Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

# Influences

## Introduction:

Those influences which affect a creative artist cannot really be listed definitively‑the whole world, the spirit of the times, the personality of the artist himself obviously become a part of the material he creates. In the case of every individual, however, there are certain influences, more obvious and direct than others, which can profitably be observed. The strongest influences are usually the simplest‑family, friends, education, reading. Goethe was no exception. A look at his diaries, his letters, his memoirs and those of his friends, gives a good picture of those people and situations which he most reacted to in his life, and which are most evident in his writings.

## Historical Romanticism‑The Term:

The adjective "romantic" was derived from the Old French romant or romanz meaning a romance or romantic story. As an adjective it first appeared in English about the middle of the seventeenth century. In its first usages it meant "like a romance," which at the time had the pejorative connotation of fanciful, improbable, illusory, or unreal. By the middle of the eighteenth century, "romantic" lost its pejorative connotation and became associated with things that were imaginative, and nature that was pleasantly melancholy. As English nature poetry‑notably James Thomson's The Seasons‑was translated into German, the new English connotations of the word were absorbed by the German word romantisch. In France the new senses of the word were attached to romantique, a word which gained in popularity among writers toward the end of the century.

### First Critical Use:

It was not until the very end of the eighteenth century, however, that "romantic" was used as a critical term. A German critic, Friedrich Schlegel, first used the term in contrast to "classical." Mme. de Stael helped popularize this use of the term in her De l'Allemagne, a work written in 1810 in which she praised German poetry for being "romantic." The popularization was continued in England with the translation in 1815 of A. W. Schlegel's Dramatic Art and Literature, a series of lectures on Shakespeare and Calderon. "Romantic" as a term designating discernible literary tendencies was firmly established through use by nineteenth century English writers such as Coleridge and Carlyle.

### Rousseau:

Although romanticism cannot be reduced to Rousseau, he is, if not the Father of romanticism, one of the most luminous and informing figures of the movement. Born in Geneva on June 28, 1712, the French writer spent the first 37 years of his life traveling about the continent, holding a variety of positions ranging from music teacher to servant. The turning point in his life, and one of the landmarks in the history of the Romantic Movement, occurred in 1749 when he entered an essay contest being held by the Dijon academy. The topic was phrased as a question: Had the advance of the sciences and arts helped to destroy or purify moral standards? In his prize‑winning answer Rousseau began to formulate the main tenets of what was to become known as the Romantic Movement. His answer, which attacked intellectual order and which emphasized the emotional side of man, was that the sciences and arts had always been harmful to morality because they undermined the natural virtue of the human heart. This revolt from the intellectual standards of eighteenth‑century rationalism continued in successive works. In Concerning the Origin of Inequality Among Men (1754), he asserted that man in his original, uncivilized state is innocent, placing the responsibility for man's corruption on society. Thus, Rousseau inspired and gave impetus to the idea of the "noble savage," an idea which was to grip the imagination of the Western world for the next 200 years.

In Julie, or the New Heloise (1761), Rousseau emphasized the importance of intuition and the inner man in an ideal love relationship. In The Social Contract (1762), he advocated a community of free men who freely subordinate their wills to the will of the majority. In Emile (1762), he reaffirmed his belief in the naturally good man, arguing that if a child is allowed to develop naturally, away from the corrupting influence of society, he will be a good man.

In the Confessions (1765‑1770), he treated the uniqueness of man, the dignity of the individual, and the value of the emotions in personal relationships. "I am commencing an undertaking," wrote Rousseau in the Confessions, "hitherto without precedent, and which will never find an imitator. I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all truth of nature, and that man myself." The implications of the opening sentence were far‑reaching. Rousseau was announcing the value of all human actions, and was doing so in an intensely personal and egotistical way. The confession, thus established by Rousseau, was to become the essential mode of expression for later romantic writers.

## The Pre‑Romantic Movement:

The same spirit which informed the writings of Rousseau during the third quarter of the eighteenth century produced in England a rich pre‑romantic literature predating Rousseau's landmark essay of 1750 by 41 years; In 1709, an influential English thinker, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, created a romantic undercurrent in the flood of neo‑classic literature by stressing the importance of man's emotional nature. Shaftesbury (as he is commonly known) began to undermine the neo‑classic standard which identified moral progress with progress in education by suggesting in An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit (1709), that man's moral sense was not improved but corrupted by education. He foreshadowed Rousseau by identifying man's moral sense with emotion rather than intellect; this foreshadowing continued in The Moralists: A Rhapsody (1711), in which he proposed a natural religion. Such a religion would have the natural world for its setting and would allow man to make full emotional response to God.

