
Romantikens univers
The universe of romanticism

By Geir Uthaug
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Take any university-employed specialist in romantic-period literature, tie him or her up, and apply mild torture: you will not get a simple and straightforward answer to the question ‘What *is*, in fact, romanticism?’ Much has happened in romantic studies since the time of René Wellek and today’s scholars are more than reluctant to venture an overall definition of European romanticism in the singular. We speak more cautiously of the ‘romantic era’ (or even ‘the period formerly known as romanticism’) – or use the term romanticism in the plural, ‘romanticisms’, as in the title of this journal. The author of this comprehensive study of European romanticism, Geir Uthaug – who is not part of academia but has since the 1970s translated English romantic poetry into Norwegian – has no such qualms. Significantly, the Norwegian title of his book uses the r-word in the singular definite, *Romantikens univers*. What, then, is the romantic, according to Uthaug? First and last, romanticism is an idea, a vision, an outlook on culture and on life (p. 13), the essence of which is the reaching out or yearning for a remote and possibly unattainable goal. To illustrate this, Uthaug evokes the star-like lantern on Daisy’s landing stage, beckoning Jay Gatsby across the bay. This lantern on which Gatsby fixes his impossible desires and yearnings is a ‘strongly romantic motif’ (p. 23).¹ Opening his study with *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Uthaug signals that romanticism to him is not, or not primarily, a period. Indeed, most of the works discussed in his book were created during the first decades of the nineteenth century; however, not every work written in this period can, in the author’s opinion, be labelled romantic (Uthaug’s prime example is Jane Austen’s novels). Conversely, romanticism as an idea transcends its historical context and may be encountered in works of art and literature of more recent date.

Though subscribing to the belief in a romantic essence, Uthaug is not blind to the fact that the urge to transcend borders and reach out for the unattainable comes in a variety of forms. Romantic poets and artists did not necessarily agree

1 All quotations from the book are translated into English by the reviewer.

in their views on art, society, religion, politics, and nature. In fact, their positions were quite often contradictory. It is this multiplicity in unity that constitutes the universe of romanticism. Uthaug's focus is on romantic literature in major European languages – English, German, French – though he occasionally includes works by Polish, Russian, Italian, and – in particular – Norwegian romantics, and also ventures into other art forms, first of all romantic painting (the book is richly and beautifully illustrated). In keeping with the overall conception of romanticism as an idea rather than a period, the arrangement is thematic rather than chronological. With regard to its European outlook, its thematic arrangement, and its inclusion of other art forms, *Romantikens univers* may be compared with Tim Blanning's *The Romantic Revolution* (2010), which is also one of Uthaug's sources; but Uthaug's study is more comprehensive, numbering over 400 pages divided into ten chapters of uneven length. Whereas the first chapter, 'What is Romanticism?', serves as an introduction to the romantic idea and to the book as such, the following four chapters, 'The Romantics and the World', 'Art and Nature', 'The Romantic Mind', and 'Myths and Religion' explore themes and issues of central importance to the romantics.

'The Romantics and the World' addresses the craving for freedom and the spirit of revolt in the *Storm and Stress* movement and early romanticism. As Uthaug points out, the romantic rebellion was directed not only against the ties and conventions of an oppressive and unjust social system, but also against aesthetic conventions and rules. A central issue in this chapter is, of course, the romantics' attitude towards the French Revolution, the great event of the age. While many romantics were radicals who, at least in the initial stages, supported the revolution, others, for instance the French aristocrat Francois-René de Chateaubriand, took quite a different stand. And of course, the ensuing Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars elicited a mixed response. Whereas Byron, in Uthaug's words, was both 'fascinated' and 'appalled' (p. 65) by the war, others, for instance the Spanish painter Goya, depicted its atrocities, and others again wrote pacifistic poetry. In Germany, the Napoleonic wars stimulated the cultivation of the German *Volksgeist*. 'Art and Nature' discusses romantic ideas of poetry, imagination, inspiration, and genius, venturing into other art forms such as instrumental music, according to E. T. A. Hoffmann 'the most romantic form of art' (p. 100), and architecture. A subsection deals with the romantic fascination with the sublime and the heroic. Observing that the German romantic Wilhelm Wackenroder distinguishes between 'two sacred languages, that of nature and that of art' (p. 95), Uthaug proceeds to romantic philosophy of nature (Schelling) and the understanding of nature as organic (rather than mechanic) and dynamic. The chapter closes with a brief look at romantic landscaping and on landscape and nature in romantic poetry.

