MODERNISM

CRITICAL CONCEPTS
IN LITERARY
AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Edited by
TIM MIDDLETON

MODERNISM

Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies

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MODERNISM AND ROMANTICISM

Gabriel Josipovici

Source: Gabriel Josipovici, *The World and the Book: A Study of Modern Fiction*, London, Macmillan, 1971, pp. 179–200.

> 'To see something new we must make something new.'
>
> Lichtenberg

The problem I want to deal with in this chapter can be formulated quite simply: the years between 1885 and 1914 saw the birth of the modern movement in the arts. What are the specific features of that movement and how are we to account for its emergence?

Two points need to be made before we start. First of all we must be clear that in one sense our inquiry is absurd. There is no physical entity called 'modernism' which we can extract from the variety of individual works of art and hold up for inspection. Every modern artist of any worth has achieved what he has precisely because he has found his own individual voice and because this voice is distinct from those around him. Yet it cannot be denied that something *did* happen to art, to all the arts, some time around the turn of the century, and that Proust, Joyce, Picasso, Klee, Schönberg and Stravinsky, for all their manifest differences, do have something in common.

The second point is more in the nature of a reminder of a historical fact which, if rightly interpreted, should serve as a guide and a warning throughout this investigation. Although the First World War effectively marks the break between the world of the nineteenth century and our own, both in the minds of those who lived through it and for those of us who only read about it in the history books, the modern revolution in the arts did not take place during the war, or immediately after it, as one might have expected, but a decade or so *before* it. This should make us wary of too facile an identification of art with the culture and the society out of which it springs.

* * *

1

The modern movement in the arts cannot be understood in isolation. It must be seen as a reaction to the decadent Romanticism which was prevalent in Europe at the turn of the century. Some of the apologists of modernism, such as T. E. Hulme, tried to argue that the movement was nothing other than a wholesale rejection of Romanticism and all that that stood for, and a return to a new classicism. Looking back at those pre-war decades from our vantage point in the mid-century, however, we can now see that the situation was a good deal more complex than Hulme suggests; that it was more a question of redefining Romanticism, of stressing some of those aspects of it which the nineteenth century had neglected and discarding some of those it had most strongly emphasised, rather than rejecting it outright. If we are to understand what the founders of modern art were doing it will be necessary to try and grasp the premises and implications of Romanticism itself.

Romanticism was first and foremost a movement of liberation[1] – liberation from religious tradition, from political absolutism, from a hierarchical social system and from a universe conceived on the model of the exact sciences. Reason and scientific laws, the Romantics felt, might allow man to control his environment, but they formed a sieve through which the living breathing individual slipped, leaving behind only the dead matter of generality. What man had in common with other men, what this landscape had in common with other landscapes, was the least important thing about them. What was important was the uniqueness of men and the uniqueness of each object in the world around us, be it a leaf, a sparrow or a mountain range. There were moments, they felt, when man is far from the distractions of the city and of society, and when the reasoning, conceptualising mind is still, when life seems suddenly to reveal itself in all its mystery and terror. In such moments man felt himself restored to his true self, able to grasp the meaning of life and of his own existence. It is to experience and express such moments, both in our lives and in our art, that we should perpetually strive, for these are the moments when we throw off the shackles of generality and are restored to our unique selves.

The function of art thus becomes that of exploring those areas of the mind and of the universe which lie beyond the confines of rational thought and of ordinary consciousness, and the hero of Romantic art becomes none other than the artist himself, who is both the explorer of this unknown realm and the priestly mediator between it and his audience. Something of this is suggested by August Wilhelm Schlegel, who was probably responsible for the introduction of the word 'Romantic' as a description of the age, when, in his lectures on dramatic art and literature of 1808–9, he made the following comparison:

> Ancient poetry and art is a rhythmical *nomos*, a harmonious promulgation of the eternal legislation of a beautifully ordered world mirroring the eternal Ideas of things. Romantic poetry, on the other

> hand, is the expression of a secret longing for the chaos . . . which lies hidden in the very womb of orderly creation . . . [Greek art] is simpler, cleaner, more like nature in the independent perfection of its separate works; [Romantic art], in spite of its fragmentary appearance, is nearer to the mystery of the universe.[2]

