

## Mathias on Vaillant (2016)

Vaillant, Alain. *Qu'est-ce que le romantisme?* Editions de la CNRS, 2016, pp. 242, ISBN 978-2-271-09347-9

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Challenging the “intellectually lazy” (9) presumption that Romanticism is beyond definition, this slim volume explains the term by situating it in its precise historical context. Alain Vaillant avoids sweeping generalizations and facile divisions by presenting Romanticism as a multiple entity encompassing optimism and disillusionment, solidarity and individualism. Romanticism, he argues, is based on a dream of fusing the material with the ideal, the concrete and the abstract. In addition, he recognizes that Romanticism did not suddenly appear in the eighteenth century only to disappear in the 1850s. Instead, he argues, certain key questions emerged in the age of the Enlightenment which led to its development (13–14). First, progress in the life sciences and the effort to know nature led to the sense that there exists a mysterious, hidden reality behind surface appearances. Second, the investigation of the boundary between the visible and the invisible, and between the mind and the body, led to alternative theological systems which aimed to bring the ideal and the material together, such as those developed by Emanuel Swedenborg or Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin. Third, the intense awareness of man’s duality fuelled attempts at a union between the intellect and the senses, and finally, the renewed interest in collective history provoked a strong fascination with origins and beginnings.

*Qu'est-ce que le romantisme?* eschews a chronological approach in favor of a thematic structure. After the prologue, seven short chapters consider topics such as religion, love, nationhood, and laughter. Emphasizing how Romanticism spread into diverse areas of life including fashion, lifestyle, and popular culture, Vaillant considers it as something more than an artistic or intellectual doctrine. The socio-political dimension is also given careful attention, as the author considers why Romanticism developed at different moments in different countries. For example, the political and economic modernity of England (the book repeatedly refers to England rather than Britain) is offered as a reason for the lack of coherence, stability, and dynamism in English Romanticism in contrast with other countries (44). The links between Romanticism and modernity are also stressed, as Vaillant notes both the importance of democratization in Romanticism’s development and Romanticism’s role as “la première culture moderne du loisir” (150). Furthermore, Romanticism’s engagement with modern media is explored through a consideration of the press and the popular genre of melodrama.

Vaillant points to the 1789 revolution as an essential trigger for many aspects of Romanticism, not least its focus on liberty. He suggests, for example, that French Romanticism liberated itself quickly from theology “pour se tourner vers le monde révolutionné, pour conduire, sous le nom de *modernité*, une réflexion résolument critique sur les conditions nouvelles de la vie en société, enfin pour devenir un phénomène essentiellement culturel et artistique” (62). Vaillant also proposes as one of Romanticism’s major contributions to Western aesthetics its freedom from Aristotelian doctrines. The importance of liberty in the formation of Romanticism is noted throughout the book, with the result that it is presented not as a reified mode bound by a distinct set of rules, but more as an ethos founded on freedom from dogma.

One of the most interesting elements in the study is Vaillant’s consideration of Romanticism’s legacy for twenty- and twenty-first century society. Modern literary criticism, for instance, is considered to have inherited the rejection of Schools and doctrines; moreover, the notion of authorial “auto-représentation” (104) and public fascination with the author’s life are pointed to as the origins of modern celebrity culture. Romanticism is also presented as one of the first cultural developments to prefigure modern globalization, due to the intensification of modes of exchange in this period (of products, people, and ideas) and the notable interaction among different cultures.

Romanticism’s central concern lies in reconciling material and abstract figures, according to Vaillant, partly through the Romantics’ combined emphasis on both bodily and cerebral pleasures. Romanticism offers, for instance, a radical understanding of love based both on the ideal and the sexual (81). Pleasure is also at the center of Romanticism in that it is “la première forme de civilisation qui, sans être cantonnée dans les sous-cultures populaires, ait prioritairement visé le plaisir de l’imagination et le pouvoir des émotions” (207). In this, Romanticism is said to go against the traditional privileging of reason and also prefigures modern forms of mass entertainment such as cinema or rock-and-roll. Despite such passages and a promotional blurb mentioning literature, music, and painting, the study clearly favors the literary.

Surprisingly, given her fascination with the origins of the French *peuple*, the links between the life and work, travel writing as an ideal Romantic genre, and the drive to unite the material and the ideal, George Sand is nearly completely absent from this volume. Figures such as Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, as well as Jules Michelet,

Théophile Gautier, Gérard de Nerval, Alphonse de Lamartine, and Charles Nodier are repeatedly examined, whereas Sand appears only once or twice. And although there is a concerted effort to consider Romanticism as a European and even global phenomenon, the volume focuses solidly on French Romanticism. These points do not pose a particular problem, other than that the focus on French Romanticism and French literature is nowhere explicitly acknowledged or justified. It would also have been useful to include a concluding chapter synthesizing the study's main arguments. Apart from these quibbles, the book is certainly to be recommended not only for those interested in situating French Romanticism in its cultural and historical context, but also as a useful introduction to nineteenth-century Europe, in particular the intricate relationships among politics, religion, science, art, and society that arose on the continent.

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