

To the Rescue of Romanticism

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“Romanticism, despite errors of judgment and quarrels of persons, stands for democracy and the historical method.”

To the Rescue of Romanticism

JACQUES BARZUN

AT A time when sincere defenders of culture and democracy assail fascism as a neo-romantic revival, when Hitler's works and Mussolini's "thought" are conned over to trace the course of the romantic virus; and when great figures of the romantic period are made the spiritual sponsors of dictatorship and violence, it becomes doubly necessary to know just what one understands by romantic and romanticism.

Historians of thought and culture who have attempted to find unity in the Romantic Movement have generally had their labors for their pains. The result is that the current notion of Romanticism is broad enough and vague enough to apply equally to Hitler and John Keats, to Mussolini and Ralph Waldo Emerson. It is confusedly thought that Romanticism has to do with a Revolt from Reason and a Return to Nature, yet Romantic is commonly used as the opposite of Realistic. Naturalism, then, is not realistic. Again, one finds it said with assurance that fascism is like Romanticism in being anti-Christian and anti-rational and, at the same time, that fascism is a new idealism with devastatingly practical purposes.

The inconsistencies are so many that it is best at this point to let fascism seek its own definition and to concentrate on romanticism by tackling it historically. A few historians have taken the view that romanticism was not a single movement at all but a congeries of fads and affectations, largely negative in purpose and decidedly foolish in performance. This is more easily said than proved, or even believed. In any backward glance over the road travelled since the French Revolution the positive achievements of romanticism still loom large and solid. Examine any branch of culture—poetry, painting, music, historiography, science, law, philology and other areas of schol-

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arship—try to remove from its present stock the contributions of the men who lived between 1770 and 1850, and then see whether the residue is not poor indeed judged by any standard whatsoever. Next cast your eye upon the men included within these dates and, without searching into the details of their different accomplishments, ask yourself whether there is not a family likeness in the mode and mood of their undertakings. Even science, which we tend to think remote from the current and eddies of the *Zeitgeist*, bears the imprint of a comprehensive attitude which rightly or wrongly has been called romantic and which, if romantic is to mean nothing positive, must be called by some other name covering the same historical facts and corresponding to our identical impressions of them.

As a matter of fact, any prolonged steeping in the work of the romanticists leads one to seek a statement at once inclusive and definite of their outlook. It should not be hard to find, for they were articulate enough in their own behalf. But it seems as though the very ring of their voice exasperated us into deafness; we are both too near and too far from them to hear much beyond our own catchwords. Consequently we must have recourse to other utterances, distant enough to be impersonal yet near enough to correspond to the views and the feelings of the romanticists themselves. Such utterances I believe can be found in two writers of the 17th century—Pascal and Spinoza—whose return to favor in the early 19th is a guarantee of their adaptability to the temper I am trying to put into words. Distortion, it is true, accompanied the rediscovery of these men, for the principles of two epochs never exactly coincide, and if ideas were not perishable goods always damaged in transit, the fugitive hints about to be made would find no excuse. It is only because we rather ignorantly make the romantics scapegoats for our own troubles that a revaluing of their outlook—however approximate—is so much needed.

The central fact behind the romantic movement is undoubtedly the French Revolution. The Revolutionists themselves were largely classical in temper: it is the effect and the impli-

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cations of the Revolution that help us grasp the meaning of romanticism. By turning society upside down the Revolution made vivid the contrast between natural man and artificial society—an old distinction but one which, translated into action, generally has the effect of “making all things new.” It rests on the common enough supposition that vegetation existed before gardens, speech before grammars and poetry before academies. In such a view traditions, laws and customs, though inescapable in one form or another, are also varied and changeable. Given man, one is not compelled to think of bishops or postmen.

Montaigne, like that earlier romantic, Shakespeare, had felt the force of these intuitions at a time when the known world was expanding so rapidly as to make the notion of social fixity seem absurd. Monarchy, which meant uniformity, gradually settled down on France and England alike, but at its height Pascal reverted to Montaigne’s observations and reasserted an essentially romantic diversity:

My friend, you are born on this side of the mountain; it is therefore right that your elder brother should inherit everything.

Why do you kill me?—But you live on the other side of the water.

