REALISM IN THE AGE OF ROMANTICISM

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It has often been urged that the terms "romanticism" and "realism" are not susceptible to precise and comprehensive definition. However, a simple detailed list of their commonest connotations will be sufficient to show how completely opposed the two concepts are. The realist is supposed to deal with contemporary life and commonplace scenes; the romantic yields to the charm of the past and delights in dreaming of distant places. The realist fixes his look upon the world of Men, the streets where they push roughly against and the rooms where they meet and converse; the romantic seeks solitude and finds it in nature, in the fields, in the woods, the lonely seashore and the lonelier mountain crag. The realist is drawn into the social vortex, depicts the cross-currents of ambition and self-interest, is familiar with all the processes, ups and downs of economic life; the romantic looks on with comtempt such dull or commonplace preoccupations; instead he idealizes the purer passions and cultivates the obscure and darker ones, having leanings towards the satanic as well as the spiritual; wheres the typical realist, especially in France, levels passion down to the play of the senses and has no patience with intimations of immortality. The romantic exalts the creative spirit and puts faith in intuition; the realist's approach to his material is detached and analytic. On literary plane, the value the realist sets on stylistic quality contrasts with the romantic's cultivation of exuberance and emotive imagery; the former, in short, stick to prose, while poetry remains an authentic medium for the expression of the romantic mood and the romantic world-view.

The semantic history of the term "romantic" has been fully studied in its early stages in France, England and Germany and for the later developments in the later stages in Germany[1]. But it is still difficult to ascertain when for the

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1 Fernand BALDENSPERGER, " 'Romantiquek' - ses analogues et équivalents," Harvard Studies and Notes in Phlilology and Literature, 14 (1937), pp. 13-105, is the fullest list. Logan P.SMITH **Four Words, Romantic, Originality, Creative, Genius**, Society for Pure English, tract no.17 London, 1924), the only piece on English developments.

first time, a work of literature and which works of literature were labeled or designated as "romantic", when a contemporary writer referred himself first as a "romanticist", when the term "romanticism" was first adopted in a country, ect. Since we are not concerned here with the early history of "romanticism" that shows an expansion of usage from "romancelike", "extravagant", "absurd", etc., to "picturesque", it seems that the term "romantic-poetry" was used first of Ariosto and Tasso and the medieval romances from which their themes and machinery were derived. It occurs in this sense in France in 1169, in England in 1674 [2]. Certainly Thomas WARTON understood it to mean this when wrote his dissertation entitled "The Origin of Romantic Fiction in Europe" (1774). In his writings, a contrast is implied between this romantic literature(and the whole tradion of literary art inherited from classical antiquity. A special taste for such a "romantic" fiction and its noncompliance with classical standards and rules then appeared. The dichotomy implied had obvious analogies in other contrast common in the eighteenth century: between the ancients and the moderns, between artificial and popular poetry, the natural poetry of Shakespeare unconfined by rules and French Classical tragedy. Thus a definite juxtaposition of "Gothic" and "Classical" occurs in Hurd and Warton. Hurd speaks of Tasso as "trimming between the Gothic and the Classic," and of the **Faerie Queene** as a "Gothic, not a Classical poem."[3] WARTON calls Dante's **Divine Comedy** a "wonderful compound of classical and romantic fancy".[4] Here, possibly for the first time, the two famous words come together.

The further usages of the term "romantic" penetrated into Germany: in 1766 Gerstanberg and Herder reviewed Warton's **Observations on the Fairy Queen,** and they distinguished sometimes between the "romantic" (Chivalric) and the "Gothic" (Nordic) taste and used the words interchangeably. This usage then entered into the handbooks of general history of literature as the mixture of the Christian religion and

[2] Odell Shepard's review of Clarissa Rinaker's Thomas Warton in JEGP, 16 (1917) p.153 and Victor M.Hamm, "A Seventeenth Century Source for Hurd's Letters on Chivalry and Romance," PMLA, 52 (1937), p.820.

[3] L.P. Smith, Warton's History of English Poetry, 3 (London, 1781) p.241.

[4] Ibid. p. 241 on Dante.

chivalry : Eichhorn's **Literargeschichte** (1799) and Frederich Bouterwekk's monumental **Geschichte der Poesie** (1801-5). In these works the term "romantic" is used in all combinations: style, manner, character, poetry are called "romantic".

