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Louis Dupré’s *The Quest of the Absolute: Birth and Decline of European Romanticism* is a feast of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century European literature, historiography, philosophy, and theology. With this volume, Dupré completes his important trilogy on the origins and enduring structures of modernity. Along with *Passage to Modernity* and *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, *The Quest* provides readers with an important insight into our current situation. As Dupré notes, “Our contemporaries, like the Romantics, typically resist political restrictions, social divisions, fixed moral rules, and dogmatic religion. They experience the same desire for global unity while fiercely resisting any attack on their regional autonomy” (viii).

It should be noted, however, that Dupré does not seek to write a history of Romantic thought or artistic production. Rather, the author considers *The Quest* a “sketch” of the characteristics of Romanticism “as a cultural phenomenon” (ix). Dupré characterizes this phenomenon as a shared sense of “living at the start of a new cultural epoch” (1). Romantics expressed in many different ways a desire for “an unreachable ideal”: that infinite that is simultaneously surpassing and indefinite (3). A suspicion of “pure rationality” characterizes the post-Kantian, post-Revolution milieu. And Dupré suggests that the true originality of the Romantics lies in their “all-inclusive” subjectivism. Dupré writes that “since there appeared to be no way to escape the mind’s self-enclosed subjectivity, [the Romantics] trusted that a more fundamental exploration of the grounding subject would lead to a groundless absolute, in which the opposition between mind and reality would cease to exist” (338). That is, Dupré makes the case that Romantic/idealistic subjectivism is anything but “self-centered sentimentality” (338-339). The opposite in fact. Romantic subjectivism is a desire to surpass finitude.

For a sketch, the book is remarkably thorough and sprawling. Taking in Romantic poetry and fiction from France, England, and Germany, European historiography of the French Revolution, historical theory, social theory, political philosophy, epistemology, philosophy of nature, and Catholic and Protestant theology, *The Quest* is the work of a master.

Dupré has written to an educated audience familiar with contemporary discourse about our Enlightenment inheritance and the current state of (post-)modernity. The reader need not be a specialist in Balzac, Wordsworth, Fichte, Schleiermacher, or any other Romantic in order to enter Dupré’s sketch. Indeed, Dupré is a skilled guide who leaves no one behind.

Those familiar with Dupré’s work on European intellectual history will not be surprised by the many strengths of *The Quest*. I have already gestured toward one of the great strengths of the book: Dupré’s argument that Romantic/
idealistic subjectivism is not self-centered sentimentality, but rather an energetic search for the absolute. This nuanced perspective on the poetry of Wordsworth or Keats, on the philosophy of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, and perhaps especially on the theology of Schleiermacher makes The Quest an invaluable contribution to our estimation of Romanticism’s contribution to the process of post-Enlightenment living. The shadow side of Dupré’s insight here is of course the realization that contemporary subjectivism is impoverished by its lack of imagination and hunger for transcendence. Some readers may hope for a more thorough treatment of contemporary strains of Romanticism. And this could be considered a weakness of the text. However, Dupré is faithful to his project to sketch Romanticism in its own right, and he is rarely distracted from that task.

Another strength of the work is Dupré’s careful attention to the literature of the era. Providing the reader with a “typology of Romantic literature” and a sensitive discussion of the self as it is reflected in the Romantic novel, Dupré opens up the Romantic world in a way few scholarly studies do. The surpassing and indefinite nature of the infinite for which the Romantics searched is probably best captured via Romantic poetry, given that the form suits the content. Dupré’s typology of the literature becomes the perfect lens through which to interpret all other facets of the cultural phenomenon of Romanticism. Students of literature may find tedious some of Dupré’s summaries and extended quotations of the literature, given that Dupré does not intend to engage in literary criticism. These sections of the text sometimes feel as though they fail to land. But in the end, they serve Dupré’s purposes.

One wonders why little to no attention is paid to Romantic music and visual arts. One would assume that Beethoven, Schubert, Paganini, Turner, and Martin deserve more of Dupré’s time. Of course, Dupré cannot write about all things Romantic. But more attention to these features of the cultural phenomenon would certainly round out the discussion.

The Quest is undoubtedly a successful completion of Dupré’s trilogy. Readable as a companion to the previous installments or as a standalone volume, The Quest shows Dupré’s unparalleled ability to mine the depths of modern sensibilities. In a style that is clear, direct, and often pleasing, Dupré makes a major contribution to Christian reflection on the fundamentals of our contemporary situation. Ours is a “neo-Romantic age,” according to Dupré (294). To the extent that he has accurately characterized our age—and few would argue that he has not—The Quest is an indispensable read for anyone interested in where we are, how we got here, and what we may say about who we are becoming.