## Nature Poetry:

The publication of James Thomson's The Seasons during the second quarter of the eighteenth century signaled a new awareness of nature in English poetry. This awareness, to become one of the identifying characteristics of nineteenth‑century romantic poetry, can be found in the closeness with which the poet observes nature and in the delight taken in such observtion. Thomson, like Shaftesbury and Rousseau, also endowed nature with a religious significance. "Oh talk of Him in solitary glooms," begins a key passage in the concluding portion of The Seasons, "Where o'er the rock the scarcely waving pine/Fills the brown shade with a religious awe." It was the translation of this poem which established in Germany the English connotations of "romantic."

## Graveyard Poetry:

The second quarter of the eighteenth century also saw the rise of a poetry of melancholy and death. Robert Blair's poem The Grave (1743), in which the speaker luxuriates in the though of death, gave this type of poetry its name. Two of the better poems which continued this indulgence of melancholy as an emotion were Edward Young's Night Thoughts (1742‑44) and Joseph Warton's The Pleasures of Melancholy (1747). "Tired nature's sweet restorer, balmy Sleep!" croons the speaker of "Night Thoughts" at the beginning of a passage lamenting the suffering man must endure in this world. "I wake," concludes the speaker, "how happy they who wake no more!" One of the most striking romantic features of this pre‑romantic poetry is the degree to which the speaker was alienated. He was almost always represented as the solitary man acutely aware of, and lamenting the limitations of man while feeling a strong desire for death as an escape from a life which has become an agony.

## Poetry And The Past:

Another romantic tendency found in eighteenth‑century England was the interest in the past. The past, particularly the Middle Ages, attracted writers with a romantic temperament since it was the complete opposite of neo‑classicism. It represented mystery, emotion, imagination‑terms foreign to an age which identified man with reason and which saw the world as a machine with a perfectly predictable order. Two works inspired new interest in the past: James Macpherson's Ossian (1760‑63) and Thomas Percy's Reliques (1765).

### Ossian:

Between 1760 and 1763, James Macpherson published a group of poems which he claimed to be translations of works by a medieval Gaelic poet called Ossian. Ossian soon became a famous name, and the volumes published by Macpherson under that name inspired writers who were beginning to formulate romantic theories concerning the nature of man and civilization. Thomas Gray, an influential poet who wrote Elegy in a Country Churchyard, was attracted to the imaginative descriptions of nature which the poem contained.

Other romantic writers were drawn to Ossian's heroes, who appeared to be proof of Rousseau's theory of the "noble savage." These heroes, although living in a primitive society, were naturally well‑mannered, sensitive, and generous. They also responded to the world emotionally rather than intellectually. "The sons of song are gone to rest," laments Ossian with an indulgence of emotion similar to that of the Graveyard Poets. "My voice remains, like a blast that roars lonely on a sea‑surrounded rock, after the winds are laid. The dark moss whistles there; the distant mariner sees the waving trees!" Today, the Ossian poems are accepted as a hoax; Macpherson, a man attuned to the times, had simply designed them to appeal to the growing number of people who were dissatisfied with a rational approach to reality. Ironically enough, attacks on Macpherson in his own time did little to lessen the interest in, or the influence of, the poems.

### Percy and The Ballads:

Thomas Percy, a contemporary of Macpherson's, gave new stimulus to the interest in the Middle Ages by publishing three volumes of ballads from the early fifteenth century. These ballads were to serve as models for most of the English romantic poets‑from Wordsworth and Coleridge to Keats and Shelley‑who were looking for poetic forms which would be less restrictive than the heroic couplet, a form which had dominated eighteenth‑century poetry. Coleridge, for instance, drew upon one of the ballads in this collection for the verse form of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. The ballads, unlike Macpherson's Ossian poems, were genuine, although, like Macpherson, Percy altered them to accommodate the growing romantic taste.

### The Gothic Tale Of Terror:

The growing interest in medieval romance and the increasing emphasis on the imagination as opposed to reason produced in the last half of the eighteenth century the Gothic tale of terror. This forerunner of the modern detective mystery was characterized by a medieval setting and an ingenious plot. The author gave his imagination free reign, with sensational results, the narrative abounding in abductions, murders, and supernatural happenings.

Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto (1764) was the first novel to make full use of Gothic trappings. William Beckford's Vathek (1786), Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), and Matthew Gregory Lewis' The Monk (1795) are the best and the most famous of the Gothic novels which flooded England during the second half of the century. The following passage from The Mysteries of Udolpho in which the heroine makes a frightful discovery is typical:

It may be remembered that in a chamber of Udolpho hung a black veil whose singular situation had excited Emily's curiosity and which afterwards disclosed an object that had overwhelmed her with horror; for on lifting it, there appeared, instead of the picture she had expected, within a recess of the wall a human figure, of ghastly paleness, stretched at its length, and dressed in the habiliments of the grave. What added to the horror of the spectacle was that the face appeared partly decayed and disfigured by worms which were visible on the features and hands.