This broad conception was later combined with a new meaning: typological, which is based on an elaboration of the contrast between "Classical" and "Romantic" and is due to the Schlegels. Goethe, once in 1830, said that Schiller invented the distinction "naive and sentimental" and that the Schlegels renamed it "Classical and romantic".[5] On the other hand, the terms "romantik" and "romantiker" as nouns were apparently innovations of NOVALIS, in 1798-99. But with him "romantiker" is a writer of romances and fairy tales of his own peculiar type, "Romantic" is a synonym of "Romankunst" in this sense.[6]

Later Schlegel (August Wilhelm) formulated the contrast between classical and romantic, as that between the poetry of antiquity and modern poetry, associating romantic with the progressive and Christian.[7]

But the designation of contemporary literature as romantic was due only to the enemies of the Heidelberg group that today we seem to be accustomed to call the Second Romantic School. J.H.VOSS attacked the Heidelberg groub, the Schlegels, Jean Paul and Friederich Ast,[8] on the grounds that with them the romantic- classical was associated with the antithesis of organic-mechanical and plastic-picturesque, and published a parodistic **Klinglingelalmanach** in 1808. Heine's much later **Romantische Schule** (1833) included Fouqué, Uhland, Werner, and E.T.A. Hoffmann. Rudolf Haym's standard work, **Die romantische Schule** (1870) is limited to the first Jena Group: the Schlegels, Novalis and Tieck. Thus the original broad meaning of the term has been abandoned and "romantik" is used for a group of writers who did not call themselves "romantiker".

In the Latin world, and in England as well as in America, the role of Mademe de Staël was also decisive.Her **Del'Allemagne**

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5 See A.O. Lovejoy, "The Meaning of Romanticism" in Early German Romanticism", MLN, 31 (1916), pp. 385-96).

6 Novalis, **Schriften,** ed. F.Schegel and L.Tieck, (1802), p.2

7 **Friedrich Schlegel's Jugendchriften**, ed.J.Minor, pp.220-21

8 Jean Paul, **Vorschule der Aesthetik**, (1804); F.Ast, **System-der Kunstlehre** (1805).

was finally published in London, in 1810. The exposition of classical-romantic in Chapter 11 of **De l'Allemagne,** including its parallel of classical and culpturesque, romantic and picturesque, the contrast between Greek Drama of event and modern drama of character, the poetry of Fate versus the poetry of progress, clearly derive from Schlegel.

Up to 1816 there was no frenchman who called himself a romantic nor was the term "romantisme" known in France. Its history is somewhat obscure: "romantismus" is used as a synonym of bad rhyming and empty lyricism in a letter written by Clemens Brentano to Achim von Arnim in 1803 [9]. In 1804, Sénancour refers to "romantisme",[10] using it as a noun corresponding to the use of "romantic" as "picturesque". But in literary contex it does not seem to occur before 1816 and then was used vaguely and humorously.[11] Afterwards Stendhal called Schlegel in letters a "petit pédant sec".[12] He then seems to have been the first Frenchman to call himself a "romantic".

The writer who gave Stendhal and Balzac the further stimulus they needed was Walter SCOTT (1771-1832). He was the last of the trio of novelists writing in English (plus Richardson and Fielding) whose art can be said to have made a significant contribution to the development of European REALISM. On the evidence of one of his marginal notes, it would appear that Stendhal read some extracts from WAVERLEY as early as 1815, the year it was published.[13] His letters in 1819 and 1820 show him to be devouring Scott"s 'devrine novel' with an enthussiasm that caused him to rate the writer's genius even higher than Byron's.[14] As for Balzac, the first mention of Scott in his writings occurs in a letter to his younger sister Laura in 1821. She had told him she was reading Richardson's **Clarissa;** he advises her, when she is finished, to go on to **La Nouvella Héloise**, and strongly reccomends her in

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9 Reinhold Steig, **Achim von Arnim und die ihm nahe staden,** 1 (Stutgart, 1894), p.102.

10 Obermann, letter 87, quated by Eggli, p.11.

11 Ibid, july 19, 1816, reprinted in Eggli, pp.472-73.

12 Letter to Baron de Mareste, April 14, 1818, **Correspondence** p.5, 137.

13 see K.G. Ma Watters, 'Stendhal, Walter Scott et la Bibliothéque britannique', Stendhal Club, No.16 (1962), p.344.

