwell too much on the clothes and try to penetrate that yellow and lemony face: you will observe traces of suffering, of concerns, of sorrows, and together with the powerful inflexibility that is hidden in his tight lips, you will find anger senselessly fueled by the intelligence of three to a quarter, by the race of the critics, friends or enemies, by the race of the artists, the race of the connoisseurs, etc.; in short, the three hundred people of Paris whom he always meets everywhere, whom he needs and with whom he exchanged comments.⁸

For his part, Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, more than others, introduced the language of the ugly. It was the romantics who put the category of the ugly at the center of their poetics. Victor Hugo pointed out that in nature not everything was beautiful and many times the perception of what was ugly was linked to the feeling of fear and repulsion. “Saturn devouring his children” by Goya is striking at first due to the deformity of the body and the monstrosity of his face, but as we delve into the details of the narrative, fear and repulsion emerge mixed in the sensation it generates in us. the disembodied body and the fact of realizing what a monster without conscience exhibits when it proposes to devour its children.

Nationalism in music and revolution, as well as death were global themes that also impacted romantic composers. Many of them composed polonaises, mazurkas, and hymns, such as Dvorák's *Patriotic*, which in 1873 became famous due to that composition. In the context of nationalism, struggle and revolution, death had a predominant role, as Liszt makes

known when commenting on Chopin's polonaises, since, if freedom was not achieved, the approach was to die, although not enough, since What is unattainable is, as we pointed out above, the principle of romanticism:

In any case, dying was too much and consequently insufficient. Not all of them were to die, but nevertheless all of them were to reject life, rejecting the open air of their innate prerogatives, the immunity of their ancient patriarchy in the great Christian city, when they rejected any pact with the victor who had usurped their place and boasted of his privilege.

“Chopin” by Franz Liszt

In the words of Berenson “What counts in human things is not what exists or what happens or what has been done, but what is believed about all of that; in other words, his myth, his personification”⁹ and that was what romanticism preached.

In romanticism, nothing was perfect; once the unattainable was achieved, it ceased to have any consequence. The imperfect view that above all things advocates freedom: of expression, of movement, of forms, breaks with the closed stereotypes of imitation that had been exalted by the neoclassical period, breaking with the rigid canons of the perfect work, completed and closed.

⁶ Historia Universal de la Literatura, La literatura del siglo XIX, II, Navarra, Ediciones Orbis, 1990, (Grupo Libro No. 88) p. 81.

⁷ Alberto Yegres Mago, *Filosofía, Ilustración y Romanticismo*, Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador, Venezuela, Revista de Investigación, vol. 39, núm. 86, 2015, pp. 11-38.

⁸ Chamfleury Su mirada y la de Baudelaire. Presentación y selección de los textos de Geneviève y Jean Lacambre, Madrid, La Balsa de la Medusa, 1990, (Col. Visor 56), p. 133.

⁹ Bernard Berenson, *Estética e historia en las artes visuales*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, (Colección conmemorativa 70 Aniversario) 2005, p. 232.