Theft, incest, the killing of children and of parents—everything has once been accounted a virtuous action . . . From this confusion comes the fact that such a one says justice lies in the authority of the lawgiver; another in the convenience of the Sovereign; a third in present custom; and the last is the soundest: nothing, according to reason alone, is just in itself; everything varies with Time. . . . Customs must be followed only because they are customs and not because they are reasonable or just.

Pascal is not a revolutionist, far from it; from diversity he argues the uselessness of replacing one arbitrary social scheme by another equally unjust. But he confirms the relativity of standards—“Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, untruth on the other.” Note, however, that relativity does not mean irresponsibility or absolute monarchy. Standards, though relative, exist.

Perceiving all forms and conventions to be relative, the romanticist is an individualist, a democrat and a cosmopolitan.

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Having had the mutability of human affairs brought home to him and being endowed with the spirit of adventure, he values the variety of human experience. As artist he seeks to capture local color; as historian he distinguishes the genius of many lands or peoples; as natural scientist he pleads for the method of observation without moral judgment; as philosopher he shows how very narrow are the limits of pure reason. The philistine of course calls his local color exoticism—falsely, because to the citizen of the world nothing can be extraneous or alien, i.e. exotic. The modern scholar may call impressionistic, antiquarian or escapist the romantics' lively sense of the past and the remote. But this same principle of social relativity, this awareness that opposite things do not cancel out but can be equally good, explains the romantics' medievalism, their taste for folklore, their globe-trotting in search of landscapes, their devotion to Greek independence, even their willing belief in the supernatural. The same principle also works biographically and helps us understand and reconcile such diverse personalities as Scott and Byron, Mme. de Staël and J. de Maistre, Leopardi and Hazlitt—all romanticists—who differ from one another in the way that Pascal differed from Montaigne—on the proposed resolution and not on the facts or the meaning of life.

Just as we can say that for the romanticists relativism was embodied in the Revolution, so we can say that Bonaparte symbolized man's fate. Otherwise the fact that almost without exception the romantic generation fell under the spell of the Napoleonic personality (even when they hated it, even when they knew that it was three-fourths legendary) would be inexplicable. They fell under it because Bonaparte's career, starting from nowhere and ending in nothing, with all the interim between, makes vivid what Pascal terms the greatness and wretchedness of man. But do not mistake: the greatness is not in the victories and imperial pomp nor the wretchedness in defeat and exile. These are its physical manifestations only. The greatness and wretchedness are in man. Man thinking is superior to the blind universe that crushes him—hence man's

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powers, triumph and conceit. But the knowledge of a hostile or indifferent universe, the fear of the "infinite spaces" and "eternal silence," the sense of something within that makes for both energy and failure, doom man and all his works to a miserable end. Hence man's despair, self-torture and humility.

Like Descartes, Pascal starts with the first person singular; but instead of arriving at a classical order which, as good luck would have it, corresponds closely with that which we find established, Pascal discovers an inner and outer contradiction which he is unwilling to explain away. "Many certainties are contradictory. . . . Contradiction is not a mark of falsehood, nor non-contradiction a mark of truth." Similarly, for the romanticist, nothing can be predicated of man except this one thing, that he exhibits a contradiction of powers: not the supremacy of reason in him nor a complete subjection to the heavy hand of necessity, but—to adapt Pascal's own words—the eternal contrast between the thinking and the broken reed.

The perpetual antithesis between these two aspects of man properly constitutes his lot, furnishes the subject of his thoughts and determines the character of his actions. The romanticist hero, the artistic genius, with their thirst for experience and their "Byronic" despair, are the embodiments of this conception. "The greatness of man is that he knows himself wretched. . . . It is therefore wretched to know that one is wretched; but it is greatness to know that one is so. . . . Man great even in his desires. . . ." Thus are explained the apparent egotism, the inexhaustible passion and the unconcealed restlessness in the lives of many romantics. But these are not necessarily a sign of folly or puerile vanity. They may be the common nature of man, magnified in the romantics by the limelight of public life and the force of unusual powers of introspection: "The whole dignity of man," says Pascal, "consists in thinking. . . . But what does this thought amount to? And how silly it is!" Silly and dignifying. Romantic heroism becomes an empty affectation and a melodramatic display only in those who ape the attitude without feeling the urgency. The fact that romantic

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lives also show a seamy side or a want of calmness is therefore no diminution of the heroism; on the contrary it is the drabness and the anguish that make life heroic. Nor is the contradiction, *pace* Lytton Strachey and his school, in the least “strange” or “curious” but natural.