This attention to the horrifying aspects of death and decay anticipates nineteenth‑century Gothic fiction such as Mary Shelley's ***Frankenstein*** and the tales of Edgar Allan Poe.

## The Pre‑Romantic Movement in Germany:

Rousseau's romantic theories about man's nature and the nature of society helped inspire revolutions in American and France. In Germany, they caused no political revolution, but they found great favor with the young writers. Like their English and French counterparts, young German poets, dramatists, and novelists were beginning to rebel against the restraints of a rational age. It is to Rousseau and the translations of James Thomson's The Seasons, Macpherson's Ossian and Thomas Percy's Reliques that these German writers turned in their search for new poetic forms and modes of expression.

### Sturm Und Drang:

The youthful romantic spirit first made itself felt in German literature during the Sturm und Drang (storm and stress) period of the 1770s. As the name suggests, the period saw the rise of a literature informed by unrestrained emotion. Johann Gottfried von Herder, the father of the storm and stress movement, inspired a number of young writers, among them Goethe, to reject the values of neo‑classicism for the new values of emotion and imagination. Herder, under the influence of Rousseau and the English pre‑romantics, attacked neo‑classic literature as coldly rational and imitative, praised Shakespeare for his natural genius and great imagination, and reawakened interest in national origins by publishing a group of German folk ballads. The storm‑and‑stress sensibility is exemplified by the lyric poetry of Fredrich Klopstock, Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774), and Schiller's play The Robbers (1781). Klopstock celebrated love, nature and freedom, while Goethe and Schiller dealt with the agonized frustrations of life and love.

## The Flowering of Romanticism:

It is with the publication of Lyrical Ballads (1798), a joint poetic undertaking by Words‑word and Coleridge, that romanticism began to flourish in England. The romantic spirit breathed new life into English poetry, and within a few years England saw the publication of Wordsworth's Prelude, Keats' Odes, Shelley's Prometheus Unbound and Byron's Childe Harold, Manfred, and Don Juan. A similar flowering occured in Germany in 1797. The storm‑and‑stress movement and the efforts of Goethe and Schiller to marry romanticism to classicism in their later poetry facilitated the growth of romanticism, which became full‑blown with the appearance of the poets Fridrich Holderlin (1770‑1843) and Heinrich Heine (1797‑1856), the dramatists Heinrich von Kleist (1777‑1811) and Franz Grillparzer (1791‑1872), and the novelist Jean Paul (1763‑1825). Paradoxically, in France, which had given birth to Rousseau, one of the most influential romantic figures, romanticism did not develop further until the 1830s with the production of Victor Hugo's controversial play Hernani. Hugo, Lamartine (1790‑1869), De Vigny (1797‑1863), and Alfred De Musset (1810‑1857) are the luminaries of French romantic poetry.

## Essential Characteristics of Romanticism:

"You are only conscious of one impulse," Faust tells Wagner shortly after the play opens, "Never/Seek an acquaintance with the other. Two souls, alas, cohabit in my breast,/The one like a rough lover clings/To the world with the tentacles of its senses;/The other lifts itself to Elysian Fields/Out of the mist on powerful wings." This conflict, which tears Faust's soul, is common to all romantic writing. The romantic, like Faust, is pulled in two opposite directions: he desires to embrace the world of here‑and‑now, allowing his senses to respond fully to that world, and at the same time he longs to escape "on powerful wings" to a more perfect world. This transcendent world is generally informed by absolute beauty or love.

In English romantic poetry, the conflict was perhaps best exemplified in Keats. In Ode on Melancholy the poet recommends that the melancholy man "glut" his sorrow on "a morning rose," or on "the rainbow of a salt sand‑wave," or on a "wealth of globed peonies." These objects of transient beauty would increase man's feeling of melancholy, thus making him more aware of himself and the world's beauty. In Ode to a Nightingale, the poet wishes to escape from this world "where men sit and hear each other groan" to the world of absolute beauty which the nightingale symbolizes: "Away! Away! for I will fly to thee,/Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,/But on the viewless wings of Poesy."

### Independence:

The romantic often sees himself as an independent, wholly self‑sufficient being. This feeling of independence prompts him to defy anyone, man or spirit, who would put himself on a higher plane. "Shall I yield to Thee, Thou shape of flame?" asks the defiant Faust in answer to the Earth Spirit's scorn of his puniness. "I am Faust, I can hold my own with Thee." Byron's Manfred, and in fact the Byronic hero as such, reacted to spiritual forces in a similar way. Shortly before his death at the end of the play, Manfred defies the spirit who summons him in words reminiscent of Faust: "Back to thy hell!/Thou never shalt possess me, that I know: What I have done is done; I bear within/A torture which could nothing gain from thine."