14 Stendhal, **Correspondance,** ed. H.Martineau and V.Del Litto (paris, 1962), Vol.I, PP. 917, 1030. 1053.

addition **Kenilworth'** Scott's last novel; and he praises that it is the finest thing in the world.[15] The following year, Balzac paid Scott the compliment by imitating him, and publishing an historical novel of his own composition.[16]

Victor HUGO, in one of his earliest critical essays, praised highly Scott for having achieved an amalgam of the two kinds of novel which had been practiced separately before; that is the novel of plain narrative, and the novel by letters. Scott had succeeded in renovating fiction by borrowing from drama; he presented events as no one had presented them before in a succession of lively scenes and conversational exchanges.[17]

Such technical considerations may have accounted for the esteem in which Walter Scott was held among literary professionals; his unprecedented sales testify to his popularity among the public. This popularity was reflected in borrowings by practitioners of the sister arts: the plots of the Waverly were used in operas, and some of the memorable scenes were made the subject of paintings.

Stendhal, reporting in the **London Magazine,** observed that Scott had brought about

> "a revolution in French Literature. Without being conscious of it, probably, or aspiring to the honour, he is the chief of what is called in France 'le parti romantique !. . Morever, the strong attachment felt or feigned by Sir Walter Scott, for all that smacks of ancient institutions, and his consequent want of enthusiasm for those innovations and improvements, which tend to emeliorate the present social state of mankind, have rendered him a distinguished favourite with the Ultra party."[18]

The ultras were the right wing extremists of the Restoration Period who more royalist than the king, regarded the contitutional settlement of 1815 as a shameful sell-out; they had been greatly hearttened when the reactionary Charles X

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15 Balzac, **Correspondance,** ed.R.Pierrot (Paris, 1960), Vol. I, p.108.

16 Lord R'hoone,

17 **La Muse Française,** July 1823 (review of Quentin Durward)

18 Stendhal, 'Letters from Paris (II)', **London Magazine,** new series, Vol. I, (Feb. 1825), p.205.

succeeded his brother Louis XVIII in 1824. At the time Stendhal was writing; romantics who took their cue from Hugo, and shared the political look of the Ultras. Stendhal, a lifelong liberal, had little patience either with the ultras, or with the romantics, or for that matter with the toryism of the Scottish baronet whose talent as a novelist he nevertheless so genuinely admired. It is here that we come up against the double paradox involved in tracing the ancestry of the French realist movement back to Scott and his literary example.

In the first place, Scott's political conservatism would almost seem to disallow from the start any claim that he might have inspired a school of writers, who tended to align themselves with the more socially progressive forces in whatever country they happened to belong to. And secondly, perhaps more importantly, there would appear to be an inherent contradiction in the proposition that a man who made his name as the author of historical novels, whose source material drawn from the recent or distant past, could be said to have fathered a movement which prided itself on its analysis of the contemporary condition of society.

The first chapter of Georg Lukacs's **Historical Novel** provides sufficient explanation of how it came about Scott, **"like so many great realists, such as Balzac and Tolstoy, became a great realist despite his own political and social views !"** For our immediate purpose, it will be sufficient to mention two aspects of Scott's treatment of his cast of characters which show him both as an innovator in his own right and as the founder of a durable tradition.

His art, in the first place, has a democratic stamp which owes to the fact that Scott was 'the poet of the peasant, soldier, outlaw and artisan'. His characters are by no means always the kings, the queens, the lords, the ladies, the generals and the ministers. The great and the powerful play their parts in his novels, but the characters who capture our interest and affections mostly come from the lower social strata. They are the old bedeman, Edie (Ochiltree) in **The Antiquary**; the simple minded steadfast, Jenie Deans in **The Heart of Midlothian;** honest Simon Glover, the father of the fair maid of Perth, and Henry Smith, the armourer, the lover; beside many other representative of the stalwart Scottish artisan and peasant classes. Similarly it is not unusual to find the forefront occupied by commoners and serfs, members of a nameless throng ignored by the historians of the period. Low characters had of course been employed in minor roles by some earlier

novelists such as Fielding, Smollett and others, but mainly to provide some kind of comic relief. Scott was the first to take them seriously. Balzac imitated him here directly in **Les Chouans** (1829), an historical novel based on the 1799 royalist rising in Britanny; he used the same conventions later in stories with contemporary scenes, such as **Le Curé de Tours** (1832) and **Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de Cesar Birotteau** (1837).