Pascal of course pushes his arguments about social relativism and the wretchedness of man to the utmost limit in order to justify the existence of God and point the way to mystical blessedness and peace in Christ. Some romanticists, like Blake and Cardinal Newman, went with him the whole way; others only as far as his analysis of society and man’s fate. But in either case it is illuminating to note the insistence on the element of risk or gambling. Pascal’s suggestion that man should gamble on there being a God, because the gain is bound to be infinite and the chances even, is often spoken of as a crass appeal for Catholic converts or is ascribed to an inveterate mathematical habit. On closer reflection it appears much more central to the rest of Pascal’s argument and to what we may take the liberty of calling here the philosophy of romanticism. The contrast between man’s state of wretched despair and his capacity for greatness demands a resolution where none is possible by mere reasoning. It follows that the next step is a jump, a leap in the dark, an *a priori* assumption of practical reason—in short, a wager.¹ However looked at, it is a risk without guarantee, whereby one may lose one’s life in order to save it. “You must make a bet,” says Pascal, “it is not in your power not to: *you are embarked.*” You must gamble for the same reason that you previously felt despair—because it is impossible that your finite self possessing infinite desire should attain certainty.

The divergence between the mystics, like Pascal, Blake and Newman, and the pantheists, idealists or materialists who make up the romantic generation lies in the resolution or “answer” which they severally gambled on. The diversity of answers no doubt corresponds to diverse temperaments and experiences, but

¹ Compare the “philosophy” of Julien Sorel in Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* and the allegory of man’s fate in Balzac’s *Wild Ass’s Skin*. Faust’s bargain with the Devil is another form of the wager.

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it also grows out of the fact that few men will or can lead their lives according to a single consistent rule. That is why it is always misleading to take literally any single jotting as an exposition of the whole romantic outlook and to imagine its author as bound within the scope of his momentary mood.

Besides, it must be remembered that the various answers—pessimism, profligacy or suicide (Byron, Leopardi, G. de Nerval, Beddoes); hard work (Carlyle and Goethe); devotion to art and nature (Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Beethoven, Berlioz); reconciliation of self to social rule (Wordsworth, Kant, Coleridge); energy and individual strength (Stendhal, Burckhardt, Gobineau); revolution (Shelley, LaMennais, Landor, Büchner); counter-revolution (de Maistre, Bonald, Hegel, the Oxford Movement); scientific or historical research (Faraday, Bougainville, Michelet, Ranke)—are not all of them mutually exclusive or equally practicable. Pascal, we know, wore a spiked belt next his skin and Newman wept as he played the violin but these are incommensurable tests of mysticism. Similarly the test of “true” romanticism is in the atmosphere it creates and not in any one activity or token. The discovery of an energetic and practical leader at Missolonghi in an alleged cynic like Byron upsets all superficial classifications and is no proof that Byron was a particularly wayward or contradictory nature. It is rather, like so many other inferences from biography, another proof of the more basic contradiction which the romanticists accepted in order variously to transcend it.

The two main principles to which we have related some of the phenomena of romanticism have each a practical worldly counterpart. The counterpart to social relativism is romanticist politics and the counterpart to the psychology of despair is romanticist esthetics. The naturalistic observation of society, as we have seen, set at naught the claims of a supreme reason. But this did not mean indifference to the ills of this world or complacent acceptance of the status quo. Mankind as a whole and geniuses in particular seem constitutionally incapable of such passivity. The mystics and poets (the most likely to dwell

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on ideal or other-worldly solutions) were militant for social betterment and supported liberalism and revolution (or their opposites) with that end in view. Romanticism in politics, however, is something wider than allegiance to a given party; it must mean, at least for the historian of ideas, the common denominator of tendencies in any age, over and above the clash of immediate programs.

