

## Roots of Romanticism

GRAHAM MARTIN<sup>1</sup> 'Romanticism' is notoriously difficult to pin down. When I discussed this with Sir Isaiah Berlin recently, we began by talking about this problem of definition. Some scholars think it's pointless to try, and they suggest that one ought to talk about 'romanticisms' - in the plural. But Professor Berlin thought this was going too far and that there was some central core of meaning that could be got at.

I asked him for his definition, but he preferred to look at the problem historically. The question he wanted to raise was: why had the really high-powered philosophic romantic movement begun in Germany at the time that it did? And he suggested a historical explanation. Germany hadn't experienced the kind of fully-fledged Renaissance that other West European countries had had. Perhaps it was Luther's influence, perhaps it was the Thirty Years War, but by the time of Louis XIV the Germans were completely dominated, politically and culturally, by a united, powerful France. This gave them a feeling of provinciality, of humiliating inferiority, and Professor Berlin went on to say:

BERLIN By the time you get to the eighteenth century, some Germans ask themselves whether there isn't something which they have which others do not have - it's a natural desire on the part of all humiliated nations. What they come up with is to say: It's all very well, the French may have the arts and the sciences, but it's all smooth, it's all external, it's all superficial, it's all artificial; there is the depth of the human soul of which the French understand nothing.

MARTIN And this is the state of mind out of which there arises romanticism in German thinking?

BERLIN Out of a reaction against French domination and everything which is associated with it, which is a spick and span, tidy universe. This appears to them to crush the spontaneity and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Then (1972) *Reader in Literature*, Open University.

depth of the unpredictable movements of the human, and especially the religious, spirit. It's a kind of secularised inner Protestantism, and it springs from pietism, it springs from preoccupation with one's own inner spiritual life, in the end, in a secularised form.

MARTIN Theology, in fact, was one of the major preliminary studies of most German philosophers, wasn't it?

BERLIN Of course, and of most Germans in general; certainly they were very preoccupied with it; it was a highly religious Protestant country - with a natural reaction against what might be called Catholic universalism, because of the small German States and because they were all locked up, each in their own political system, and of course bullied by their own little princes.

Let me say one more thing. Kant, whom you wouldn't normally describe as having anything to do with romanticism, and who hated what we now call romanticism, which he called *Schwärmerei*, sentimentality, enthusiasm - he was a tidy, severe, austere, extremely rigorous rational thinker, whatever else he was, yet in some sense he really got it going among other people.

You probably know that one of the central Kantian doctrines is the primacy of the will, the view that morality depends upon the fact that you are not conditioned by external circumstances, as against determinism - that only those acts are moral which you freely do yourself and are not made to do by external forces; either external forces in the sheer physical sense of being coerced or even in the psychological sense of emotions or drives - inner drives - which you can't control. He was absolutely convinced that morality depends on individual responsibility, something I do and which is not done to me, and something which I can choose to do. The importance of choice - now that lays huge stress on what might be called the individual will. Nature, which for the rationalist and empiricist thinkers of the West, particularly those who were dominated by science, is a kind of exquisite model to follow - marvellous machinery or a

marvellous organism - if only you understand what it's like, and if only you understand yourself, you see how you fit into it, and everything which is vicious, a cause of grief or misfortune, comes from the fact that you don't fit into this, through ignorance or through intellectual idleness; if only you understand yourself, which is to be done by rational, scientific means, you will fit harmoniously into it, and in this way all the disharmonies will disappear. This is no good for Kant, because simply to tick over like a clock is not to be an individual, is not to be free, is not to be moral, is not to be a personality, it is to be a cog. On the contrary, nature for him is something which you mould, something which is at worst hostile to you and tries to reduce you to the status of a thing or a machine, at best neutral matter upon which you impress your free creative personality - this is the moral theory of Kant. His theory enormously stresses what he calls a kingdom of ends - that is to say, goals to which you commit yourself because reason tells you they are right, goals to which you in some way subdue nature.

This view of nature as an enemy is something which is quite contrary to the central tradition of rationalist European philosophy, and it's one of the roots of romanticism. So, gradually, you get to the notion that human goals, instead of being discoverable somewhere in nature, which is what previous thinkers thought - just a sort of set of facts, in a way, so that you know what is right and wrong, you know what is good and bad, in the way in which you know what is long and short, what is heavy and light - you get from that position to a position that an end is something which you yourself create, which you yourself make for yourself, which you go for, and which is important not because it's good, not because it's bad, not because it's right, not because it's wrong, but because it's yours. This is not in Kant, of course - he'd have been horrified by this - but he initiates the process by which you get to the position that the true goals of man are not goals which are imposed upon him, but ends which he invents or creates, as he creates works of art.

MARTIN This is a very attractive theory to artists and writers, is it not? This would perhaps be one reason why German philosophers were very interesting to English poets.

BERLIN Yes, I think the history certainly of social and political thought to a large extent is the history of successive models. I mean, someone like Plato thought in terms of mathematical models. Aristotle thought in terms of biological models and tried to think of human beings and of nature as a form of growth, say. In the eighteenth century the dominant model was a scientific model. Just as Newton was able to determine the position and the movement of every particle of matter by means of a very small number of formulae from which you could deduce the positions, and in this way tidied physics up, it was thought that exactly the same process could tidy up ethics and politics, you see, and this was really the programme of the French Enlightenment. The model which I think really springs up in Germany, with some assistance from England, is the aesthetic model, in which you conceive of nature and of man, not in terms of an organism and certainly not in terms of a mechanism, but in terms of a work of art.