In **La Chartreuse de Parme** and in the ones above mentioned we find the most fully developed and sympathetic characters. The Balzac's characters in the last three novels are respectively an honest seargent, a minor canon and a Parisian tradesman of exceptional honesty. In the novel written by Stendhal an unusual prominence is given to ill-educated men of low-rank, live Ludovic, a manservant, Giletti, the strolling player, and Ferrante Pall, the self-styled tribune of the people. In fact Stendhal echoes Walter Scott in this very novel.

An even more extraordinary technical innovation of the Waverley novels was the downgrading of the 'Central-Character.' The typical protagonist in a novel by Scott is a young man of breeding, with sound moral principles and a small amount of practical intelligence. Essentially a colourless figure, he is the decent, evarage Englisman or Scotsman, stirred. by no deep passions and not intended to arouse more than a mild sympathy in the reader. Briefly speaking, Scott may be said to have invented the 'unheroic hero' and in this he was most sharply at odds with the whole spirit of romanticism: there is nothing Byronic about Waverley novels. However it was a device which was to prove suited to the realist novel as developed later in the century, especially in Russia. By placing at the centre of his novel an unremarkable, basically uninteresting character, the realist would find it easier to concentrate attention on the social scene which he has conceived it as being his main business to depict.

Scott, as the writer of historical novels, cannot in any obvious sense be regarded as a forerunner of the realists, whose principal concern would be with contemporary life. But the critical acclaim he won in France in the 1820's was in no small measure due to the impression of reality that his novels conveyed. A literary travel book (written by Amédée Pichot) in 1825 praised Scott for remaining "on the prosaic ground of commonplace realities". Another magazine appeared in the same year (**Le Mercure du XIX^{e} Siecle**) attributed Scott's mastery to his success in associating himself imaginatively with

the perood he was describing "hence' the r e a l i t y of the landscapes, sites, characters, customs and people that he depicts'.[19]

His most educated readers felt that they were absorbing history under the disguise of entertainment. In their opinions they felt again that Scott succeeded in raising immeasurably the prestige of the novel which as a form of literature had lost the critical esteem that Richardson, Swift, Fielding and the others secured for it in the previous century.

Then it was from historical and pseudo historical writing that the early realist novel largely stemmed; Fielding himself had called the novelist the "historian of private life". Then a feeling for history is a feeling for the changes that time brings about in its broadest sense, and those who had been born on the eve of French revolution (like Stendhal) and were in the middle age when the Romantic Revolution was subverting all the old literary canons, noting was more evident than that everything was subject to change.

Thus the realist began by thinking of himself as the historian of the present, mission was to capture the spirit of his own period, with all its minute and fugitive particularities, before it was swept away by the rising tide of future change.

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When we turn to the realm of poetry, what is called romanticism in England and on the continent is not the literal vision of the mystics but the concern for the reconciliation of subject and object, man and nature, and consciousness and unconsciousness. Most of the studies rendered on the nature of 'romanticism' show that a convincing agreement has been reached: they all see the implication of imagination, symbol, myth and organic nature and see it as the part of the great endeavour to overcome the split between subject and object, the self and the world,the consciousnees and the unconsciousness. This is the central creed of the romantic poets in England, Germany and France. It is a coherent body of thought and feeling. But on the other hand, on the surface analysis, the main charges against romantic poetry, if summarized, have been that it is subjective, that it is sentimental, that its diction is inflated, and that it lacks form. With regard to the first charge it has been counter charged that it is an historical mistake to accuse the romantics of subjectivism. It is rather to misunderstand the direction of romantic thought. For,

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[19] Quoted in Marguerite Iknayan, **The Idea of Novel in France** (Paris 1961) p. 111

subjectivity was not a programme but the inescapable condition of romanticism. Had the 18 th century left the individual isolated within himself withouth an objective counterpart for the values he sensed in his own free -will and feelings- than romanticism began as a movement toward objectivity, toward a new principle connection with society and nature through the imposition of values on the external-world. Wordsworth wrote The p r e l u d e , the model of the subjective or autobiographical poetry in English, not because he believed in autobiographical poetry but in order to prepare himself for a long philosophical poem treating the 'mind of man'. He wrote it because he felt as yet inadequate to the objective undertaking, out of the 'real humility' :

> "here, at least, I hoped that to a certain degree I should be sure of succeeding, as I had nothing to do but decribe What I had felt and thought".