Schlegel, it is true, is not here talking only of the nineteenth century; he is contrasting the whole 'modern' or Christian era with the classical age of Greece and Rome. But his stress on the transcending impulse of Romanticism, on the aspiration towards the mystery of the universe, is taken up by Baudelaire several decades later when, in a discussion of the 'Salon' of 1846, he writes: 'Romanticism means modern art – that is to say, intimateness, spirituality, colour, aspiration towards the infinite, expressed by every means known to art.' And yet already here a curious contradiction begins to emerge, a contradiction which lies at the heart of the whole Romantic endeavour, and whose nature was to determine its future course. Two quotations, the first from Rousseau and the second from Schleiermacher, will bring it out into the open. In his *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* Rousseau tells how he came to after a minor accident to find himself lying in the middle of the countryside:

> Night was falling. I perceived the sky, a few stars, and a little verdure. This first sensation was a wonderful moment; I could still only feel myself through it. In that instant I was born to life, and it seemed to me that I filled with my frail existence all the objects I perceived. Entirely within the present, I remembered nothing; I had no distinct notion of my individuality, not the least idea of what had just happened to me; I knew neither who nor where I was: I felt neither hurt, nor fear, nor anxiety.[3]

And Schleiermacher, in his *Speeches on Religion*:

> I am lying in the bosom of the infinite universe, I am at this moment its soul, because I feel all its force and its infinite life as my own. It is at this moment my own body, because I penetrate all its limbs as if they were my own, and its innermost nerves move like my own. . . . Try out of love for the universe to give up your own life. Strive already here to destroy your own individuality and to live in the One and in the All . . . fused with the Universe. . . .[4]

Romanticism had begun as a movement of rebellion against the arbitrary authorities of the eighteenth century and its abstract laws, a rebellion undertaken in the name of the freedom of the individual. But this freedom, which of course involves the suppression of the tyrannical intellect, in fact turns

out to be synonymous with the loss of individuality. 'In that instant I was born to life', writes Rousseau. The world around him soaks into his body, he becomes one with it and in so doing gains a sense of his own uniqueness, while Schleiermacher too feels the universe as if it were his own body. But this feeling is also one of the loss of self – 'I did not know who I was', 'Strive already here to destroy your own individuality . . .'. The paradox is there: the ultimate freedom, according to the Romantic logic, can only be death.

Where consciousness itself is felt to be an imprisoning factor, keeping man from his true self, freedom must lie in the transcending of consciousness. Yet the only time we escape from it for more than a brief moment is in sleep, or under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or else in madness. And the only total escape is death. Hence the key place accorded by Romanticism to dreams, to various forms of addiction, to madness, and to the death-wish. And in all these cases the result is, of course, ambiguous. The freedom from consciousness and from the bonds of society may result in deeper insight, but it results also in rendering the individual more vulnerable, more prone to destruction from outside as well as from within. Hence the general tone of Romantic art and literature is one of melancholy gloom, for there seems to be no way of resolving the paradox.

This tension between freedom and annihilation is even easier to discern in the forms of art than in its contents. The task of the poet, as the Romantics saw it, was to communicate those moments of visionary intensity which he experienced, moments in which the meaning and value of life seemed to emerge. But the poet's only means of expression is language, and language belongs by definition to the realm of consciousness and social intercourse. For language, as Plato had already noted, only exists at a certain degree of abstraction and universality; it takes for granted that there is some sort of social agreement among the users of a language. But if you feel that what is important is the uniqueness of this tree or that man or this experience – then how are words going to help you to convey this uniqueness? This of course has always been one of the problems of art, but with the Romantics it comes right into the foreground of their consciousness. The Romantic poet finds himself struggling to express by means of language precisely that which it lies beyond the power of language to express. He becomes a man desperately striving to escape from his own shadow.

Only one poet in the nineteenth century was fully aware of the implications of the Romantic endeavour and was also prepared to accept and overcome them. In Rimbaud's famous letter to Paul Demeny of 15 May 1871 we can see that he had fully understood the problem and had decided on a radical solution:

> Thus the poet is truly a stealer of fire.
>
> He is the spokesman of humanity, even of the animals; he will have to make men feel, touch, hear his creations. If what he brings back

> from *down there* has form, he will bring forth form; if it is formless, he will bring forth formlessness. A language has to be found – for that matter, every word being an idea, the time of the universal language will come! One has to be an academician – deader than a fossil – to compile a dictionary in any language. Weak-minded men, starting by *thinking about* the first letter of the alphabet, would soon be overtaken by madness!
>
> This [new] language will be of the soul, for the soul, summing up everything, smells, sounds, colours; thought latching on to thought and pulling. The poet would define the quantity of the unknown awakening in the universal soul in his time: he would produce more than the formulation of his thought, the measurement *of his march towards Progress*! An enormity who has become normal, absorbed by everyone, he would really be *a multiplier of progress*!

The failure of this ideal can be traced through the poems themselves, and it forms the explicit subject-matter of *Une Saison en enfer*. And, indeed, how could Rimbaud succeed? What he desires is not communication but communion, the direct and total contact of one person with another through a language so charged that it will act without needing to pass by way of the interpreting mind at all; in other words, a language that is not conventional but natural. But, as we have seen, such a wish can never be more than a Utopian dream, since to give words the meanings I want them to have regardless of their dictionary definitions is tantamount to abolishing language altogether. When Rimbaud recognised this, with admirable logic he gave up writing altogether.

But just because he was so ready to push the premises of Romanticism to their ultimate conclusion, Rimbaud remains one of the key figures of the nineteenth century, marking forever one of the two poles within which modern art is to move. His contemporaries, both in England and in France (Mallarmé excepted), chose a somewhat less arduous and therefore less interesting path. They tried to solve the problem by making their verse approximate as closely as possible to their conception of music, since music seemed to them to be the ideal artistic language, with none of the disadvantages of speech. To this end they made their verse as mellifluous as possible, stressing its incantatory qualities, smoothing out all harshness of diction, minimising its referential content, and rigidly excluding all forms of wit and humour for fear these would break their fragile spell. The result was aptly described by Eliot in his essay on Swinburne:

> Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified. They are identified in the verse of Swinburne solely because the object has ceased to exist, because the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning, because language,

> uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment.[5]

As with Rimbaud, the normal function of language is denied and words take on an independent meaning. But here the meaning is not just independent of general usage, it is no longer under the poet's control at all. The result is not revelation but empty cliché, not the articulation of what lies beyond the confines of consciousness and rationality but simple reflex, the verbal equivalent of the canine dribble:

> Before the beginning of years
> There came to the making of man
> Time with a gift of tears;
> Grief with a glass that ran. . . .

Or:

> O prêtresse élevant sous le laurieur verdâtre
> Une eau d'antique pleurs dans le creux de tes mains,
> Tes yeux sacrés feront resplendir mes chemins,
> Tes mains couronneront de cedre un jeune prêtre. . . .

For language, as we have seen, has a way of getting its own back on those who try to step over it in this manner. Just as the Romantic dreamer found that he escaped from the bonds of the intellect only at the cost of his sanity or his life, so the Romantic poet, trying to escape from the bonds of language, found himself its prisoner, uttering platitudes in the voice of a prophet.[6]

But if the poets dreamt of living in a world freed from the stifling restrictions of language, and looked with envy at the composers, these, had the poets but known it, were in the same plight as themselves. For if language is not natural, if, that is, words are not inherently expressive, as Rimbaud had imagined, then the same is true of the language of music. Although E. T. A. Hoffmann wrote enthusiastically about the inherent qualities of the chord of A flat minor, the truth of the matter is that music is nearly as conventional a form of expression as speech. We find it difficult to grasp music which is distant from us in space or time (Indian or Japanese music, or Gregorian chant, for instance), to know when it is being 'cheerful', when 'sad'. Musical instruments too have different and highly specialised functions in other societies, and so are associated with different things; it is only through frequent hearings, through a familiarisation with its language that we can come to appreciate Indian music or the music of Bali. The composer, no less than the poet, works in a language which is largely the product of convention, and according to rules to which he voluntarily submits in order to create a

meaningful work. Thus, when the initial heroic impetus of Romanticism starts to peter out, we find a development in music parallel to that which we traced in poetry: a slackening of formal control, a loosening of harmonic texture, and the emergence of a soulful, cliché-ridden style which strives to lull the listener into a state of trance while the music struggles to express the world of the infinite which Baudelaire had urged the artist to seek with every means at his disposal. Naturally enough the piano, instrument of the half-echo, the suggestive, the indefinite, becomes the favourite of composer and public alike. And in music, as in poetry, the attempt to express *everything*, the totality of experience, unfettered by the rules and limitations of conventions and consciousness, leads to self-destruction. More than any of the other arts, Romantic music is imbued with the melancholy which stems from the knowledge that to achieve its goal is to expire.