Instinct and experience teach man his true nature; why cannot they help him organize society? This question is of the essence of romantic politics. But experience generalized is history, and instinct universally respected is democracy. Romanticism, therefore, despite errors of judgment and quarrels of persons, stands for democracy and the historical method. Democracy means here not plebeianism but equality in diversity; and the historical method means not scholarship alone but empiricism and the distrust of absolute, *a priori* reasoning.²

So long as Reason was One, Monarchy was the only conceivable social order, just as the "polite man" with his single standard of behavior, dress and art was the only conceivable creature. Individualism, for the thorough classicist, was little better than rebelliousness and conceit; but for the romanticist it is the recognition of difference and the tolerance that goes with it. Ironically enough, as we have seen, romanticism was the offspring of reason by way of the French Revolution. For the reasonable man, in pursuing his course, set in motion ideas and forces that upset the social order which was one part of his standard and the mathematical-Newtonian view of life which was the other. In the light of this sequence nothing could be falser than to term romanticism a revolt from reason and take these words to mean that suddenly a portion of mankind decided to embrace a life of impulse and folly. The facts call for

² Sir Walter Scott was a conservative landowner who hated revolution, but all his work and all we know of his life breathes sympathy with and understanding of the common man. Carlyle was a democrat in that same sense, though he abhorred the contemporary plutocracy that went by the name of democracy. To clinch the point, compare any romantic critic of democracy with Racine, Montesquieu or Lord Chesterfield. The signs of a neo-classicism in our own day can be found precisely in the hankering after a monarchical form, a social and artistic convention, and an established—as over against an individual—religion.

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Liancourt's answer to Louis XVI when Louis spoke of revolt: "No, Sire: it is a revolution." Reason was not dethroned but was revolved on its base to admit the discovery Pascal had made a century before: "*Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas*"—a discovery made by the use of reason, and repeated on a grander scale in the time of Rousseau and Wordsworth.

The "reasons of the heart" can be translated as the setting of a value upon emotion, feeling and imagination; but over-familiar as we are with the checkered lives of the romantics we may find it hard to resist the notion that this respect for the heart was simply an excuse for irresponsible behavior. There is scattered evidence for this view, but the question is one that cannot be resolved in the lump. Particular instances from particular lives must be judged on their merits and compared with the probabilities of human behavior at all times and places. Classicism and romanticism, moreover, like Stoicism or chivalry, are ideals of life which actual life only approaches as a polygon approaches its limit. It is well to remember, when we are inclined to judge hastily of romantic despair, that on one occasion Racine, Boileau and their friends became so despondent about life that they were prevented with the greatest difficulty from going to the Seine in a body to drown themselves. When we are tempted to confuse issues and to think of Rousseau as a rhapsodist, deficient of brain and overfull of heart, it is useful to turn to his writings and find in them much logic, simplicity and plain observation.

A fair judgment of the romantics in this matter of reason and emotion is threatened by our ingrained belief in the complete separation of thought and feeling, and it is here that the great "find" of the romantics—Spinoza—delivers us from error with his psychology. Spinoza makes it clear that desire is inseparable from life itself and that all emotions are associated with ideas, often casually and dangerously, but always inevitably. What happens when, as the phrase goes, we wrestle with ourselves, is not that a part of us called reason joins battle with another part called emotion but that two emotions welded

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to two ideas struggle for mastery. "Will like Intellect is only a certain mode of thinking." If our idea refers to the outside world it may be inadequate—as when we cry for the moon and fail to get it. But we are not split crosswise, our brain having a perfect knowledge of astronomy and our heart cherishing a disconnected longing for the moon. Spinoza points out, moreover, that only a stronger emotion can displace another which has hold of us. The possibility of peace or happiness in man depends therefore upon his limited though real power of sorting out his ideas and emotions and of harnessing the strongest desires to the most permanently satisfying ideas. "To act absolutely according to virtue is nothing else than to act under the guidance of reason, to live so, and to preserve one's being (these three have the same meaning) on the basis of seeking what is useful to oneself."³ This union of emotion and reason is implicit in the famous phrase *amor intellectualis Dei*. To speak of the romantics or anybody else as if the cold reason of mathematics were at war with the hot imaginings of poetry is to speak like a plumber and not like a philosopher. Faraday was as anxious and emotional an author as Shelley, and Beethoven as rational and patient a workman as John Stuart Mill.⁴ We acknowledge these facts every time we admire a "beautiful" mathematical demonstration and every time we praise the logic and structural solidity of a work of art.

