10-1-1980

Romanticism and Taoism: The Planes of Cultural Organization

Vytautas Kavolis
Dickinson College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol5/iss5/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
ROMANTICISM AND TAOISM: THE PLANES OF CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Vytautas Kavolis

I

The goal of a comparative study of civilizations can only be a comprehension of mankind as a whole within the full diversity of its major historical trajectories.* But the study of civilizations lends itself peculiarly well, by an inner logic of its own, to a kind of self-testing, a critical evaluation of one's own stance toward life and intellectual position in the light of the experience of mankind as a whole. Civilizational studies constitute themselves as an idiom of self-and-civilization.

It is possible to approach the world as Montaigne has approached his own self—in the exploratory spirit of perplexed curiosity to discover whatever is there; or with the managerial intention to order, to control, and to predict everything about it, exemplified in the works, on the one hand, of most evolutionary theorists, on the other hand, of Spengler or Quigley. One may voyage through the world in a mystical quest to be liberated from the bondage of any provincialism and to enter into a sacred union with humanity as a whole, in the manner of Eliade or Le'vi-Strauss. And finally there is the analytical approach to the world—an endless effort to understand, with each step, a little more fully how the human mind works in its diverse histories, as it comes to grips with the seemingly endless variety of specific predicaments, and therefore what possibilities we have at our individual and collective disposal. Scholars as diverse as Weber, Coulborn, Voegelin, Gebser, Ricoeur, Needham, or Nelson have contributed to this approach.

The four approaches to the world, taken separately,
yield four different kinds of knowledge, which we might designate as participation knowledge, domination knowledge, salvation knowledge, and self-completion knowledge. With the possible exception of the last, these concepts have a familiar ring to sociologists of knowledge. What might be added here are two hypotheses of special interest to the comparative study of civilizations. First, the four approaches to the world may constitute a repetitive sequence through which the intellectual tradition of the study of humanity itself develops: One starts in an exploratory stance, then the managers and the mystics split, then the self-completing analysis makes its appearance.

Second, the comparative study of civilizations needs to employ all four approaches to the world. Participation knowledge is not comprehensible enough. Domination knowledge is blind to whatever cannot be fully described. Salvation knowledge disregards all demonstrable particularities irrelevant to a vision of redemption. Self-completion knowledge advances towards its possible goal only if it is continuously challenged by explorers, managers and mystics (and perhaps, for humility’s sake, by madmen as well, which is in any case inevitable).

II

In principle, the study of civilizations, rather than of societies or of cultures, demands (1) that attention be paid to symbolic designs in their social contexts; (2) that the complexes of symbolic designs and their social contexts be related to the largest comprehensible frames within which they have historically existed; and (3) that these frames and their components be studied as historical processes of emergence, transformation, interchange across their boundaries with other civilizational traditions, and perhaps decay, dissolution, revival.
Civilizations can be defined as entities with written histories of their own, within which states arise and disappear, and languages become differentiated and replaced, without the basic pattern that encompasses them losing the continuity of its distinctiveness.

Since a civilization is more extensive in space and in time than any organized society, in talking about civilizations, one gives analytical priority—a priority not of faith but of attention—to that which transcends any particular social organization, namely trans-societal symbolic designs. But, in studying civilizations, rather than cultures, one must view symbolic designs not by themselves, in a museum-like purity, but as sources of social energies and as structures expressing or limiting such energies. What one does in studying civilizations is not intellectual or social history, since the primary concern is not with the thoughts of particular individuals or with group actions, but with the deeper and more general matrices or frameworks within which these actions and thoughts are generated and which they presuppose.

In practice, the following seem to be the types of methodologies most prevalent in comparative civilizational studies. (1) The task may be conceived of as the construction of an inventory of world-wide uniformities, as in the generalizations about the rise and decline of civilizations or in hologeistic correlations between the size of empires and creativity. A recent study of this type reports that with industrialization in various parts of the world similarity of values in the cultural traditions does not increase, surely a finding of some interest even to those who are skeptical of the “scientific” method in cross-civilizational studies.¹

(2) At the opposite extreme one might locate a “presuppositionless” method best describable as a treasure house of particularities. Few people would candidly declare their adherence to this position, but comparisons of a bit from one civilization with a bit from an-
other, where it is not clear what the theoretical significance of the comparison is, approximates to the conception of comparative study as the gathering of all possible comparisons.

(3) The treasure house of particularities is transformed into an intellectually fruitful method by the device that might be named the *embedded dynamic detail*. Under this method, one chooses a significant element of one civilization, views it in its embeddedness within the total pattern of that civilization, considers its changes over time, traces out its impact on its various social settings—and then makes a search for what might be considered its counterpart in another civilization. This method allows an individual scholar to do important work amidst the infinite perplexities of comparative civilizational studies, in the manner, perhaps, of Louis Dumont.

(4) But what the comparative study of civilizations increasingly needs to make itself a coherent—as well as shared—discipline is an empirically resonant, processually open classificatory system of major alternatives for organizing the experience of mankind at all levels of differentiation and with regard to all key issues. This risky enterprise is the only possible approach to a comprehensive, non-reductionist understanding of the restless issues of consciousness and society. But this method can be advanced only by a collectivity of scholars who collaborate on defining the issues by which to guide the works.

The starting point for the joint construction of such a classificatory system might well be the notion of general types of necessary elements which one might expect to find, in some form, in all civilizations at some point in their historical trajectories—but which are differently dealt with in practice by the particular civilizations. We need diverse inventories of such necessary elements, constructed from the point of view of the several civilizations, of various intellectual traditions and cultural
movements within them, of different scholarly disciplines, and of particular perspectives within the disciplines.

(5) There is a fifth method employed by some who do comparative civilizational studies in order to discover a spirituality that transcends and renders unimportant all cultural particularities. The very interesting work of Raimundo Panikkar leans in this direction. But this looking through to a particularity-transcending spirituality is ultimately a method of contemplation rather than of comparative study. Let us not neglect the possibility of a civilizational ecstasies. A comprehension, in one’s own way, of the totality of the experience of mankind, with full respect to concrete diversity, is the beginning of the only responsible spirituality conceivable in today’s world. But it is only respect for particularities that renders a spirituality responsible.

III

And now to an extended example. I am currently engaged with six planes of the organization of culture that strike me as necessary elements of any civilization, accessible for both intra- and inter-civilizational comparisons. These necessary elements—only one of several possible lists—are: perceptual set, structure of consciousness, moral culture, mode of sensibility, form of organization of knowledge, and dramatic design.

I was led to this particular list by long-standing analytical concerns, which many others have pursued before me, and partly by an effort to make sense of the diversity and contradictory qualities of European Romanticism in civilizational perspective. It is a peculiarity of what is comprehended as Romanticism that it has produced mutually inconsistent meanings on the six planes of cultural organization. This type of incoherence has nothing in common with the promiscuousness of contemporary popular culture (or the “immense
confusion” of the popular perception of Romanticism). Romanticism is precise recognition of ambiguity and contradiction, and each of its planes (at a given moment of its historical trajectory) is exactly definable.

(1) As a perceptual set, Romanticism indicates a disposition not merely to perceive, but to admire, such qualities of experience as spontaneous diversity, flow, transformation, and extraordinariness—to see these qualities as naturally miraculous even when they generate disorder. It is, in large part, this perceptual set—the opposite of the “classical”—that has made social movements a subject of magic attraction to the best and the worst of sociologists. Within this perceptual set, taken by itself, object love—attachment to anything concrete—is replaced by process love. “Objectless longing” originates here.

(2) As a structure of consciousness (or general ideology, or explicit cosmology), Romanticism can be described by the following constellation of key terms (for which, however, there are various partial equivalents): A memorable individuality, whether of person or historical group, through alienations between and moves toward identity of nature and spirit (or reason and heart), seeks attunement with an unfinished and developing totality through its own best art, which is of universal significance only when it is most deeply particular. It is this structure of consciousness—most powerfully contrasting with the tragic—that mediates between Christianity, after its transformation by the Greeks, and Marxism.

In the European tradition, “nature” in general and human “nature” in particular can spoil in the absence of the proper “spirit,” and so does “spirit” deprived of its appropriate place in the “nature of things.” Yet there is, especially in certain secular derivatives from Latin and Greek Catholicism, in which the sense of the beauty of Lucifer is subliminally alive, nothing to prevent corruption from appearing beautiful, and supreme
corruption supremely so. The result of this denaturalization of spirit and despiritualization of nature is the “dark” Romanticism in which nature is regarded as unredeemably corrupt—with Sartre, one becomes “allergic to chlorophyll”—and original unity is therefore sought through “destructive transcendence” of either “nature” or “spirit”—or of both simultaneously. In addition to its disturbing contribution to the genesis of what its perpetrators proudly describe as political terrorism, this conception has influenced modern Japanese but hardly Chinese poets: a nature devoid of spirit, beautiful in its corruption, is conceivable within a Buddhist as well as a Catholic, but not within a Confucian or a Taoist tradition. For Puritan descendants (and Jews) corruption tends to remain ugly.

(3) As a mode of sensibility, or implicit organization of feelings, Romanticism suggests cycles, or coexistences, of desiccation and vitality or, in dark Romanticism, of desecration and evocation, the latter gained by unexpected intensities of emotion whether morbid or salvific, treasured regardless of the suffering they may cause, and regarded as having indestructible significance beyond their momentariness of experience. It is within the Romantic sensibility—the opposite of “bourgeois” prudential moderation—that passion to the death, to a human being or cause, which dissolves all boundaries and creates its own disciplines—but also, in dark Romanticism, of crime, sickness, deformity, and perversity—acquire the exaltation of deeper truth and momentary royalty. In Tantrism such intensifications are managed, in Romanticism they must surprise us.

(4) As a moral culture, or configuration of the basic ideas and feelings about man’s rights, duties, and limitations, Romanticism connotes the other—regarding obligation to prefer the ethics of compassion—“romantic pity,” as Shelley says—over the “liberal” ethics of reason and enlightened self-interest. The Romantic
moral culture also contains, and more profoundly, the self-regarding obligation to know and to be one’s own authentic self, good, evil or mixed (but hardly “neutral”), to its most painful depths and to confess one’s selfhood in public, where revealing one’s weaknesses and transgressions openly, without hiding one’s virtues, is more essential than restraining oneself from these weaknesses and transgressions (Rousseau), an attitude opposed above all to rigorous and systematic self-control as well as obligatory humility. The Romantic obligation of compassion feeds, or fades away, into the ideological foundations of the welfare society, on which it has probably had more influence than Christianity directly; the Romantic duty to unrestrained authenticity dissolves, alas, into pop-cultural views of the individual.

(5) As a form of organization of knowledge, of putting together into a readable “text” that which is “known” by the various human capacities of “knowing,” Romanticism can be described as a juxtaposition of fragments of systems and impressions of life. (Not to be confused with Surrealism, a later stage of this form, in which life itself becomes fragmented and systems melt down.)

(6) As a dramatic design for action, the Romance, in Hayden White’s phrase, is “fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero’s transcendence of the world of [ordinary] experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it.” “But,” in contrast to the Christian, the Moslem, or the Communist, “the Romantic Hero does not expect any ultimate relief.” The Romantic changes the world by investing it with significance. But he invests the world with significance while himself lacking it: not a saint but a hero marked by a deficiency, moving where victory is indistinguishable from defeat. (There are also Romantic bystanders who can be “purer,” fleetingly, than Romantic heroes.)
Two further elements of the Romantic scheme of things may be noted here: (7) the Romantic psychology of self-invention through compelling acts of consciousness and sensibility responding to the disharmonies of culture and experience. Yet it is this self-producing artifact, this man or woman of one’s own invention, that in the end discovers in its deepest inwardness something which has always been there, some givenness within, a grounding affectivity, perhaps, as a “leader in the grand style,” Rosa Luxemburg, discovered: “. . . I feel so much more at home . . . [she wrote] in the meadows when the grass is humming with bees, than at one of our party congresses . . . my inner-most self belongs more to my titmice than to the ‘comrades.’”

If the givenness within cannot be found, an awful emptiness emerges. Not for Romantics the happiness of the void.

Finally, (8) the Romantic conception of the relationship between “text” and “reality,” of words destroying their own meanings as constraints upon understanding, in the hope without faith of recovering, in a few privileged moments, “true speech.” (Reality, for Romantics, is a momentary unification of fragmentary experiences.) In this respect, Romanticism contrasts with the Medieval notion of the text as an eternally valid revelation of reality and the more contemporary ideas of the text as an approximation to reality, as itself the construction of whatever reality there is, or as an illusion without which it is impossible to speak about reality. Romanticism has regained a dimension of mysticism for secular thought.

Romanticism dissolves permanent categorial distinctions but centralizes the psyche—emotionally, morally—for a powerful moment in time. But it acts from within and is not calculating enough to adapt well to material interests and the objective characteristics of everyday life. It supports itself by its own spiritual energies and is not sustained by the world (or not as
much as, for example, Christianity is).

IV

The various components of Romanticism have different roots in or beyond recorded history and diverse trajectories and semantic linkages in the various linguistic communities in which they have been employed to make sense of individual experiences. These roots and linkages have not yet been uncovered in sufficiently differentiated depth. It will be possible here but to give a few hints.

The Romantic perceptual set is a version of spontaneous psychocultural tendencies that appear to be repetitively generated, in second-century China as well as in sixteenth-century England, by sociocultural breaks, in the absence of a militantly dualistic religiosity, and where elements of an aristocratic imagination have been retained. But an approximation of this perceptual set has become a well-established constant in Japan.

The Romantic structure of consciousness has been viewed as a secularization of Plotinus, accomplished by belated Renaissance hermeticists and over-rationalized nature mystics in an age of rising liberalism. The dark Romanticism can be regarded as an aestheticizing transposition of the Gnostic spirit and some of the inner demons of medieval Europe. A "clerical"—that is, text-centered—way of life appears to be a necessary prerequisite of either development. Warriors, craftsmen, merchants, peasants and bureaucrats would neither invent the Romantic structure of consciousness out of their own existence nor find it particularly appealing.

The compassionate side of the Romantic moral culture comes straight out of pietistic Christianity (but it could have come out of Buddhism no less well). The duty to authenticity and public self-revelation also
seems to have Christian, perhaps ultimately Protestant sources: once the obligation of self-directed moral development is removed, Rousseau’s *Confessions* are not too different from what the 17th-century Puritan divine, Richard Baxter, describes as the giving of an “exact account” of the “dark and passionate” plight of the soul. But Baxter sought spiritual development through such accounts, and for Rousseau it was enough to give them straight (or to feel intensely that he was doing so).

Romantic sensibilities are, to some degree, spontaneous reactions against rapid advances in various types of “rationalization of the world” and the experience of mechanical indifference such advances generate among the heirs and the victims—sometimes the agents—of the rationalizing achievements. But if one digs deep into what Romantic sensibilities seem to presuppose, one finds, on the other hand, some sense of the possibility of “eternal forms” or a “treasure house in heaven” or the “memory of mankind” in which all experiences of extraordinary quality will be preserved and, on the other hand, more archaically, traces of tricksters, trances, spirit-wives, vampires, scapegoats, voyages of the soul and feasts of fools—an uncanny primordial sphere of horrifying insight and miraculous renewal in the no-man’s land between ordered community and predictable nature, and perhaps between life and death, which exists everywhere. (This is, at least within my interpretation of Romanticism, its most ancient element. But it is not the key to Romanticism as a whole. And it has to become an individual’s interpretation of literature before it qualifies as Romantic.)

The Romantic form of organization of knowledge suggests a mind that is faced with the breakdown of all possible systems of thought but still vividly remembers their former greatness, and is not convinced of the solidity of everyday experience but occasionally illuminated by its nuances: a disillusioned mind still inti-
mate with a great heritage, kept alive by an occasional subtlety, perhaps the mind of Montaigne caught between the religious wars.

The Romantic dramatic design originates deep in the narrative mythology, it seems, particularly of the sea-going and nomadic (but not agricultural) peoples and undergoes a variety of transformations, under aristocratic, eremitic, poetic, and eventually revolutionary auspices, in a variety of places. The Romantic psychology of self-invention derives one of its sides, perhaps, from Pico della Mirandola, the other, possibly, from Petrarch.

Romanticism arises when these various planes begin to resonate to each other; it ceases to exist when they become mutually impermeable. What has happened to Romanticism since the Romantic age is better described as deconstellation than as decay.

The different components of Romanticism have historically tended to appeal to different social groups and psychological types. The Romantic moral culture has had its most reliable base in sections of the liberal bourgeoisie, especially in its Protestant-influenced Anglo-Saxon version. Romantic dramatic designs, in forms ranging from chivalrous to “true love” stories in popular magazines, have been popular far more widely and among various social strata, from the nobility to the urban proletariat, from St. Ignatius to Rousseau, with a stronger attraction, in the lower classes, to women than to men; and its appeal has extended far into non-Western societies; Indonesia’s Sukarno wrote his autobiography as a Romance.20

Other elements of Romanticism have narrower appeals. The Romantic structure of consciousness galvanizes mainly the secular urban intellectuals of a religious, indeed prophetic bent. (This is the facet of
Romanticism which has appealed more to secularized Jews—as well as urban Latin Catholics—than to urban Calvinists or East European peasant Catholics.) The Romantic perceptual set attracts adolescents, aesthetic souls, "post-modern" intellectuals; it is reflected in Malayan biographies, and this tendency resists, in that region, the influence of the firmer tradition of self-comprehension of Islam. The Romantic mode of sensibility seems to speak to those who, without being economically deprived, suffer from both social and cultural alienation, perhaps (in the twentieth century) more so in the Catholic than in the Protestant parts of Europe, especially France, Spain, and Latin America. The Romantic form of organization of knowledge has its clearest embodiment in English gardens, German Romantic paintings, and its primary appeal is to the non-political, non-religious littérateurs.

These are most tentative generalizations. But the approach suggested here allows the dismantling of the incomprehensible variety of Romanticisms beyond their purely literary signification into definable symbolic entities, each with different boundaries in social space and time—and in the architecture of particular psyches.

VI

It would be methodologically desirable, in cross-civilizational comparisons, to ask what is distinctive about one tradition from the point of view of the other, and then reverse the perspective, turning what had been the "alien" object of investigation into the "native" standpoint of the questioner. Ideally, representatives of several civilizations ought to collaborate in such exercises of shifting perspectives. But I can here only say in what respects Taoism seems to me to be comparable with and to differ from Romanticism on the six planes of cultural organization, and invite Chinese scholars to tell
me in what respects Romanticism differs from Taoism in terms that they consider most relevant to such cross-civilizational comparisons. The ultimate objective of such comparisons is to clarify what one is ultimately concerned with: a particular object, analytical issues, the dangers of one's own attractions.

In its perceptual orientations to fluidity and change, and in its sense for the generative chaos, Taoism is most similar to Romanticism, except for the Romantic insistence on extraordinariness. In the Romantic scheme of things, the extraordinary is always distinguishable from the quotidian. The latter should be treated, where the Romantic moral culture is active, with compassion, but does not count, by itself, as significant. In the Romantic universe of experience, most of what can now be observed, or even sensed, in it has merely factual existence but no significance, much in the same manner in which the East European Jews appeared to the German Jews before the Holocaust. (Some Romantics have sought to make everything extraordinary. But this is what should become, not what is.) In Taoism the ordinary in nature is as significant as anything can be, though the religiously perfected man—or woman—has extraordinary powers, which others lack. Romantics are puritanic with their significations and profligate with their energies; Taoists preserve their energies for their own health and longevity (except at the highest level of religious development, where it is possible to expend energies without losing them) and tend toward being profligate in their significations.

In the Taoist moral culture, it is assumed that compassion is generally spontaneous (somewhat in the manner of the eighteenth-century notion of "irresistible compassion," though less insistently). But there is less specific demand for it than in the Romantic tradition. While military commanders are told in the Tao Te Ching that compassion is essential for success (a utilitarian calculation alien to Romantic morality), gen-
eral indifference is often explicitly recommended: in order to attain tranquility one should be "an uncarved block." Natural spontaneity is sought, but what is spontaneous is not in the least individualized, but wholly general and normatively prescribed as "natural." Two key elements of Romantic morality exist in Taoism as well, but with different weights and differing contents.

The mode of sensibility of literary, as distinguished from popular, Taoism in its attunement to tranquility, to the fading away of the "drifting boat" of Chinese poetry (an attraction which it shares with the Confucians), is in exact opposition to the intensity-seeking Romantic sensibility. It is possible, within the Romantic scheme of things, to be tranquil. But it is a fragile, momentary tranquility between the wars, an accidental escape, not the gradually emerging and then perpetual, at-home-in-the-universe tranquility of the Taoists (attained by a "natural process" of self-perfection of primordial energies in man from the sexual ch'ing to the mindful shen, merely aided by man's meditation techniques).

If Western concepts are to be employed here at all, the dramatic design for human action favored by the Taoist literary imagination would have to be described as containing both "comical" and "visionary" elements. The comic design is a form of contests among agents operating on the same level of existence, in a "natural" universe of organic interdependence which asserts itself in the end, sorts out the actors into their naturally appropriate places, and provides whatever meaning there can be found in human action. The visionary design is a form for overcoming the "alienation" of the temporary from the eternal in man, in an ultimately unified and meaningful universe, architectonic in Christianity, dance-like in Hinduism, energetic in Taoism, or in the non-universe of Buddhism. The visionary differs from the romantic as the uniformitarian from the diversitarian. It is the comic element that
introduces diversitarianism—that is, quotidian individualization—into visionary designs and thus "humanizes" them, as in the Divine Comedy or Journey to the West.

The form of organization of knowledge favored by literary Taoists can be described as a collection of poetic intuitions of unbroken natural-spiritual totality; it contrasts sharply with the brokenness, fragmentariness, necessary imperfection, and the sense of incomplete grasp of the Romantic organization of knowledge.

The Taoist structure of consciousness lends itself best to a more detailed comparison with the Romantic structure of consciousness. These two structures can be viewed—at least if Romanticism is taken as the point of departure—as consisting of the same basic elements in different arrangements. The notion of the identity of nature and spirit is shared by Taoism and Romanticism. In philosophic Taoism this identity is an ever-present given which can only be forgotten but never lost. In Romanticism it has either been already lost or not yet attained, thus not a given at all but a supreme possibility for which, in the characteristic manner of the secular West, one has to risk one's all without any guarantee of success.

Taoism is heavily biased toward a stabilizing connectedness, a changing but unevolving continuity of universal alternation of apparent opposites in a pattern of repetitive circularity. Romanticism balances (in practice, at any given time, disharmoniously, but in theory, and in the long run, harmoniously) between connectedness and disconnection. Romanticism is full of such balances, it is never one-sided, as Taoism is most of the time, and it is for this reason that it might qualify as the most adult dream of mankind, and most completely adult: a dream (a) containing all essential opposites within itself, and (b) known to be capable of collapsing, and perhaps collapsing at any moment, yet

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol5/iss5/2
worth retaining in human memory, in the memory of strangers, even when it has collapsed. The Romantic conception of adulthood: firm knowledge of historically variable limitations of self and the world, strong sense of the endurably admirable, and the horrifying, in acts, in qualities, and in environments.\textsuperscript{28}

Within the Romantic structure of consciousness, it is only by one’s own best art—that is, by a sort of self-transcending artifact, which man also is—that one can hope to overcome the split between nature and spirit (or, in a distortingly schematized form, between “fact” and “value”). The comparable connecting link in religious Taoism is spiritual-bodily technique (breath exercises, meditation and sexual techniques, macrobiotic diet) by which the unity of body and spirit is not so much attained as asserted, provided the techniques are performed with the attitude appropriate for them.\textsuperscript{29}

Art is an important part of the Taoist (or, more generally, Chinese) tradition. But it is not the operating key without which the whole “system” breaks down utterly, as would Romanticism. In the Taoist scheme of things at its most sophisticated art is the expression of the experience of a harmonious embeddedness of the conscious detail of nature in the totality to which it belongs. Romantic art is “spiritual work,” the means of salvation; Taoist art “spirited leisure,” the consciousness of nature that does not need to be saved. (And yet there is an essential core of spirited leisure—the spontaneous poetic experience—inside the necessary spiritual work in Romanticism, equivalent to the givenness within of the Romantic psychology of self-invention.)

The Romantic universe operates by (unpredictable) additions to it, the Taoist universe by (non-contributory) attunements with it. In Taoism, the artificial is a nominalistic illusion that will eventually evaporate by itself. In Romanticism, the artificial (insofar as it is not art) is a very real prison that one must fight against—without hope of a final victory in one’s own
life or in anyone’s time. Everyone has his/her own struggle, though in its course one discovers unexpected, all-significant spiritual congenialities—the essence of Romantic sociability—with others. (But these are congenialities of the deformed and of fighters: containing large imperfections and violent destructiveness within universal compassion and the mystery of resonating, quietly, with a few others to some of the same ultimates. None of this deformation and fighting in Taoist sociability.)

The emancipatory schema of the Romantic paradigm can itself become a prison, and indeed this is how evil arises, where it does arise, in secular Romanticism: as “iron necessity” or “blind compulsion,” as mere structure—outward or inward—emerging out of the fluidity of the moving contradictions of experience but incapable of resonating to them. (“He reasons but does not resonate” is a Romantic’s definition of a cognitively evil man.)

A schematically conceived process of liberation is, by Romanticism’s own premises, a prison: artifice rather than art. Schematic liberation is the betrayal that transforms romanticism into terrorism. But without schemas the objective of analytic practice escapes its own grasp. To analyze human life is to live precariously balanced between betrayal and escape: a principle that holds for civilization analysis no less than for any other.

From the Taoist point of view, Romanticism can be accused of containing both poison and antidote in its design—and of employing too much art in the effort at being natural in society.

But which other secular scheme of things contains as much antidote to its own poisons as Romanticism does? By its sobriety and tough-mindedness Romanticism surpasses them all.

VII
tecture, Romanticism encounters, within Western civilization, competitors with which it is habitually confused. What is now popularly known as "romantic love" usually lacks the sense that only highly select, exalted emotions matter, that they matter regardless of the suffering they cause, and that they matter in all eternity. This sense is a definitional part of Romantic sensibility. In its absence "romantic love" relocates itself within the egalitarian Sentimentalist paradigm, within which all feelings, regardless of their ordinariness, matter, and matter equally, but matter only during the election (or, in this case, the affair).

In contrast to Sentimentalism, assorted pop-Oriental religious loves, sociological labeling theories and other egalitarian paradigms, Romanticism contains a highly demanding principle of selection, an exalted conception of the hidden potentialities of man (and, especially, woman) and accepts only what is appropriate to that conception. In this respect, Romanticism retains an enduring educational significance in a secularized egalitarian culture as an ever-reviving principle of selectivity by which that which is worth enduring can be distinguished from routine productions, from an all-blurring "mass culture," though Romanticism does not well distinguish sanity from madness. Only Romanticism shows signs, among the secular traditions of democratic societies, of being able to solve Tocqueville's problem of preserving individuality in a democracy, even though in a manner entailing high risk.

What is risky is of course especially seductive to people with Romantic sensibilities. It is not criteria of selection suggestive of spiritual hierarchies, not of people but of experiences and of works, but the fatal attraction to the unexpected festival which has a way of turning into a catastrophe that is dangerous about Romanticism. (This attraction has much to do with the Romantic attitude toward disorder: orderliness disguising a volcano, higher order hidden away in apparent disorderliness.)
Confusion of paradigms is one problem, the coexistence or conflict of different paradigms in the same group or individual is another. This is frequently the case with Anglo-Saxon liberals of the tradition of Thomas Jefferson and John Stuart Mill: the Romantic moral culture of compassion and of the search for individual authenticity coexists with the liberal moral culture of rational calculation of consequences and of the artificial construction of everything social. It is this extension that renders American liberals as a group incapable of coherent policy. But it has also saved American liberalism from the cultural desiccation of the more purely rational European liberalism.\(^{33}\)

As moral cultures, the liberal and the romantic can either compete or coexist in the same minds (the liberal, since Emerson, as the *container*, and the romantic as the *contained*, with the possibility, on certain spectacular occasions, of inverting the container with the contained). But as a structure of consciousness, liberalism must compete and it is handicapped in competing with its major challengers by the absence of a conception of totality not reducible to the acts of its component parts. Since the liberal tradition lacks a conception of ultimate totality, it gains a certain temporary pragmatic maneuverability, but it cannot generate dramatic designs of imaginative depth and moral appeal that either the nature of man’s living in society or the human “natures” of a great many individuals demand. Liberals must therefore either borrow the dramatic designs of other types of consciousness—nationalist, romantic, socialist, or religious—, or they cannot respond, on the level of either civilizational design or personal experience, to the search for dramatic designs and intuitions of totality by which so many anti-liberal movements are motivated.

It seems impossible to confuse the liberal tradition which centers on the idea that the individual is capable of rational choices and therefore responsible for his
choices, with the contemporary counter-culture of irresponsible determinism, favored by all sorts of bureaucracies and technocracies and expressed in various types of behavioral science-therapeutic tradition, in which man is treated as subject to psychological, or economic, or organizational, or linguistic, or even civilizational determinisms.

In all respects except the inhospitality to dramatic designs, the culture of irresponsible determinism is the exact opposite of the liberal moral culture. And yet the two symbolic frameworks are frequently confused, both by critical outsiders and by those within. One begins to long for a “rectification of names” sensitive to the defining characteristics of the symbolic structures for the conduct of human existence as well as to their changes over time.

But it is only the most practical common sense to presume that there must be at least seven types of spirit beyond each name.

VII

What happens to people when they take Romanticism seriously depends on (1) which plane, or facet, of Romanticism, in which stage of its historical trajectory, they take seriously, and (2) what, in their own social settings, they specifically repudiate in Romanticism’s name. While there are “intrinsic” elements in Romanticism, what it looks like in particular national, religious, political settings depends also on its “accidental” characteristics, on what particular Romantics polemicize against—in France and Spain, against traditional clericalism and the bourgeoisie aligned with it; in Germany and England, against modernist rationalization, but only in Germany in the “priestly” manner; in Russia, against feelinglessness in personal life; in nineteenth-century Italy and Poland, against historical injustices to one’s nation, to cite only some distinctive,
though not exclusive, emphases. The same is true of the adherents of any other civilizational movement, such as Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, or Socialism.

For what purposes a symbolic constellation can be used in society depends partly on the character of the constellation and partly on the needs of society. It would seem impossible for Romanticism to be brought into the same close relationship to the state as Taoism has been: "under every dynasty priests furnished supportive tokens to the central government and performed rituals for its security."

The extreme individualism of the Romantic dramatic design, its obligation to seek and express individual authenticity, the correlated perception of established structures as prisons, and the fragmentary form of organization of knowledge characteristic of Romanticism make its institutionalization as a church, or a series of churches, for any protracted length of time, unlikely. It is not as closely, even in psychotherapy, linked with healing as (religious) Taoism and therefore does not have the leverage on power which the ability to heal and to exorcise demons represents, and it has not acquired rituals that can be shared, standardized, and kept apart from what appears as the daily life of its adherents. By virtue of its individualistic, spontaneity-asserting, self-critical, and ironic elements Romanticism would be far more subversive than Taoism of any state in whose support it might, temporarily and in part, be mobilized. While Taoism presumes the basic soundness of Chinese civilization, Romanticism senses fundamental distortions not only in Western civilization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but it would sense such distortions in the practical and theoretical arrangements of any civilization in which it could exist. Thus Romanticism is not easily usable in support of existing power. On the other hand, in Western civilization more easily mobilizable (because more authoritarian) ideological supports have been available to states, so Romanticism was less
needed as a state religion than Taoism might have been in China. Romanticism has, however, been influential in various types of nineteenth-and twentieth-century political movements—left and right—before their acquisition of power. "Perhaps Romanticism is something which should not achieve length and breadth, but which should flare up in this meteoric way if it is to bring forth its concern in a manner impressive and worthy of credence." But the temporariness of basic Romantic impulses makes it all the more important to inquire into which more durable structures of practice Romantic impulses pour their energies. (And what effects of Romanticism endure in those shaped and then disappointed by it.)

The "objective contributions" of such symbolic constellations as Romanticism or Taoism, in their full diversity, to the development of Western and Chinese civilizations can be adequately traced out only when a more complete understanding of the general types of civilizational processes, and their psychological dimensions, than we currently possess is in hand.

In estimating these contributions, one has to take into account not only the effects of the direct insertion of elements of a particular symbolic configuration into various spheres of sociocultural life, but also (a) its mixes with other cultural systems, (b) its distortion as, in the course of its popularization, it comes to speak less for the general cultural concerns of its originators and more for the immediate social interests of its adherents, and (c) the unanticipated and even counter-productive results of its institutionalization under various material conditions.

IX

What I have been talking about are all hypotheses and questions, and evaluations of one's own stance toward life and intellectual position in the light of the accumu-
lated experience of mankind, conceived as building blocks toward a cooperative construction of a set of tools for comprehending the significant differences between and within all civilizations.

What we need most at present are careful histories, or archeologies, of each component of major civilizational designs. We need histories of the various elements of each cultural configuration and movement, and culturally sensitized histories of the social systems with which these symbolic designs have interacted. We need histories of the social classes and of the human types from which humanity's symbolic configurations have been selecting their adherents and enemies. We need analytical accounts of what has happened to various symbolic designs and social systems in inter-civilizational as well as intra-civilizational encounters. Perhaps it could all be summed up by saying that we need a world-wide linked series of histories of perception (or rather of perceptual frames).

Neither at the beginning nor at the end can we forget to ask: What effects have the various symbolic designs generated, at various times, in particular spheres of social practice—in law, psychotherapy, economic conduct, marriage and child raising, religious experience and organization, political institutions and processes, and sociological theorizing?37

What have been the practical energies not only of the major religions and ideologies, but of every symbolic design that has exploded upon the imagination of mankind, particularly if it has remained memorable for many generations or if its loss has not ceased to hurt?

What can civilizational analysis discern in what is now taking place in these spheres that is less visible to other methods of deep questioning and selective affirmation of ourselves in the world?

Dickinson College
Notes

*) Presidential Address, presented at the ninth annual meeting of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, on May 22-25, 1980, at Syracuse University.


3 M. H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973). It is the separation of nature and spirit, when both remain significant, that requires the Romantic investigator,—in contrast to the observer of picturesques and the pure sentimentalist,—to pay attention in principle both "to the qualities in the observed object and to the reactions of the observing subject." Hans Eichner, ed., 'Romantic' and Its Cognates/The European History of a Word (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 36. But the Romantic methodological preference for "a light comparison, a few lines traced in the sand" (Novalis) over systematic research has produced a tendency not to pay sufficient attention to the "observed object" as it exists outside of our perceptions of it.

4 When the totality is finished and in itself undeveloping, the alienation of nature and spirit (or some equivalent kind of alienation, such as that of "facts" and "values") unsolvable, and art not the act of reconciliation, but the means of gaining stoic insight into the unsolvable state of affairs, Romantic consciousness is replaced by Tragic consciousness, in which only the abstract (and therefore in principle repeatable) overall scheme matters, but not the unique particularities of individual lives within it, as they do in the Romantic structure of consciousness. On the Tragic consciousness, see Paul Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967); and Lucien Goldman, The Hidden God: A Study of the Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

5 Black Romanticism exists almost from the beginning of Romanti-
cism, in a pure form, since de Sade. But it becomes proportionately more important (and culturally acceptable) as time goes on.—The typical Romantic metaphor is something that is simultaneously, but in clearly distinguishable ways, artificial and natural: such as the Romantic prison of French and Russian literatures, in which spiritual regeneration occurs, or the deep mask through which alone the genuine rises to the surface. But in dark Romanticism—Poe, Baudelaire—the key metaphor seems to become something that is either simultaneously life and death (e.g., the erotic death) or neither life nor death while appearing, in some ambiguously outrageous way, to be both, la technique in Ellul’s book, the city in some contemporary American fiction.


8Lionel Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974); Vytautas Kavolis, “Moral Cultures and Moral Logics” Sociological Analysis, 38 (1977), pp. 331-344. Compassion is one of the two major motives behind the strong interest of the Romantics, especially French and English, in the salvation of Satan, that is a sinner whom even official Christianity, a few exceptions aside, has abandoned as hopeless. The other motive is sympathy for the assertion of authenticity—rebellion against established authority. Maximillian Rudwin, The Devil in Legend and Literature (La Salle, Ill.: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1931), pp. 280-308. Authenticity is closely linked with rebellion in the Romantic mind, which makes it difficult to comprehend non-rebellious kinds of authenticity or to be authentic when rebellion is not called for (or impossible).

9Romantic self-restraint arises either from an eighteenth-century
natural sensitivity to others (Shaftesbury's "moral sense") or from a nineteenth century ironic awareness of the closeness of one's "constructive" acts to being "destructive" (Friedrich Schlegel). Systematization of self-control, in the sense of a monastic or military discipline, seems, from the Romantic point of view, both dishonest and insensitive, even when it "works."


The givenness within can be conceptualized as the unconscious, the primordial, or the archetypical. From the Romantic point of view it is most authentic when grasped directly and untheoretically.


Abrams, op. cit.
shamans, see Ross Woodman, “Shaman, Poet, and Failed Initiate: Reflections on Romanticism and Jungian Psychology,” *Studies in Romanticism*, (Spring, 1980), pp. 51-82. Woodman locates the roots of this failure in the lack of an analytical method (or perhaps ritual) for mastering the monsters of the depths evoked by the Romantic imagination.


22 As a consequence of its preference for the extraordinary, Romantic thought is inadequate in comprehending the “merely” ordinary, everyday reality unimproved by the imagination. The danger is particularly great in political theory. But the extraordinary can be understood only against a background of a sound science of the ordinary. Hence the need of European Romantics for American sociology—the question of the latter’s “soundness” temporarily suspended.—English Romantics, in their conscientious manner, have perhaps been more respectful of the structures of ordinary life than any other. Hamill, *op. cit.*

23 Novalis in 1789: “The world must be romanticized. . . . When I give the common a high significance, the ordinary a mysterious appearance, the familiar the dignity of the unfamiliar, the finite the semblance of the infinite, then I romanticize it.” Quoted from Eichner, *op. cit.*, p. 124. There is here a sober distinction between what “reality” is without the imagination and the “significance” which imagination adds to it. Psychoanalytic writers make a similar distinction when they insist that “the lack of fantasy life” produces a chronic state of boredom. Martin Wangh, “Boredom in the Psychoanalytic Perspective,” *Social Research*, 42 (Autumn, 1975), p. 542.
The insignificance, in the Romantic scheme of things, of most of the world as it is without the addition of imagination to it pertains not to people, but to their experiences. Romantics do not uphold any social elite identifiable by its position or reputation, but they insist on the possibility of hierarchies of qualities. The quality of extraordinariness ("poesy") is in principle available to a socially low-ranking individual, or the disesteemed, and is indeed more typically attributed by Romantics to him (or her) than to the stereotyped "middle-class mediocrity" of the lower reaches of Romantic imagination. The Romantic scheme of things is intended to make ordinary people capable of sustaining extraordinary experiences. This is the explanation of its popular roots, where it connects with certain elements of folk literature. But, as in folk tales, so for the Romantics, the extraordinary cannot be artificially constructed where it does not spontaneously (or miraculously) arise. It is the artificial, willed, technically competent construction of the extraordinary which makes the idea of the extraordinary dangerous. But one should think that the Romantic theory of evil contains enough warnings against it.

24 When Romantic designs are "vulgarized," they seem, to someone who thinks he understands "true" (that is, late eighteenth and early nineteenth century) Romanticism, as no longer Romantic. But in the Taoist tradition, in spite of the immense differences between "philosophical" and "religious," "literary" and "popular" Taoism, all of them have been easily thought of as legitimately Taoist. One does not normally speak of "vulgarized" Taoism. This difference in attitudes toward "high" and "low" in the two traditions does not seem to be an accident of scholarly conventions, but to arise from the essential contrast between the "puritan" selectivity of Romanticism and a "profligate" embracingness of Taoism. For an argument that the meaning of "Taoism" be restricted to religious Taoism, see Michel Strickmann, "History, Anthropology, and Chinese Religion," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 40 (June, 1980), pp. 201-246, esp. p. 207. Taoism is, after all, primarily shared religion, while Romanticism is primarily individual imagination.


26 Two other dramatic designs complete the analytical scheme: tragedy and burlesque. The tragic design is an existential form for struggle by individuals or collectivities capable of independent action against principles or forces superior to them, in a universe containing a meaningful, but contradiction-carrying invisible order. Tragedy is a struggle against a superior force amidst con-

While tragedy may not be a universal form there are also significant differences in the treatment of the form in civilizations which possess it.

When the burlesque is defined as a dramatic design for upheavals against order by "chaotic" forces normally believed to be inferior to it in rationality, morality or general respect-worthiness, do we not have a cross-cultural universal which emerges in the imagery of the trickster in whom features of the animal, the clown, the shaman-magician-witch, and the rebel are fused, as they are also in the image of the Jew in European anti-Semitic thought, in the Japanese image of the Burakumin, and generally in the dramatic designs, allocated to the outcastes everywhere?

Historically, different dramatic designs have tended to be associated with particular social groups—the tragic with a threatened aristocracy (or with threatened groups imbued with aristocratic values); the comic with the peasantry and the bourgeoisie; the burlesque with low ranking and outcaste groups (although today alienated bureaucrats and many literary humanists are grateful enough for whatever the burlesque has to offer); the romantic with independent poet-intellectuals (who have inherited, but are no longer bound by, traditions of aristocratic combat as well as those of individual religious quest); the visionary with priests and prophets, whether religious or profane. Once these designs have originated in a particular context, they are of course available for use in other contexts, but then their meanings change, mixed types result, and we find ourselves in today's world, where tragedy is believable only when it is simultaneously burlesque.

In Taoism, the only essential alienation is that of the artificial, or artificializing, particular (culture, the techniques of spiritual development when separated from proper attitude, self-assertions) from the natural-spiritual totality. No alienation of nature from spirit, which is the essential alienation of Romanticism, is conceivable.

It is by this conception of adulthood that Romantic education and psychotherapy would be guided.
In the Taoist treatment of sickness, the body-spirit unity is also manifest, but its spiritual aspect seems to have an active priority in causing sickness to the body and must therefore be purified, in an early second century A. D. version of the practice, by a confession in triplicate, for the body to recover physical health. Pei-yi Wu, "Self-Examination and Confession of Sins in Traditional China," Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, 39 (June, 1979), pp. 5-38. While exposure to Romanticism has had psychotherapeutic effects—e.g., on John Stuart Mill—, no formalization of therapy is intrinsic to Romanticism as such, as it is to religious Taoism. It has, however, influenced the development of the differentiated system of medical psychotherapy. But the role of Taoism in Chinese science and medicine is both far deeper and more prolonged.

In secular Romanticism the emergence of evil has to be explained. The idea of a permanent, unexplainable evil has a place only within a sacralized version of Romanticism.

Rigidity, in the sense of absoluteness and exclusiveness—the rigidity of rationality, of tyranny, but also the rigidity of goodness and of God—is one of the two main sources of evil in the Romantic imagination. Walter H. Evert, "Coadjutors of Oppression: A Romantic and Modern Theory of Evil," in George Bornstein, ed., Romantic and Modern: Reevaluations of Literary Tradition (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), pp. 29-52; John Porter Houston, The Demonic Imagination: Style and Theme in French Romantic Poetry (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); Karl S. Guthke, "Der Mythos des Bösen in der Westeuropäischen Romantik," Colloquia Germanica, 1968 1/2, pp. 1-36. The other main source of evil is disgust at the "endless emptiness" into which God has collapsed under the influence of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Evil is connected, in the "Romantic theology," with the syndrome of emptiness, rigidity, rationality, collapse of imagination, and tyranny, with various elements being given more emphasis by different Romantics. (Feminine images of evil seem to represent either wholly denatured spirit or wholly despiritualized nature at either its most beautiful or most ugly. See Praz, op. cit.)

The Romantic cult of childhood has much to do with the absence in children of all forms of typically Romantic evils. The message of Romantic childhood is: recollect the beginnings, imagine the destination. Even psychoanalysis, with its more Puritanic conception of childhood, has not succeeded in abolishing the hold on the popular mind of the Romantic view of childhood.

It is "the very impossibility of using the term in a positive sense without some consciousness of its negative implications" that
ultimately contributed to the development of what was to be called ‘romantic irony.’” Eichner, op. cit., p. 21. The antidote to some aspect of Romanticism (e. g., the intensity need of Romantic sensibility) usually emerges on a different plane of its cultural organization (e. g., in this case, the givenness within of Romantic psychology). Critiques of Romanticism which do not pay attention to all its planes are fundamentally misconceived.

For the perhaps more common view that Romanticism has corrupted Liberalism, see Charles Frankel, “Does Liberalism Have a Future?”, Research Institute on Institutional Change, The Relevance of Liberalism (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1978), pp. 97-120.

Strickmann, op. cit., p. 211.


For instance: While Romanticism equalizes the sexes, it would seem—in spite of Hugo and Yeats—to put old age at a disadvantage, more so than the traditions it competes with in the West. (See, however, David Luke, “How Is It That You Live, And What Is It That You Do?: The Question of Old Age in English Romantic Poetry,” in Stuart F. Spicker, Kathleen M. Woodward, David D. Van Tassel, eds., Aging and the Elderly: Humanistic Perspectives in Gerontology (Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press, Inc., 1978) p. 221, for the argument that prior to the Romantic period, “the old man generally entered English literature only as a comic and peripheral distortion of the norms and ideals of various social roles. Thus his development in much Romantic writing as a central, sympathetic, and symbolic character is indeed distinctive.” Romantics have made old age more than merely a social problem for the secular imagination—in the same spirit in which they have made more than a social problem of alcoholism, crime, or homosexuality.) Taoism is equally accessible to the old and the young, indeed perhaps more attractive to the old. But while, in comparison to Confucianism, it does advance women, it does not in practice equalize the sexes, in spite of its preference for feminine symbolism and a few female immortals.

Romanticism has clearly contributed to improving the condition of children in eighteenth-century English and French aristocratic and middle-class families. No comparable effect of Taoism on childhood seems to be demonstrable.