### Love of Death:

Just before the Easter scene at the beginning of Faust, the protagonist contemplates suicide and in so doing suggests another characteristic of romantic literature: the love of death. "Be calm and take this step," says Faust at the end of a passage invoking death, "though you should fall/Beyond it into nothing‑nothing at all." One sees a similar sentiment pervading nineteenth‑century English and American romantic literature. "I have been half in love with easeful Death," wrote Keats in Ode to a Nightingale, "Called him soft names in many a mused rhyme,/To take into the air my quiet breath;/Now more than ever seems it rich to die."

In America, Poe argued that the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic of all subjects, and in Whitman's Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking, death is the word whispered by the sea:

Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak, Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death,

And again death, death, death, death....

Like Faust and the speaker in Keats' Ode, Whitman was drawn to the idea of death; death is "delicious."

### Emphasis On The Heart:

Faust pronounces a romantic manifesto when he tells Wagner in lines 194‑95, "But heart can never awaken a spark in heart/Unless your own heart keep in touch." Faust's emphasis on the heart, thus on feeling, as opposed to the intellect, in man's dealings with his fellow man again makes him the archetypal romantic. This emphasis is found in romantic literature from Wordsworth to Whitman. "Come forth" said Wordsworth at the end of The Tables Turned, "And bring with you a heart/That watches and receives." It was also with the heart that Whitman responded in Song of Myself. "I loafe and invite the soul," said Whitman, following Rousseau's dictum to become an expansive spirit or heart, then exulting in his emotional response to life, "I see, dance, laugh, sing...."

And Rousseau foreshadowed them all when he said at the beginning of his Confessions, "Myself alone! I know the feelings of my heart, and I know men."

### Love of Humanity:

One of the major distinctions between Faust and Wagner is that Faust embraces the humanity which Wagner scorns. In the Easter scene, Wagner no sooner declares that he is repelled by the vulgarity of the crowd than Faust accepts a drink from a member of the same crowd. At the end of the play, it is Faust's love of humanity which redeems him, a love which is made known in the opening lines of the play when he expresses a desire to improve mankind. This love of humanity is still another identifying characteristic of the romantic temperament. In Lines Written in Early Spring Wordsworth said that it grieved his heart "to think/What man has made of man." In Hymn to Intellectual Beauty Shelley considered the function of spiritual beauty and concluded with the declaration that beauty leads man to love of his fellow man: "Whom, Spirit fair, thy spells did bind? To fear himself, and love all human kind." Finally, it was this love which to a large degree informed Whitman's Leaves of Grass.

### Love of Nature:

In order to escape from a world that was becoming ever more industrialized the romantic turned to nature. The return was inspired also by Rousseau when he argued that civilization corrupted man who was naturally good. If this is true, then the logical way of escaping corruption would be to return to nature. It is the Spring festival as well as the celebration of Easter which keeps Faust from suicide. It is nature which sustains man in Wordsworth's poetry. In Tintern Abbey, for instance, the poet exults in the pastoral scene and then relates how nature has sustained him in the city:

These beauteous forms

Through a long absence, have not been to me

As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:

But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din

Of towns and cities, I have owed to them

In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,

Felt in the blood and felt along the heart;

And passing even into my purer mind,

With tranquil restoration.

### Alienation:

Although romantics like Goethe, Wordsworth, and Shelley were led to embrace humanity, one also finds the romantic who has become alienated from the community, who has become the outsider. The Byronic hero exemplified this particular romantic characteristic. "Is it not better, then, to be alone," cries Byron's Childe Harold in Canto 71 of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, "Is it not better thus our lives to wear,/Than join the crushing crowd, doomed to inflict or bear?" This theme of the hero as outsider is struck in the opening lines when Byron speaks of the protagonist as "The wandering outlaw of his own dark mind."

### Spontaneity:

One of the reasons that the medieval ballads attracted so much attention was that they attested to the value of spontaneous creation. Spontaneity and inspiration became the key words of romantic poetic theory. It was Shakespeare's spontaneous genius that was praised by Herder at the beginning of the Sturm und Drang period in Germany. And spontaneity was at the heart of Wordsworth's theory of poetry as formulated in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads. "For all good poetry," asserted Wordsworth at the beginning of that essay, "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Spontaneity as the heart of poetic creation was also pointed to by Shelley in A Defense of Poetry when he said, "A man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry.' The greatest poet even cannot say it; for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the color of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure."