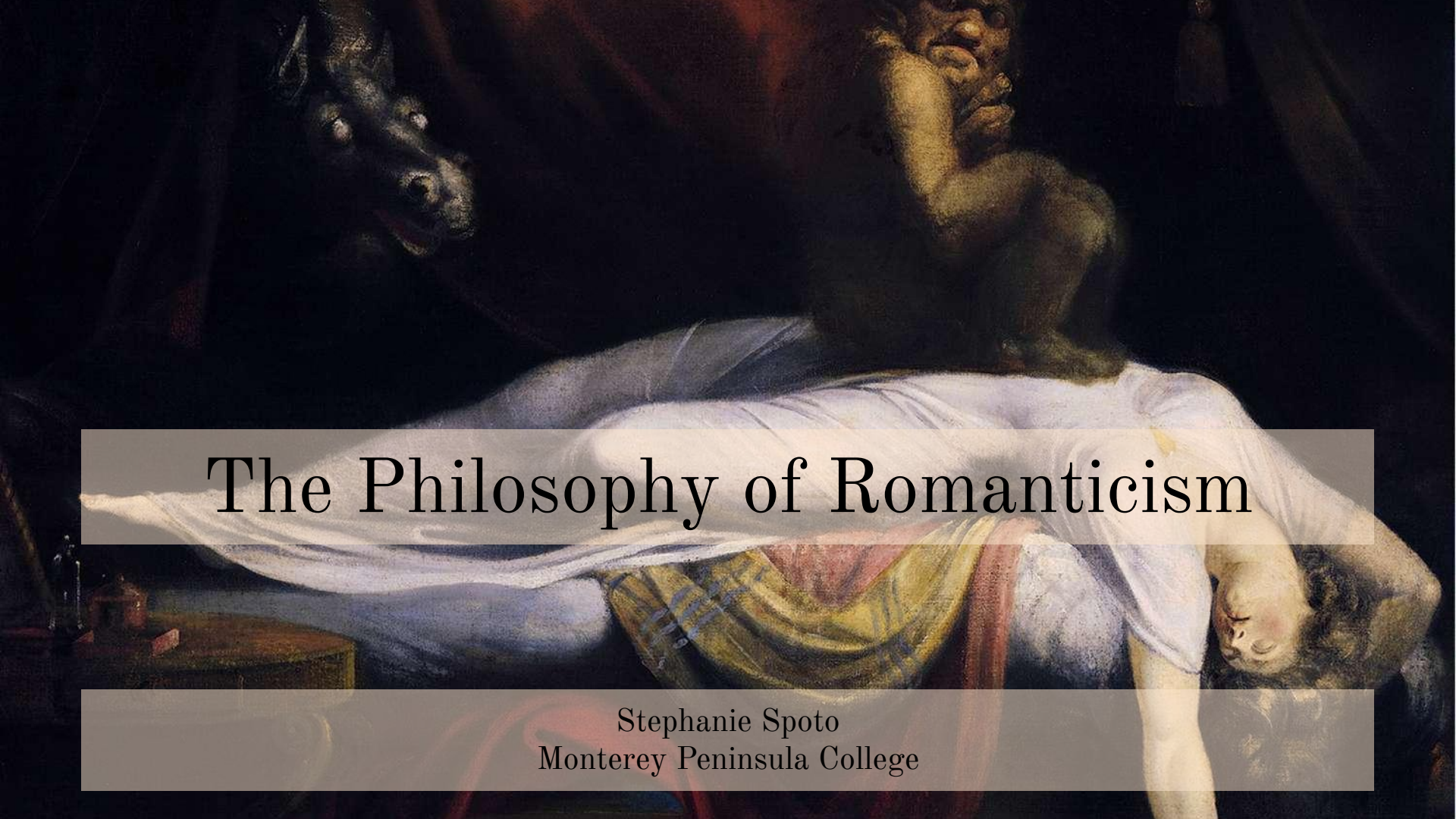

The Philosophy of Romanticism

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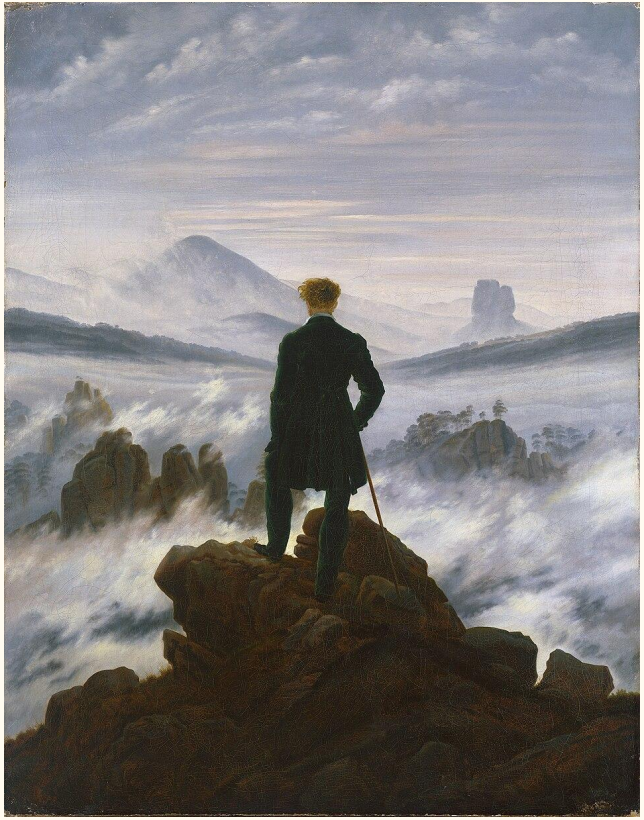
The Philosophy of Romanticism

- Late 18th and early 19th century philosophical and artistic movement
- A philosophy that has its roots in art, music, and literature
- Moving past reason → elevation of emotion, intuition, imagination
- Many see Romanticism as a reaction against Enlightenment philosophy
- Individualism → focus on individual subjective experiences and inner life
- Eugène Delacroix, Caspar David Friedrich; Wordsworth and Byron; Kirkegaard, Rousseau, Schopenhauer



“All the knowledge I possess everyone else can acquire, but my heart is all my own.”

— Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

Sturm und Drang (1760s-1780s)

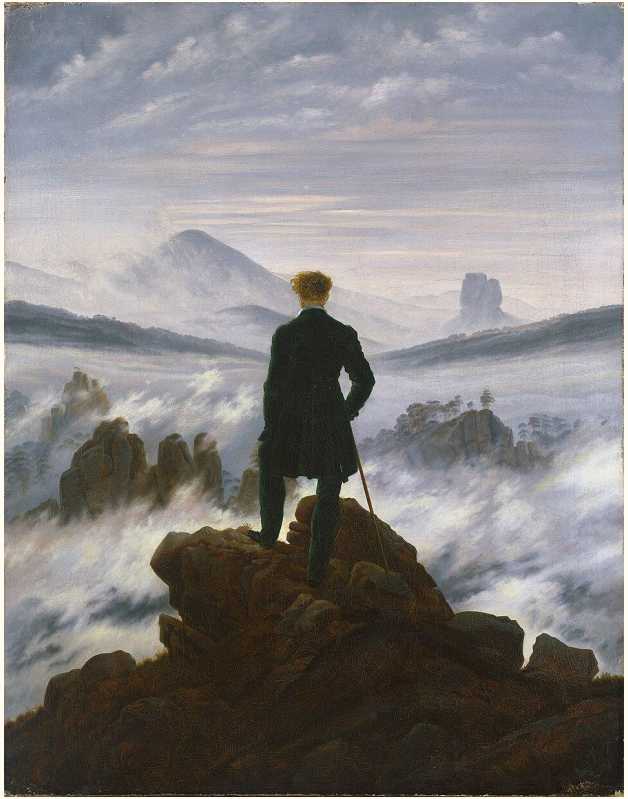
- An early influence on Romanticism
- *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) was an artistic and literary movement
- Explored the extremes of emotional expression
- Contrasted against cold Enlightenment philosophy, which was believed to no longer capture the human condition → rejection of rationalism, universalism, and empiricism
- Named after the 1777 play by Friedrich Maximilian Klinger

Responding to their Historical Context

- Critique of Industrialism → seeing the Industrial Revolution as creating a new vision of an alienated humanity
- Attempt to reconcile humanity and the natural world amidst this alienation
- The belief that the false notion of human and natural world as separate has alienated humanity from its true essence
- Rejection of the view that nature is merely a resource

Nature as sublime

- Nature as sublime → rather than rationality as the source for higher or transcendent experience, thought, connection with God it is Nature
- Primacy of Aesthetics → the idea that it is not rational inquiry that elevates humanity, but beauty, awe, and wonder
- Nature and beauty allow for the individual to an experience of the “infinite”



The “Wild” Nature of Man and the All Soul

- Man’s true nature is emotion, intuition, connection with the world
- Wild Untamed Nature is a window into the turbulent soul of Man
- Falsely cut off from the natural world by industrial society
- In the darkness of untamed nature is the sublime, which connects our individual hidden and emotional souls with the “all soul”
- All Soul was universal divine force that connected all living things
- An ultimate reality beyond material things
- Accessed through the experience of the Sublime

Bertrand Russell on Romanticism

“The romantic movement, in art, in literature, and in politics, is bond up with this subjective way of judging men, not as members of a community, but as aesthetically delightful objects of contemplation. Tigers are more beautiful than sheep, but we prefer them behind bars. The typical romantic removes the bars and enjoys the magnificent leaps with which the tiger annihilates the sheep. He exhorts men to imagine themselves tigers, and when he succeeds the results are not wholly pleasant.”

Primacy of Aesthetics

- Art has the power to reveal the truth about the world and the human condition
- Modernity and Industrialism has severed off the connection between Man and Nature
- Beauty and Terror both sublime experiences
- Sublime can connect Man back to the true self and Nature

Romanticism and Nationalism

- Romanticism as an artistic movement often *romanticized* historical moments
- Focus on folklore and folk culture as nations authentic expression
- Similar to Hegel → each nation has its own destiny and spirit
- Goethe and Wordsworth → blending of Romantic ideals with national identity

Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "To the German Nation”, 1806

“Those who speak the same language are joined to each other by a multitude of invisible bonds by nature herself, long before any human art begins; they understand each other and have the power of continuing to make themselves understood more and more clearly; they belong together and are by nature one and an inseparable whole. ...Only when each people, left to itself, develops and forms itself in accordance with its own peculiar quality, and only when in every people each individual develops himself in accordance with that common quality, as well as in accordance with his own peculiar quality—then, and then only, does the manifestation of divinity appear in its true mirror as it ought to be.”

Romanticism and the Unconscious

Not Chaos, not
The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
By help of dreams—can breed such fear and awe
As fall upon us often when we look
Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man—
My haunt, and the main region of my song.

—Wordsworth, "Prospectus" to
The Recluse (35-41; PW 5: 4)

- Emphasis on the dark source of inspiration and knowledge of the inner self → the unconscious
- This inner self was irrational and emotional → the source of creativity
- Importance of dreams and emotions for revealing deeper truths