Wagner's operas, as all his contemporaries realised, form the apotheosis of Romantic art. These vast music-dramas seemed to them to be the perfect answer to Baudelaire's plea for a work of art that would make use of all the resources of all the arts, lifting the spectator into the realm of the infinite, into the very heart of the mystery of the universe. We are fortunate in possessing a critique of Wagner by one of the few men who really understood the implications of Romanticism because he was so much of a Romantic himself – Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's analysis of the 'decadent' style sums up many of the points we have already noted:

> What is common to both Wagner and 'the others' consists in this: the decline of all organising power; the abuse of traditional means, without the capacity or the aim that would justify this. The counterfeit imitation of grand forms . . . excessive vitality in small details; passion at all costs; refinement as an expression of impoverished life, ever more nerves in the place of muscle.[7]

This is extraordinarily perceptive. Nietzsche has put his finger on one of the main characteristics of expressionism: the richness of sensual detail, of the feel of things, allied to the poverty of overall form. And how could it be otherwise, once the dichotomy expressed by Thomas Hooker is accepted? We are left with either meaningless sensation (the traveller) or knowledge devoid of feeling (the historian, map-maker). Thus it becomes easy to trace even a historical connection between Luther, the Puritans, the German Romantics, the German expressionists, and a film-maker like Bergman. This has little to do with innate German or northern characteristics or geography and a great deal to do with cultural tradition.

But Nietzsche is not content with a simple catalogue of Wagner's characteristics; he wants to understand what lies behind them and to try and account for Wagner's enormous popularity. He sees first of all that for Wagner music is only a means to an end: 'As a matter of fact, his whole life long,

he did nothing but repeat one proposition: that his music did not mean music alone! But something more! Something immeasurably more! . . . "*Not music alone*" – *no* musician would speak in this way.' And he explains what this 'more' is: 'Wagner pondered over nothing so deeply as over salvation: his opera is the opera of salvation.' And this, thinks Nietzsche, is the source of Wagner's power and popularity: what he offered was nothing less than the hope of personal salvation to a Europe – and especially a Germany – bewildered by the rapid social and technological changes of the previous half-century. 'How intimately related must Wagner be to the entire decadence of Europe for her not to have felt that he was decadent,' he writes in the same essay. And again: 'People actually kiss that which plunges them more quickly into the abyss.' We remember that Schlegel had already talked about a 'secret longing for the chaos . . . which lies hidden in the very womb of orderly creation', and that this longing was nothing other than the Romantic desire for an absolute freedom. Nietzsche's suggestion that with Wagner this longing spills out of the realm of art into that of politics allows us to glimpse the connection between decadent Romanticism and mass hysteria. The cataclysmic events of the first half of the present century would have occasioned him little surprise.

What Nietzsche particularly objects to in Wagner is precisely the fact that by trying to turn his music into a religion he debases both music and religion; by trying to turn the entire world into a music-drama, drawing the audience up into the music until they shed their dull everyday lives and enter the heart of the mystery, he dangerously distorts both the life of everyday and the true nature of art. By blurring the outlines between life and art he turns art into a tool and life into an aesthetic phenomenon – that is, into something which is to be judged entirely by aesthetic criteria and where the rules of morality therefore no longer apply.

Only one other thinker in the nineteenth century had seen as clearly as Nietzsche where the assumptions of Romanticism were leading, and that was Kierkegaard. In *Either/Or*, written in 1843, he set out to analyse what he calls the aesthetic attitude to life, and from then on the category of the aesthetic or the 'interesting' occupied a key place in his writing. He noted that the point about a work of art is that we are not in any way committed to it. We can pick up a book and put it down again, turn from one picture to another in a gallery. We are surrounded by a growing number of works of art and we can move among them at will, sampling here or there according to our whim. Art makes no claims on us, and surely an attitude of disinterested contemplation is the correct one when we face a work of art. It so happens, however, that people carry this attitude over into their lives. A man will take up with one woman, for instance, because she 'interests' him, and when she begins to bore him he will turn to another. The philanderer, Don Juan, is the archetype of the aesthetic attitude to life, an attitude which depends on a complete surrender to the moment, the immediate, the sensual, and which for that

reason is wholly amoral. That is why music is the most perfect medium for the aesthetic mode, and why, Kierkegaard argues, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is the greatest work in that mode. But when we transfer this attitude from art to life its immediate implication is that no choices are binding. The person who lives in the category of the aesthetic never thinks in terms of 'either/or', but always of 'and/and'. Yet life, Kierkegaard argues, does not consist of a series of aesthetic moments. Choices are essential in life, and a genuine choice implies a genuine renunciation. That man is a creature who must make choices is evinced by his awareness of *time*. The aesthetic category does not know the meaning of time,[8] but man is a creature of time, as can be seen from the fact that no absolute repetition is possible in life although it is perfectly possible in art. Repetition in life always implies change and difference, and so always forces us to recognise the fact that we do not exist in the category of the aesthetic.[9]