The work of art might in fact be taken as the simplest symbol of the romantic way of life, and the esthetic attitude as the simplest description of the romantic philosophy. But romantic art, as we might expect, differs from classicist art and even from the common notion of the romantic art. For one thing, it mirrors the irregularity of nature and therefore conforms to no universal standard of beauty; it values scope and complexity above compactness and perfection of finish. For another, it is realistic in the widest sense: everything imaginable is real, in-

³ Compare William James and Freud insofar as the theory is psychological.

⁴ Pascal's distinction between the *esprit de finesse* and the *esprit de geometrie* confirms the fact that men endowed with identical emotions and of a common nature, but differently habituated, produce different works and act like different characters.

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cluding romance; it has roots in folk art and reproduces, consciously or not, the spirit of democracy as previously defined. These qualities are at the root of all the scattered impressions current about romantic art. It is an art that embraces the love of nature and the new realism of diction, color and sound; the ugly, the fantastic and the grotesque; the Wordsworthian interest in the simple emotions of common men and the Coleridgian use of the supernatural. It uses and extends every possible means of expression in the arts and courts formlessness in seeking new shapes of the beautiful. Romanticism creates order like every other artistic creed, but the order, as Spinoza says of the ugly and the beautiful, is not pre-established. Consequently each work of art contains its own form which the beholder must discover before he can pronounce on the perfection of the product. Pascal had put the same thing in much the same way: "No one knows what the pleasure or object of poetry is. No one knows what the natural model is that one should imitate, so lacking this knowledge we have invented certain bizarre expressions . . . and we call this jargon poetical beauty."

In this light the autobiographical or, as it is often miscalled, the subjective element in romantic art must be reinterpreted. It springs not from excessive self-centering but from the new desire for notes upon experience. Its speaking in the first person can be seen as a kind of modesty, backed by responsibility for one's impression; whereas there is something pompous and irresponsible in the confidently didactic classicism forever chanting universal truths.⁵ Moreover, the much-decried yearning for "self-expression" permits the artist whose Self is equal to the task to embody in art the sense of conflict from which romanticism springs. This does not mean on the part of the artist a tedious reiteration that man is both wretched and great. It does mean that romantic work is first and foremost a display of con-

⁵ It is instructive to compare, let us say, Boileau and Victor Hugo in this regard. The prefaces to Boileau's work are minutely concerned with his own feelings and the praise or blame he has received from such-and-such, while the works themselves chiefly deal in generalities. Victor Hugo tends on the contrary to generalize about artistic and political principles in his prefaces and to reveal concrete feelings and ideas in his works. In reading books, Pascal preferred to find "not an author, but a man."

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trasts, a dramatic view of life which does not take sides and is without hope of resolution. So defined, drama is the special mark of romanticism in art. The conclusion is not invalidated by the fact that the plays of the period are actually the weakest part of romanticist literature, for real drama often gets but a feeble footing on the conventional stage.

So far, then, the archetypal romantic would be a pragmatist and pluralist, and so he actually was in earthly things. Spiritually, the human desire for a transcendent resolution found satisfaction in a many-sided religious revival. It was Catholic, Protestant, pantheistic, mystical and materialistic by turns, and passionate through and through. Like Lucretius, the materialists loved their universe of matter, and compared with them the classical Deists were palely Stoical. The pantheists, idealists and transcendentalists, far from deadening nature into uniformity, thrived on inconsistencies for the sake of which they were prepared to find hidden compensations. The Neo-Catholics fed their artistic impulse as they worshipped, and merged the romantic sense of misery with the Christian doctrine of original sin. And all of them, including the new disciples of Oriental philosophies, recognized as basic the romantic (as well as Christian and democratic) notion of the equal worth of every living soul. Romanticism was full of *disbelievers* in every kind of creed, but it numbered hardly a single *unbeliever*. Fervor in search for God the Infinite was the complement of despair; and given man's greatness as a thinking reed willing to wager his soul, man could find the light shining through the works of nature and her poets, through the geometry of Spinoza or through the counterpoint of Bach.

All this seems a far cry from the wilfully-narrowed world projected by the two philosopher-kings of our time, Hitler and Mussolini. Crude, broken echoes or a second-hand romanticism may appear here and there in their remarks; but the touchstone of the true fervor is the very principle they war against: "Man is powerless to prove, in the teeth of every dogma; and goes on thirsting for truth in the teeth of every doubt."