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I

In Search of a Definition

I MIGHT BE EXPECTED TO BEGIN, or to attempt to begin, with some kind of definition of Romanticism, or at least some generalisation, in order to make clear what it is that I mean by it. I do not propose to walk into that particular trap. The eminent and wise Professor Northrop Frye points out that whenever anyone embarks on a generalisation on the subject of Romanticism, even something so innocuous, for example, as to say that a new attitude sprang up among English poets towards nature – in Wordsworth and Coleridge, let us say, as against Racine and Pope – somebody will always be found who will produce countervailing evidence from the writings of Homer, Kālidāsa, pre-Muslim Arabian epics, medieval Spanish verse – and finally Racine and Pope themselves. For this reason I do not propose to generalise, but to convey in some other way what it is that I think Romanticism to be.

Indeed, the literature on Romanticism is larger than Romanticism itself, and the literature defining what it is that the literature on Romanticism is concerned with is quite large in its turn. There is a kind of inverted pyramid. It is a dangerous and a confused subject, in which many have lost, I will not say their senses, but at any rate their sense of direction. It is like that dark cave described by Virgil, where all the footsteps lead in one direction; or the cave of Polyphemus – those who enter it never seem to emerge again. It is therefore with some trepidation that I embark upon the subject.

The importance of Romanticism is that it is the largest

recent movement to transform the lives and the thought of the Western world. It seems to me to be the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred, and all the other shifts which have occurred in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appear to me in comparison less important, and at any rate deeply influenced by it.

The history not only of thought, but of consciousness, opinion, action too, of morals, politics, aesthetics, is to a large degree a history of dominant models. Whenever you look at any particular civilisation, you will find that its most characteristic writings and other cultural products reflect a particular pattern of life which those who are responsible for these writings – or paint these paintings, or produce these particular pieces of music – are dominated by. And in order to identify a civilisation, in order to explain what kind of civilisation it is, in order to understand the world in which men of this sort thought and felt and acted, it is important to try, so far as possible, to isolate the dominant pattern which that culture obeys. Consider, for instance, Greek philosophy or Greek literature of the classical age. If you read, say, the philosophy of Plato, you will find that he is dominated by a geometrical or mathematical model. It is clear that his thought operates on lines which are conditioned by the idea that there are certain axiomatic truths, adamant, unbreakable, from which it is possible by severe logic to deduce certain absolutely infallible conclusions; that it is possible to attain to this kind of absolute wisdom by a special method which he recommends; that there is such a thing as absolute knowledge to be obtained in the world, and if only we can attain to this absolute knowledge, of which geometry, indeed mathematics in general, is the nearest example, the most perfect paradigm, we can organise our lives in terms of this knowledge, in terms of these truths, once and for all, in a static manner, needing no further change; and then all suffering, all doubt, all ignorance, all forms of human vice and folly can be expected to disappear from the earth.

This notion that there is somewhere a perfect vision, and that it needs only a certain kind of severe discipline, or a certain kind of method, to attain to this truth, which is analogous, at any rate, to the cold and isolated truths of mathematics – this notion then affects a great many other thinkers in the post-Platonic age: certainly the Renaissance, which had similar ideas, certainly thinkers like Spinoza, thinkers in the eighteenth century, thinkers in the nineteenth century too, who believed it possible to attain to some kind of, if not absolute, at any rate nearly absolute knowledge, and in terms of this to tidy the world up, to create some kind of rational order, in which tragedy, vice and stupidity, which have caused so much destruction in the past, can at last be avoided by the use of carefully acquired information and the application to it of universally intelligible reason.

This is one kind of model – I offer it simply as an example. These models invariably begin by liberating people from error, from confusion, from some kind of unintelligible world which they seek to explain to themselves by means of a model; but they almost invariably end by enslaving those very same people, by failing to explain the whole of experience. They begin as liberators and end in some sort of despotism.

Let us look at another example – a parallel culture, that of the Bible, that of the Jews at a comparable period. You will find a totally different model dominating, a totally different set of ideas, which would have been unintelligible to the Greeks. The notion from which both Judaism and Christianity to a large degree sprang is the notion of family life, the relations of father and son, perhaps the relations of members of a tribe to one another. Such fundamental relationships – in terms of which nature and life are explained – as the love of children for their father, the brotherhood of man, forgiveness, commands issued by a superior to an inferior, the sense of duty, transgression, sin and therefore the need to atone for it – this whole complex of qualities, in terms of which the whole of the universe is explained

by those who created the Bible, and by those who were to a large extent influenced by it, would have been totally unintelligible to the Greeks.

Consider a perfectly familiar psalm, where the psalmist says that ‘When Israel went out of Egypt [...] the sea saw it, and fled: Jordan was driven back. The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs’, and the earth is ordered to ‘Tremble [...] at the presence of the Lord.’ This would have been totally unintelligible to Plato or to Aristotle, because the whole notion of a world which reacts personally to the orders of the Lord, the idea that all relationships, both animate and inanimate, must be interpreted in terms of the relations of human beings, or at any rate in terms of the relations of personalities, in one case divine, in the other case human, is very remote from the Greek conception of what a God was and what his relations were to mankind. Hence the absence among the Greeks of the notion of obligation, hence the absence of the notion of duty, which it is so difficult for people to grasp who read the Greeks through spectacles partly affected by the Jews.

Let me try to convey how strange different models can be, because this is important simply in tracing the history of these transformations of consciousness. Considerable revolutions have occurred in the general outlook of mankind which it is sometimes difficult to retrace, because we swallow them as if they were familiar. Giambattista Vico – the Italian thinker who flourished at the beginning of the eighteenth century, if a man who was totally poor and neglected may be said to have flourished – was perhaps the first to draw our attention to the strangeness of ancient cultures. He points out, for example, that in the quotation ‘Jovis omnia plena’ (‘Everything is full of Jove’), which is the end of a perfectly familiar Latin hexameter, something is said that to us is not wholly intelligible. On the one hand Jupiter or Jove is a large bearded divinity who hurls thunder and lightning. On the other hand, everything – ‘omnia’ – is said to be ‘full of’

this bearded being, which is not on the face of it intelligible. Vico then argues with great imagination and cogency that the view of these ancient peoples, so remote from us, must have been very different from ours for them to have been able to conceive of their divinity not only as a bearded giant commanding the gods and men, but also as something of which the whole heavens could be full.

Let me give a more familiar example. When Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* discusses the subject of friendship, he says, in what is to us a somewhat surprising manner, that there are various kinds of friends. For example there is the friendship which consists in passionate infatuation by one human being with another; and there is also a friendship which consists in business relations, in trading, in buying and selling. The fact that for Aristotle there is nothing strange in saying there are two kinds of friends, that there are people whose whole lives are given to love, or at any rate whose emotions are passionately engaged in love, and on the other hand there are people who sell shoes to one another, and these are species of the same genus, is something to which, as a result, perhaps, of Christianity, or of the Romantic movement, or whatever it may be, we find it rather difficult to acclimatise ourselves.

I give these examples merely in order to convey that these ancient cultures are stranger than we think, and that larger transformations have occurred in the history of human consciousness than an ordinary uncritical reading of the classics would seem to convey. There are of course a great many other examples. The world can be conceived organically – like a tree, in which every part lives for every other part, and through every other part – or mechanistically, perhaps as a result of some scientific model, in which the parts are external to one another, and in which the State, or any other human institution, is regarded as a gadget for the purpose of promoting happiness, or preventing people from doing each other in. These are very different conceptions of

life, and they do belong to different climates of opinion, and are influenced by different considerations.

What happens as a rule is that some subject gains the ascendancy – say physics, or chemistry – and, as a result of the enormous hold which it has upon the imagination of its generation, it is applied in other spheres as well. This happened to sociology in the nineteenth century, it happened to psychology in our own. My thesis is that the Romantic movement was just such a gigantic and radical transformation, after which nothing was ever the same. This is the claim on which I wish to focus.

Where did the Romantic movement take its rise? Certainly not in England, although technically, no doubt, it did – that is what all the historians will tell you. At any rate, that is not where it occurred in its most dramatic form. Here the question arises: When I speak of Romanticism, do I mean something which happens historically, as I appear to be saying, or is it perhaps a permanent frame of mind which is not exclusive to, is not monopolised by, any particular age? Herbert Read and Kenneth Clark¹ have taken up the position that Romanticism is a permanent state of mind which might be found anywhere. Kenneth Clark finds it in some lines of Hadrian's; Herbert Read quotes a great many examples. The baron Seillière, who has written extensively on this subject, quotes Plato and Plotinus and the Greek novelist Heliodorus, and a great many other persons who, in his opinion, were Romantic writers. I do not wish to enter upon this issue – it may be so. The subject with which I myself wish to deal is confined in time. I do not wish to deal with a permanent human attitude, but with a particular transformation which occurred historically, and affects us today. Therefore I propose to confine my attention to what occurred in the second third of the eighteenth century. It occurred not in England, not in France, but for the most part in Germany.

¹ Both previous Mellon Lecturers: see list after index.

The common view of history and historical change gives us this account. We begin with a French *dix-huitième*,¹ an elegant century in which everything begins by being calm and smooth, rules are obeyed in life and in art, there is a general advance of reason, rationality is progressing, the Church is retreating, unreason is yielding to the great attacks upon it of the French *philosophes*. There is peace, there is calm, there is elegant building, there is a belief in the application of universal reason both to human affairs and to artistic practice, to morals, to politics, to philosophy. Then there is a sudden, apparently unaccountable, invasion. Suddenly there is a violent eruption of emotion, enthusiasm. People become interested in Gothic buildings, in introspection. People suddenly become neurotic and melancholy; they begin to admire the unaccountable flight of spontaneous genius. There is a general retreat from this symmetrical, elegant, glassy state of affairs. At the same time other changes occur too. A great revolution breaks out; there is discontent; the King has his head cut off; the Terror begins.

It is not quite clear what these two revolutions have to do with each other. As we read history, there is a general sense that something catastrophic occurred towards the end of the eighteenth century. At first things appeared to go comparatively smoothly, then there was a sudden breakthrough. Some welcome it, some denounce it. Those who denounce it suppose this to have been an elegant and peaceful age: those who did not know it did not know the true *douceur de vivre*,² as Talleyrand said. Others say it was an artificial and hypocritical age, and that the Revolution ushered in a reign of greater justice, greater humanity, greater freedom, greater understanding of man for man. However that may be, the question is: What is the relation of the so-called Romantic revolution – the sudden breakthrough in the realms

¹ 'Eighteenth [century]'.
² 'Sweetness of living.'

of art and morals of this new and turbulent attitude – and the revolution which is normally known as the French Revolution? Were the people who danced upon the ruins of the Bastille, the people who cut off the head of Louis XVI, the same persons as those who were affected by the sudden cult of genius, or the sudden breakthrough of emotionalism of which we are told, or the sudden disturbance and turbulence which flooded the Western world? Apparently not. Certainly the principles in the name of which the French Revolution was fought were principles of universal reason, of order, of justice, not at all connected with the sense of uniqueness, the profound emotional introspection, the sense of the differences of things, dissimilarities rather than similarities, with which the Romantic movement is usually associated.

What about Rousseau? Rousseau is of course quite correctly assigned to the Romantic movement as, in a sense, one of its fathers. But the Rousseau who was responsible for the ideas of Robespierre, the Rousseau who was responsible for the ideas of the French Jacobins, is not the Rousseau, it seems to me, who has an obvious connection with Romanticism. That Rousseau is the Rousseau who wrote the *Social Contract*, which is a typically classical treatise that speaks of the return of man to those original, primary principles which all men have in common; the reign of universal reason, which unites men, as opposed to emotions, which divide them; the reign of universal justice and universal peace as against the conflicts and the turbulence and the disturbances which tear human hearts from their minds and divide men against themselves.

So it is difficult to see what the relation is of this great Romantic upheaval to the political revolution. Then there is the Industrial Revolution too, which cannot be regarded as irrelevant. After all, ideas do not breed ideas. Some social and economic factors are surely responsible for great upheavals in human consciousness. We have a problem on our hands. There is the Industrial

Revolution, there is the great French political revolution under classical auspices, and there is the Romantic revolution. Take even the great art of the French Revolution. If, for example, you look at the great revolutionary paintings of David, it is difficult to connect him specifically with the Romantic revolution. The paintings of David have a kind of eloquence, the austere Jacobin eloquence of a return to Sparta, a return to Rome; they communicate a protest against the frivolity and the superficiality of life which is connected with the preachings of such men as Machiavelli or Savonarola or Mably, people who denounced the frivolity of their age in the name of eternal ideals of a universal kind, whereas the Romantic movement, we are told by all its historians, was a passionate protest against universality of any kind. Therefore there is, *prima facie* at any rate, a problem in understanding what happened.

In order to give some sense of what I regard this great breakthrough as being, why I think that in those years, say 1760 to 1830, something transforming occurred, that there was a great break in European consciousness – in order to give you at any rate some preliminary evidence of why I think there is even a case for saying this, let me give an example. Suppose you were travelling about Western Europe, say in the 1820s, and suppose you spoke, in France, to the avant-garde young men who were friends of Victor Hugo, *Hugolâtres*.¹ Suppose you went to Germany and spoke there to the people who had once been visited by Mme de Staël, who had interpreted the German soul to the French. Suppose you had met the Schlegel brothers, who were great theorists of Romanticism, or one or two of the friends of Goethe in Weimar, such as the fabulist and poet Tieck, or other persons connected with the Romantic movement, and their followers in the universities, students, young men, painters, sculptors, who were deeply influenced by the work of these poets, these

¹ 'Hugolators' by analogy with 'idolators'.

dramatists, these critics. Suppose you had spoken in England to someone who had been influenced by, say, Coleridge, or above all by Byron – anyone influenced by Byron, whether in England or France or Italy, or beyond the Rhine, or beyond the Elbe. Suppose you had spoken to these persons. You would have found that their ideal of life was approximately of the following kind.

The values to which they attached the highest importance were such values as integrity, sincerity, readiness to sacrifice one's life to some inner light, dedication to some ideal for which it is worth sacrificing all that one is, for which it is worth both living and dying. You would have found that they were not primarily interested in knowledge, or in the advance of science, not interested in political power, not interested in happiness, not interested, above all, in adjustment to life, in finding your place in society, in living at peace with your government, even in loyalty to your king, or to your republic. You would have found that common sense, moderation, was very far from their thoughts. You would have found that they believed in the necessity of fighting for your beliefs to the last breath in your body, and you would have found that they believed in the value of martyrdom as such, no matter what the martyrdom was martyrdom for. You would have found that they believed that minorities were more holy than majorities, that failure was nobler than success, which had something shoddy and something vulgar about it. The very notion of idealism, not in its philosophical sense, but in the ordinary sense in which we use it, that is to say the state of mind of a man who is prepared to sacrifice a great deal for principles or for some conviction, who is not prepared to sell out, who is prepared to go to the stake for something which he believes, because he believes in it – this attitude was relatively new. What people admired was wholeheartedness, sincerity, purity of soul, the ability and readiness to dedicate yourself to your ideal, no matter what it was.

No matter what it was: that is the important thing. Suppose

you had a conversation in the sixteenth century with somebody fighting in the great religious wars which tore Europe apart at that period, and suppose you said to a Catholic of that period, engaged in hostilities, 'Of course these Protestants believe what is false; of course to believe what they believe is to court perdition; of course they are dangerous to the salvation of human souls, than which there is nothing more important; but they are so sincere, they die so readily for their cause, their integrity is so splendid, one must yield a certain meed of admiration for the moral dignity and sublimity of people who are prepared to do that.' Such a sentiment would have been unintelligible. Anyone who really knew, supposed themselves to know, the truth, say a Catholic who believed in the truths preached to him by the Church, would have known that persons able to put the whole of themselves into the theory and practice of falsehood were simply dangerous persons, and that the more sincere they were, the more dangerous, the more mad.

No Christian knight would have supposed, when he fought against the Muslim, that he was expected to admire the purity and the sincerity with which the paynims believed in their absurd doctrines. No doubt if you were a decent person, and you killed a brave enemy, you were not obliged to spit upon his corpse. You took the line that it was a pity that so much courage (which was a universally admired quality), so much ability, so much devotion should have been expended on a cause so palpably absurd or dangerous. But you would not have said, 'It matters little what these people believe, what matters is the state of mind in which they believe it. What matters is that they did not sell out, that they were men of integrity. These are people I can respect. If they had come over to our side simply in order to save themselves, that would have been a very self-seeking, a very prudent, a very contemptible form of action.' This is the state of mind in which people must say, 'If I believe one thing, and you believe another, then it is important that we should fight each other. Perhaps it is

good that you should kill me, or that I should kill you; perhaps, in a duel, it is best that we should kill each other; but the worst of all possible things is compromise, because that means we have both betrayed the ideal which is within us.’

Martyrdom, of course, was always admired, but martyrdom for the truth. Christians admired martyrs because they were witnesses to the truth. If they were witnesses to falsehood there was nothing admirable about them: perhaps something to be pitied, certainly nothing to be admired. By the 1820s you find an outlook in which the state of mind, the motive, is more important than the consequence, the intention is more important than the effect. Purity of heart, integrity, devotion, dedication – all these things which we ourselves admire without much difficulty, which have entered into the very texture of our normal moral attitudes, became more or less commonplace, first among minorities; then gradually they spread outwards.

Let me give an example of what I mean by this shift. Take Voltaire’s play on Muhammad. Voltaire was not particularly interested in Muhammad, and the play was really intended, no doubt, as an attack upon the Church. Nevertheless Muhammad emerges as a superstitious, cruel and fanatical monster, who crushes all efforts at freedom, at justice, at reason, and is therefore to be denounced as an enemy of all that Voltaire held most important: toleration, justice, truth, civilisation. Then consider what, very much later, Carlyle has to say. Muhammad is described by Carlyle – who is a highly characteristic, if somewhat exaggerated, representative of the Romantic movement – in a book called *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, in the course of which a great many heroes are enumerated and analysed. Muhammad is described as ‘a fiery mass of Life cast up from the great bosom of Nature herself’. He is a man of blazing sincerity and power, and therefore to be admired; what he is compared to, what is not liked, is the eighteenth century, which is warped and useless, which to Carlyle, as he puts it, is a ‘withered,

[...] second-hand century'. Carlyle is not in the least interested in the truths of the Koran, he does not begin to suppose that the Koran contains anything which he, Carlyle, could be expected to believe. What he admires Muhammad for is that he is an elemental force, that he lives an intense life, that he has a great many followers with him; that something elemental occurred, a tremendous phenomenon, that there was a great and moving episode in the life of mankind, which Muhammad instantiates.

The importance of Muhammad is his character and not his beliefs. The question of whether what Muhammad believed was true or false would have appeared to Carlyle perfectly irrelevant. He says, in the course of the same essays, 'Dante's sublime Catholicism [...] has to be torn asunder by a Luther; Shakespeare's noble feudalism [...] has to end in a French Revolution.' Why do they have to do this? Because it does not matter whether Dante's sublime Catholicism is or is not true. The point is that it is a great movement, it has lasted its time, and now something equally powerful, equally earnest, equally sincere, equally deep, equally earth-shaking must take its place. The importance of the French Revolution is that it made a great dent upon the consciences of mankind; that the men who made the French Revolution were deeply in earnest, and not simply smiling hypocrites, as Carlyle thought Voltaire to be. This is an attitude which is, I will not say brand new, because it is too dangerous to say that, but at any rate sufficiently new to be worthy of attention, and whatever it was that caused it, occurred, it seems to me, somewhere between the years 1760 and 1830. It began in Germany, and grew apace.

Let us consider another example of the sort of thing I mean – the attitude towards tragedy. Previous generations assumed that tragedy was always due to some kind of error. Someone got something wrong, someone made a mistake. Either it was a moral error, or it was an intellectual error. It might have been avoidable, or it might have been unavoidable. For the Greeks, tragedy was error which the Gods sent upon you, which no man

subject to them could perhaps have avoided; but, in principle, if these men had been omniscient, they would not have committed those grave errors which they did commit, and therefore would not have brought misfortunes upon themselves. If Oedipus had known that Laius was his father, he would not have murdered him. This is true even of the tragedies of Shakespeare, to a certain degree. If Othello had known that Desdemona was innocent, none of the denouement of that particular tragedy could have occurred. Therefore tragedy is founded upon the inevitable, or perhaps avoidable, lack of something in men – knowledge, skill, moral courage, ability to live, to do the right thing when you see it, or whatever it may be. Better men – morally stronger, intellectually more adept, above all omniscient persons, who perhaps also had enough power – could always avoid that which in fact is the substance of tragedy.

This is not so for the early nineteenth century, or even for the late eighteenth. If you read Schiller's tragedy *The Robbers*, to which I shall return again, you will find that Karl Moor, the hero-villain, is a man who avenges himself upon a detestable society by becoming a brigand and committing a number of atrocious murders. He is punished for it, in the end, but if you ask 'Who is to blame? Is it the side from which he comes? Are its values totally corrupt, or totally insane? Which of the two sides is right?' there is no answer to be obtained in that tragedy, and the very question would have appeared to Schiller shallow and blind.

Here there is a collision, perhaps an unavoidable collision, between sets of values which are incompatible. Previous generations supposed that all good things could be reconciled. This is true no longer. If you read Büchner's tragedy *The Death of Danton*, in which Robespierre finally causes the deaths of Danton and Desmoulins in the course of the Revolution, and you ask 'Was Robespierre wrong to do this?', the answer is no; the tragedy is such that Danton, although he was a sincere revolutionary who committed certain errors, did not deserve to die, and yet

Robespierre was perfectly right in putting him to death. There is a collision here of what Hegel afterwards called ‘good with good’. It is due not to error, but to some kind of conflict of an unavoidable kind, of loose elements wandering about the earth, of values which cannot be reconciled. What matters is that people should dedicate themselves to these values with all that is in them. If they do that, they are suitable heroes for tragedy. If they do not do so, then they are philistines, then they are members of the bourgeoisie, then they are no good and not worth writing about.

The figure who dominates the nineteenth century as an image is the tousled figure of Beethoven in his garret. Beethoven is a man who does what is in him. He is poor, he is ignorant, he is boorish. His manners are bad, he knows little, and he is perhaps not a very interesting figure, apart from the inspiration which drives him forward. But he has not sold out. He sits in his garret and he creates. He creates in accordance with the light which is within him, and that is all that a man should do; that is what makes a man a hero. Even if he is not a genius like Beethoven, even if, like the hero of Balzac’s *Le Chef d’oeuvre inconnu*, ‘The Unknown Masterpiece’, he is mad, and covers his canvas with paints, so that in the end there is nothing intelligible at all, just a fearful confusion of unintelligible and irrational paint – even then this figure is worthy of more than pity, he is a man who has dedicated himself to an ideal, who has thrown away the world, who represents the most heroic, the most self-sacrificing, the most splendid qualities which a human being can have. Gautier, in the famous preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* in 1835, defending the notion of art for art’s sake, says, addressing the critics in general, and the public too, ‘No, imbeciles! No! Fools and cretins that you are, a book will not make a plate of soup; a novel is not a pair of boots; a sonnet is not a syringe; a drama is not a railway [...] no, two hundred thousand times, no.’ Gautier’s point is that the old defence of art (quite apart from the particular school of social utility which he is attacking – Saint-Simon, the Utilitarians

and the socialists), the notion that the purpose of art is to give pleasure to a large number of persons, or even to a small number of carefully trained cognoscenti, is not valid. The purpose of art is to produce beauty, and if the artist alone perceives that his object is beautiful, that is a sufficient end in life.

Clearly something occurred to have shifted consciousness to this degree, away from the notion that there are universal truths, universal canons of art, that all human activities were meant to terminate in getting things right, and that the criteria of getting things right were public, were demonstrable, that all intelligent men by applying their intellects would discover them – away from that to a wholly different attitude towards life, and towards action. Something clearly occurred. When we ask what, we are told that there was a great turning towards emotionalism, that there was a sudden interest in the primitive and the remote – the remote in time, and the remote in place – that there was an outbreak of craving for the infinite. Something is said about ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’; something is said – but it is not clear what this has to do with any of the things which I have just mentioned – about Scott’s novels, Schubert’s songs, Delacroix, the rise of State-worship, and German propaganda in favour of economic self-sufficiency; also about superhuman qualities, admiration of wild genius, outlaws, heroes, aestheticism, self-destruction.

What have all these things in common? If we try to discover, a somewhat startling prospect greets our view. Let me offer some definitions of Romanticism which I have culled from the writings of some of the most eminent persons who have written on the subject; these show that the subject is by no means easy.

Stendhal says that the Romantic is the modern and interesting, classicism is the old and the dull. This is not perhaps quite as simple as it sounds: what he means is that Romanticism is a matter of understanding the forces which move in your own life, as opposed to some escape towards something obsolete. However,



Portrait of Frederic Chopin by Eugène Delacroix

what he actually says, in the book on Racine and Shakespeare, is what I have just enunciated. But his contemporary Goethe says that Romanticism is disease, it is the weak, the sickly, the battle-cry of a school of wild poets and Catholic reactionaries; whereas classicism is strong, fresh, gay, sound, like Homer and the Song of the Niebelungs. Nietzsche says it is not a disease but

a therapy, a cure for a disease. Sismondi, a Swiss critic of considerable imagination, though not perhaps altogether friendly to Romanticism, in spite of being a friend of Mme de Staël, says that Romanticism is a union of love, religion and chivalry. But Friedrich von Gentz, who was Metternich's chief agent at this time, and a precise contemporary of Sismondi, says that it is one of the heads of a three-headed Hydra, the other two heads being reform and revolution; it is in fact a left-wing menace, a menace to religion, to tradition and to the past which must be stamped out. The young French Romantics, 'les jeunes-France', echo this by saying 'Le romantisme c'est la Révolution.' *Révolution* against what? Apparently against everything.

Heine says Romanticism is the passion-flower sprung from the blood of Christ, a re-awakening of the poetry of the sleep-walking Middle Ages, dreaming spires that look at you with the deep dolorous eyes of grinning spectres. Marxists would add that it was indeed an escape from the horrors of the Industrial Revolution, and Ruskin would agree, saying it was a contrast of the beautiful past with the frightful and the monotonous present; this is a modification of Heine's view, but not all that different from it. But Taine says that Romanticism is a bourgeois revolt against the aristocracy after 1789; Romanticism is the expression of the energy and force of the new arrivistes – the exact opposite. It is the expression of the pushing, vigorous powers of the new bourgeoisie against the old, decent, conservative values of society and history. It is the expression not of weakness, nor of despair, but of brutal optimism.

Friedrich Schlegel, the greatest harbinger, the greatest herald and prophet of Romanticism that ever lived, says there is in man a terrible unsatisfied desire to soar into infinity, a feverish longing to break through the narrow bonds of individuality. Sentiments not altogether unlike this can be found in Coleridge and indeed in Shelley too. But Ferdinand Brunetière, towards the end of the century, says that it is literary egotism, it is stressing of

individuality at the expense of a larger world, it is the opposite of self-transcendence, it is sheer self-assertion; and the baron Seillière says yes, and egomania and primitivism; and Irving Babbitt echoes this.

Friedrich Schlegel's brother August Wilhelm Schlegel and Mme de Staël agree that Romanticism comes from the Romance nations, or at least the Romance languages, that it really comes from a modification of the verses of the Provençal troubadours; but Renan says it is Celtic. Gaston Paris says it is Breton; Seillière says it comes from a mixture of Plato and pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Joseph Nadler, a learned German critic, says that Romanticism is really the homesickness of those Germans who lived between the Elbe and the Niemen – their homesickness for the old Central Germany from which they once came, the day-dreams of exiles and colonists. Eichendorff says it is Protestant nostalgia for the Catholic Church. But Chateaubriand, who did not live between the Elbe and the Niemen, and therefore did not experience these emotions, says it is the secret and inexpressible delight of a soul playing with itself: 'I speak everlastingly of myself.' Joseph Aynard says it is the will to love something, an attitude or an emotion towards others, and not towards oneself, the very opposite of the will to power. Middleton Murry says Shakespeare was essentially a Romantic writer, and adds that all great writers since Rousseau have been Romantic. But the eminent Marxist critic Georg Lukács says no great writers are Romantic, least of all Scott, Hugo and Stendhal.

If we consider these quotations from men who after all deserve to be read, who are in other respects profound and brilliant writers on many subjects, it is clear that there is some difficulty in discovering the common element in all these generalisations. That is why Northrop Frye was so very wise to warn against it. All these competing definitions have never, so far as I know, really been the subject of a protest by anyone; they have never incurred that degree of critical wrath which might have been

unleashed against anyone who had really produced definitions or generalisations which were universally regarded as absurd and irrelevant.

The next step is to see what characteristics have been called Romantic by writers on this subject, by critics. A very peculiar result emerges. There is such variety among the examples I have accumulated that the difficulty of the subject which I was unwise enough to choose seems even more extreme.

Romanticism is the primitive, the untutored, it is youth, the exuberant sense of life of the natural man, but it is also pallor, fever, disease, decadence, the *maladie du siècle*, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, the Dance of Death, indeed Death itself. It is Shelley's dome of many-coloured glass, and it is also his white radiance of eternity. It is the confused teeming fullness and richness of life – *Fülle des Lebens* – inexhaustible multiplicity, turbulence, violence, conflict, chaos, but also it is peace, oneness with the great 'I Am', harmony with the natural order, the music of the spheres, dissolution in the eternal all-containing spirit. It is the strange, the exotic, the grotesque, the mysterious, the supernatural, ruins, moonlight, enchanted castles, hunting horns, elves, giants, griffins, falling water, the old mill on the Floss, darkness and the powers of darkness, phantoms, vampires, nameless terror, the irrational, the unutterable. Also it is the familiar, the sense of one's unique tradition, joy in the smiling aspect of everyday nature, and the accustomed sights and sounds of contented, simple, rural folk – the sane and happy wisdom of rosy-cheeked sons of the soil. It is the ancient, the historic, it is Gothic cathedrals, mists of antiquity, ancient roots and the old order with its unanalysable qualities, its profound but inexpressible loyalties, the impalpable, the imponderable. Also it is the pursuit of novelty, revolutionary change, concern with the fleeting present, desire to live in the moment, rejection of knowledge, past and future, the pastoral idyll of happy innocence, joy in the passing instant, a sense of timelessness. It is nostalgia, it is reverie, it is intoxicating dreams,

it is sweet melancholy and bitter melancholy, solitude, the sufferings of exile, the sense of alienation, roaming in remote places, especially the East, and in remote times, especially the Middle Ages. But also it is happy co-operation in a common creative effort, the sense of forming part of a Church, a class, a party, a tradition, a great and all-containing symmetrical hierarchy, knights and retainers, the ranks of the Church, organic social ties, mystic unity, one faith, one land, one blood, 'la terre et les morts',¹ as Barrès said, the great society of the dead and the living and the yet unborn. It is the Toryism of Scott and Southey and Wordsworth, and it is the radicalism of Shelley, Büchner and Stendhal. It is Chateaubriand's aesthetic medievalism, and it is Michelet's loathing of the Middle Ages. It is Carlyle's worship of authority, and Hugo's hatred of authority. It is extreme nature mysticism, and extreme anti-naturalist aestheticism. It is energy, force, will, life, *étalage du moi*;² it is also self-torture, self-annihilation, suicide. It is the primitive, the unsophisticated, the bosom of nature, green fields, cow-bells, murmuring brooks, the infinite blue sky. No less, however, it is also dandyism, the desire to dress up, red waistcoats, green wigs, blue hair, which the followers of people like Gérard de Nerval wore in Paris at a certain period. It is the lobster which Nerval led about on a string in the streets of Paris. It is wild exhibitionism, eccentricity, it is the battle of Ernani, it is ennui, it is *taedium vitae*,³ it is the death of Sardanapalus, whether painted by Delacroix, or written about by Berlioz or Byron. It is the convulsion of great empires, wars, slaughter and the crashing of worlds. It is the Romantic hero – the rebel, *l'homme fatal*,⁴ the damned soul, the Corsairs, Manfreds, Giaours, Laras, Cains, all the population of Byron's heroic poems. It is Melmoth, it is Jean Sbogar, all the outcasts and Ishmaels as well as the golden-hearted courtesans and the

¹ 'The land and the dead'.

² 'Display of myself'.

³ 'Weariness of life'.

⁴ 'The deadly man'.



Hector Berlioz by Émile Signol

noble-hearted convicts of nineteenth-century fiction. It is drinking out of the human skull, it is Berlioz who said he wanted to climb Vesuvius in order to commune with a kindred soul. It is Satanic revels, cynical irony, diabolical laughter, black heroes, but also Blake's vision of God and his angels, the great Christian society, the eternal order, and 'the starry heavens' which can scarce 'express the infinite thoughts and emotions that fill the soul of a Christian'. It is, in short, unity and multiplicity. It is fidelity to the particular, in the paintings of nature for example, and also mysterious tantalising vagueness of outline. It is beauty and ugliness. It is art for art's sake, and art as an instrument of

social salvation. It is strength and weakness, individualism and collectivism, purity and corruption, revolution and reaction, peace and war, love of life and love of death.

It is perhaps not very surprising that, faced with this, A. O. Lovejoy, who is certainly the most scrupulous and one of the most illuminating scholars who ever dealt with the history of the ideas of the last two centuries, approached a condition nearing despair. He unravelled as many strands of Romantic thought as he was able to, and not only found that some of them contradict the others, which is patently true, and that some are totally irrelevant to the others, but he went further. He took two specimens of what nobody would deny to be Romanticism, for example, primitivism and eccentricity – dandyism – and asked what they had in common. Primitivism, which began in English verse and to some extent in English prose at the beginning of the eighteenth century, celebrates the noble savage, the simple life, the irregular patterns of spontaneous action, as against the corrupt sophistication and Alexandrine verse of a highly sophisticated society. It is an attempt to demonstrate that there is a natural law which can be discovered best in the untutored heart of the uncorrupted native, or the uncorrupted child. What, asks Lovejoy quite intelligibly, has this in common with red waistcoats, blue hair, green wigs, absinthe, death, suicide and the general eccentricity of the followers of Nerval and Gautier? He concludes by saying that he really does not see what there is in common, and one can sympathise with him. One might say, perhaps, that there is an air of revolt in both, that both have revolted against some kind of civilisation, one in order to go to some Robinson Crusoe island, there to commune with nature and live among uncorrupted simple people, and the other in pursuit of some kind of violent aestheticism and dandyism. But mere revolt, mere denunciation of corruption cannot be Romantic. We do not regard the Hebrew prophets or Savonarola or even Methodist preachers as particularly Romantic. This is too wide of the mark.

One does therefore have a certain sympathy with Lovejoy's despair.

Let me quote a passage which Lovejoy's disciple George Boas wrote apropos of this:

[A]fter the discrimination of the Romanticisms made by Lovejoy, there ought to be no further discussion of what Romanticism *really* was. There happen to have been a variety of aesthetic doctrines, some of which were logically related to others and some of which were not, all called by the same name. But that fact does not imply they all had a common essence, any more than the fact that hundreds of people are called John Smith means that they are all of the same parentage. This is perhaps the most common and misleading error arising from the confusion of ideas and words. One could speak for hours about it alone and perhaps should.

I should like to relieve your fears immediately by saying that I do not propose to do this. But at the same time I think that both Lovejoy and Boas, eminent scholars though they are, and great though their contribution has been towards illumination of thought, are in this instance mistaken. There *was* a Romantic movement; it did have something which was central to it; it did create a great revolution in consciousness; and it is important to discover what this is.

One can of course give up the whole game. One can say, like Valéry, that words like *Romanticism* and *classicism*, words like *humanism* and *naturalism*, are not names with which one can operate at all. 'One cannot get drunk, one cannot quench one's thirst, with labels on bottles.' There is much to be said for this point of view. At the same time, unless we do use some generalisations it is impossible to trace the course of human history. Therefore, difficult as it may be, it is important to find out what it was that caused this enormous revolution in human consciousness which occurred in those centuries. There are

people who, faced with this plethora of evidence which I have attempted to collect, may feel some sympathy for the late Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, who said with typical British breeziness, ‘The whole pother about [the difference between classicism and Romanticism] amounts to nothing that need trouble a healthy man.’

I cannot deny that I do not share this point of view. It appears to me to be excessively defeatist. Therefore I shall do my best to explain what in my view the Romantic movement fundamentally came to. The only sane and sensible way of approaching it, at least the only way that I have ever found to be at all helpful, is by slow and patient historical method; by looking at the beginning of the eighteenth century and considering what the situation was then, and then considering what the factors were which undermined it, one by one, and what the particular combination or confluence of factors was which, by the later part of the century, caused what appears to me to be the greatest transformation of Western consciousness, certainly in our time.

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