The extension of the term 'aesthetic' to imply an attitude to life as well as to works of art allows Kierkegaard to show how much the European bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century had in common with the Romantic artists, just as Nietzsche had noted the close links between Wagner's art and the mentality of his patrons. But Kierkegaard was able to extend his insight into a critique of the prevalent philosophy of the time, Hegelianism. For Hegel, as he saw, was the supreme philosopher of aestheticism. He it was who had undertaken to show that all history should be contemplated as a work of art, the product of one great Mind, moving inevitably forward towards the completion of its pattern. But this view of history, though tempting, is also subtly distorting, as Kierkegaard noted. Luther or Cromwell or Napoleon, when confronted with a choice between one action and another, did not have the benefit of Hegel's vision of the totality of history to guide them. For them the future was open, their choice fraught with consequences they could not foretell. It is only by virtue of hindsight that a pattern emerges, and each of us lives life forwards rather than backwards. Hegel sees history as akin to the plot of some great novel, sees it, in fact, as an aesthetic object, to be contemplated and understood; whereas in fact history – and our own life – can almost be defined by the fact that it is *not* a book.[10]

Kierkegaard's attacks on Hegel and on the 'aestheticism' of the society in which he lived were of course made in the name of his own particular brand of Christianity. But he felt that it was essential that he make them, if only to reveal to his readers the impossibility of his task. For how is he to convey the difference between life lived according to the religious or the ethical category and life lived according to the aesthetic category, when all he has at his command is his pen, an instrument good only for the creation of aesthetic objects? How can he bring home to each reader the uniqueness of his life and the irreversibility of his choices through the generalising medium of language and of philosophical discourse? The answer is of course that he can't, except by the roundabout way of drawing the reader's attention to the

problem in the first place. That is why reading Kierkegaard and Nietzsche is such an uncomfortable activity, for they introduce us not to some foreign realm of experience, but to ourselves. Kierkegaard's problems, and some of his solutions, are the problems and solutions of modernism. For even as Wagnerism swept through Europe and Nietzsche sank into his final madness, the reaction to Romantic decadence had begun. This did not take the form of a movement in the sense that, say, surrealism, was a movement, with polemical manifestos and self-appointed leaders and spokesmen; it was not even a movement of men who thought alike on such general topics as human freedom and the role of the artist in society, as Romanticism had been in its early stages. Proust and Joyce met once and did not take to each other; Schönberg loathed Stravinsky; Eliot was more interested in Donne than in Mallarmé or Mann; Kafka ignored and was ignored by all the rest. Yet it is easy for us today to see that all these men were united by one common attitude, albeit a negative one: they all insisted on the *limitations* of art. More than that, they all stressed, in their art itself, that what they were creating were artifacts and not to be confused with life: that painting was first of all a series of brushstrokes on a flat canvas; music certain notes played by certain combinations of instruments; poetry the grouping of words on a page.

The Romantics had regarded art as simply a means to a transcendental end, and they therefore tended to see all art as more or less interchangeable – it didn't matter what train you caught since they all arrived at the same destination. The insistence on the part of the moderns that their work was art and not something else, their stress on the particular *medium* in which they were working, was not meant to be a denial of the importance of art. On the contrary, it was a reassertion of art's vital function. Art, they argued, was not a means of piercing the sensible veil of the universe, of getting at the 'unknown', as Rimbaud and others had claimed, for there was nothing *beyond* the world we see all around us. The whole mystery is there, in front of our eyes – only most of us are too blind or lazy to see it. What most of us tend to do in the face of the world, of ourselves, of works of art even, is to neutralise what is there in front of us by referring it to something we already know. Thus we are forever shut up inside our preconceived ideas, reacting only to that which makes no demands on us to see. As Giacometti wittily remarked:

> Where do we find the greatest number of people? In front of the *Sacre de Napoléon*. Why do people look in particular at this painting? Because they imagine themselves to be present at the scene, participating in it. They become 'little Napoleons.' At the same time the spectacle becomes the equivalent of the reading of a novel.[11]

In other words, it becomes an excuse for daydreaming. The modern artist, on the other hand, holds that the work of art is meaningful precisely because it