From his point of view it seems that the whole conscious concern with objectivity as a problem is in fact specifically romantic. Objectivity presented no problem to an age of Faith like Middle Ages, which considered the object ant its value as equally given. Nor did it present a problem to a critical and rationalist age like the Enlightenment, the whole point of which was to undermine the established order of values by driving a wedge between the object and value and saw objectivity as desirable and as difficult to achieve. When subjectivity came to called a disease (la malaise du siecle), the romantic period had begun. Coleridge had suffered from subjectivity:

> "Such punishments, I said, were due To
> To natures deepliest stained with sin,-
> For eye entempesting anew
> The unfathomable hell within"
>
> "The pains of Sleep"

Byron tried to drive out the devil of subjectivity with the laughter of Don Juan. Carlyle preached 'work' as an escape from subjectivity. Matthew Arnold, in his Empedocles, found the example of what was wrong with modern poetry- that it deals with situations:

> "in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done".[20]

In our own time an insistence upon objectivity characterizes the leading critical doctrines : Yeats' m a s k, that the poet must not write about himself but about the antithesis of himself; Eliot's c a t a l y s t, that the poet acts like a catalist to bring the poetic elements into combination but remains himself outside the poem; and Eliot's 'objective correlative, that emotion cannot be stated as a description of subjectivity but must be presented through

> "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion" [21]

It should be clear, then that the desire to overcome subjectivity and achieve objectiviy is by no means peculiar to the 20th Century, but has determined the direction of poetic development since the end of the Enlightenment.

Sentimentalism is an 18th century phenomenon in that it belongs to Locke's world where the movements of atoms were considered the only reality. In such a world the individual fell back upon the feelings, but with the fundemental acknowledgement that they did not reflect reality. The romantics were prepared to take up the issue that the sentimentalists were content to let lie. They were out to transform reality, to show that it had no existence apart from the emotional apprehension of it. It is where the romantic transformation does not come off, where emotion remains opposed to an object that a poem falls into sentimentalism. But the point is that sentimentalism is the failure of romantic poetry, but not its characteristic.

In the same way, there is nothing new in the inflated diction of which there was certainly plenty. To the extent that there were innovations in diction, they were in the direction of plainness and colloqualism, as in Wordsworth, Browning and Hopkins. The 19th Century poets who were not innovators of

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[20] Preface to the 1853 edition of his Poems (London, 1945) p.2

[21] Eliot, 'Hamlet', **Selected Essays,** (London, Faber), p.145.

diction, but continued with the cluster of Spencer, Milton and the neo-classicists which had constituted the norm of mid-Eighteenth century style. It is that style which is often meant when romantic diction is criticized. But to the extent that poets take over a conventional style, they are not being romantic at all but quite traditional.

It may still be argued that the romantics were responsible for the revival of archaic diction. But the archaic revival was surely as benefical for refreshing the language and enlarging its resources as the introduction of scientific words by 20th century poets. The use of archaic diction is sufficiently justified by 'The Ancient Mariner' : while Eliot himself has shown how effective it can be in 'East Coker'.

There remains still the charge of formlessnees used against romantic poetry. If we consider form as existing not only around the edges of a poem, but in the relation of all its parts, it is hardly possible for a poem which has meaning to be formless, to have no relation between its parts. It is possible for a poem not to adhere to established forms, or to have no relation to the form of other poems. It is also possible for a poet not to be aware of the relation between one poem of his and another, or between his poetry and that of his contemporaries. It is possible for poets not yet to have generalized the rationale of a new kind of poetry.

This is, I think, the case with the romantic poets and their critics . In making their new kind of poetry, many romantics announced that they were sacrificing form in the interest of sincerety. They announced an ideal of artlessness-Coleridge finding the perfect poet in the Eolian harp which being played on by the wind makes music without intervention of art, Shelley finding him in the Skylark which pours out its

full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art .

If romanticism gave rise to the poetry of artlessness, spontaneity, and sincerity, to the 'spasmodic poets', Whitman and free-verse; it also gave rise to Keats, the preraphalites, and even the aesthetic and symbolic movements, to The doctrine of insincerity and to the poetry of art and artifice.