Taking as his point of departure the lives of the poets Hölderlin and Gérard de Nerval, Uthaug characterizes the romantic mind as divided between two widely different aspects, the cheerful, naïve, childlike and idealizing disposition on the one hand and the darker, more sombre aspect on the other. The chapter 'The Romantic Mind' explores the romantic fascination with subliminal states of mind (the subsection 'Dream and Intoxication') and attitudes towards love and eroticism. The chapter also provides a catalogue of romantic moods and feelings: yearning, passion, enthusiasm, melancholy, etc. A subsection on 'The Romantic Death' closes the chapter. 'Religion and Myth' discusses the romantics' rather different attitudes towards institutionalized religion and romantic mythmaking (Blake) before zooming in – somewhat arbitrarily – on three romantic myths: S. T. Coleridge's albatross, John Keats's Endymion, and Richard Wagner's Lohengrin.

Chapter VI, 'The Hotbeds of Romanticism', deals with romantic places and geographies in a dual sense. On the one hand, Uthaug maps the national cradles of romanticism and discusses different national variants of the romantic idea: The English, the German, the French, the Polish, etc. On the other hand, he explores nations, regions, and places that fuelled the romantic imagination: Goethe's Italy, Byron's Greece, and the Orient, but also the Rhine and the Alps. Chapter VII, 'The Dark Romanticism', is quite short and deals with Gothic fiction, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in particular. Chapter VIII, 'Romantic Elements', returns to natural phenomena as it discusses representations in romantic art and literature of light and darkness, the night, the stars, the ocean, flowers, rivers and lakes, mountains, caves, and birds. The chapter closes with nature's opposite, the city. Chapter IX, 'Marginalia' includes various observations, which the author apparently could not fit into the other chapters, for instance the romantics' fascination with Shakespeare and Goethe's ambivalence towards romanticism. Finally, Chapter X, 'Epilogue', poses the question: What happened to romanticism? As Uthaug sees it, the romantic idea foundered on the scientism, rationalism, and materialism of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The romantics wanted to poeticize the world, he writes, but 'now the point was to de-poeticize poetry and bring it down to earth' (p. 355). However, the romantic idea was never quite extinct, and the author sees in present-day culture signs of its revival. One such sign is that fantasy, myth and magic have once again become part of literature. He might have added the contemporary concern with the environment, climate change, and animal rights, which has once again propagated a holistic view of man and nature.

Uthaug includes Polish and Norwegian romantics, but otherwise his canon is quite conservative. His book does not offer any new perspectives on romanticism, nor does it engage with new research in the field. However, it would be unfair to hold this against a work that never pretends to be cutting-edge schol-

arship. On its own terms, *Romantikkens univers* is a wonderfully rich book. Uthaug has extensive knowledge of (and great love for) European romanticism and he is an engaging storyteller. His book is quite simply a good read, lucidly written and accessible even to those who have never read a single line of romantic poetry. One of the (many) attractions of *Romantikkens verden* is its generous inclusion of short as well as longer extracts from romantic poems and prose works. But why does Uthaug in a few cases cite romantic poetry in the original language when everything else is translated into Norwegian? Uthaug is himself a gifted translator of English romantic poetry – why has he not put in the small extra effort and translated, for instance, the two short stanzas from Blake and Shelley on pages 90 and 91? Furthermore, the reasons for his arrangement of his vast material are not always crystal clear. The brief chapter ‘Dark Romanticism’ (Chapter VII) ties in with the chapter on the romantic mind (Chapter IV), so why not place it there? Parts of the chapter ‘The Romantic Hotbeds’ (VI) overlap with Chapter VIII, ‘Romantic Elements’. And Chapter IX, ‘Marginalia’, is too much of a mixed bag. However, these minor shortcomings should not deter the reader! *Romantikkens univers* is the first comprehensive introduction in Norwegian to European romanticism. But the book is more than just that. It is an inspired guide to the enchanting world of romantic literature and art. Students with an interest in romanticism will love it. Also, specialists should read it – if only to be reminded of what first drew them to romantic poetry.

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