In the nineteenth century somebody once said 'Where is the song before it's sung? Where is the picture before it's painted?' What he meant, of course was that it is nowhere, not until I've made it. This wouldn't have been received at all well by Sir Joshua Reynolds in the eighteenth century, who thought that the business of the artist was, by some species of magic eye, by the intuition of genius, to penetrate the ordinary common-sense vision of the world and reach some ideal vision which was out there whether you knew it or not, some platonic heaven. He said: If you are going to paint, for example, a picture of King David, King David may in fact have had a harelip, for all you know, but you have no right to paint him like that. You are painting a king. This makes no sense to the romantic artist. The romantic artist doesn't think that there is an eternal image which you imitate. The romantic artist thinks you literally create something new, not only the means but the end itself. You create a vision out of yourself, out of your inner eye. The imagination is literally creative. I think that's one of the central notions of all romanticism,

that goals, purposes, the vision which you want to impart, the life which you want to lead, the State which you want to create - the political State - or anything else, is not found but invented.

MARTIN Is this the source of the very central romantic idea that the artist is a kind of hero who is on his own, struggling with enormous and difficult problems, and dedicating his whole life in an almost self-sacrificial spirit - so that a musician like Beethoven seems to be a romantic ...?

BERLIN I'm very glad you mentioned Beethoven, because the picture of Beethoven is the picture of the artist as a tousle-haired man with burning eyes, who has given up everything to his art. This is not intelligible in the eighteenth century, really. Blake, I think, was something rather like that, but he was thought rather mad in his own day. Rousseau was a little bit like that - he was thought very mad - but these are forerunners. Beethoven is triumphant. He really does manage to impose himself on the imagination of the most respectable people in the nineteenth century. And the thing about Beethoven, even apart from his music, is that he is defiant. Integrity becomes the great idea. But I think there is a whole set of new values which arise in the nineteenth century, romantic values, which really weren't known before, such as this worship of integrity for its own sake; worship of defiance for its own sake; the idea that minorities are better than majorities; that failure in some way is nobler than success. There's something rather vulgar about success. There's something rather noble and marvellous about failure. That defiance, resistance, doing your own thing - as it's called now - is the best thing that could possibly be. In the nineteenth century the man who is worshipped is the tragic hero, the man who defies the storm, the man who does his thing at no matter what price. The one thing which is not permissible is compromise, by which you sell out and I sell out and we have some kind of squalid agreement to get on together, but at the price of sacrificing our ideals. If we stand up for our ideals, no matter what, this is regarded as in some way sublime, and this is brand new. You see, if you'd said to Mozart or to Haydn that they were sacred vessels, and that their obligation as

artists was to defy the public, they wouldn't have understood what you meant. Mozart's purpose was to produce objects which would please a very large number of persons, and he thought that if he made a very beautiful object it would please a very large number of people, and he might even perhaps make a lot of money; and I'm sure that Haydn thought exactly the same. They were sincere, they were artists in the sense in which craftsmen are craftsmen, whereas by the nineteenth century this becomes a problem. There's a story, I think you probably know it, called 'The Unknown Masterpiece' by the French novelist Balzac, where there's a mad artist who covers the canvas with an absolute chaos of colours. In the end there is nothing on the canvas at all. The implication is that the mad artist is a grander being than if he had sold his genius to produce picture-postcards for the market and made a lot of money. The whole idea that the business of the artist is to convey himself, to express himself, to mould something which will express his inner convictions, no matter what they are - that's new.

MARTIN Quite a lot of the English poets, at least, were excited by the French Revolution and were very optimistic, at least at an early stage. And from this it's often assumed that there is a kind of direct relationship between romantic writers and the French Revolution.

BERLIN I wish I could talk dogmatically about this, but it seems to me that the relation of the French Revolution to romanticism is extremely complex. The French Revolution was the attempt to realise, essentially, the ideas of the Enlightenment, the idea that to all social and political questions, as to all other questions, there is one true answer, and all other answers are false. This true answer can be discovered by using the correct means for obtaining these answers - those methods which have proved triumphant in the natural sciences, Newtonian methods, a free science undertaken by intelligent men under free conditions. It's a very noble ideal, and the French Revolution was certainly conceived in that spirit. This is not the romantic spirit, but the exact opposite. No doubt the English poets, and poets in Germany too, were much excited by the

French Revolution because it was anti-tyrannical, because it was anti-despotic. Well, the effect of the French Revolution, as often happens, was very different from the motives with which it was begun. It produced a situation of conflict and war, in the end, and ultimately Napoleon. Instead of a rational organisation, it threw into relief, as a result of the rise of the Terror, the power of unbridled mobs, the charismatic power of savage individuals, of great men like Robespierre or Napoleon. So the result of the French Revolution was to emphasise the power of huge irrational forces, as dominating the universe to a far greater extent than anybody in the eighteenth century ever anticipated. So the effect of the French Revolution was to strengthen a belief in the capacity of individuals to alter the fortunes of mankind, which I think is at the heart of romantic belief. In this sense I think the French Revolution increased the force of romanticism; and it produced both the romantics of the right and romantics of the left. The great paradox which people talk about is: Which side was romanticism on? Well, the answer is: Both. It depends what these people are revolting against. In France people like Chateaubriand, who was a romantic, certainly, was of course a reactionary romantic; so was Maistre, who was a kind of romantic. What they are against is secularism, science, which doesn't make room for the deeper spiritual currents. In England people like Shelley and Byron, who were romantics, if you like, of the left, revolted against what they regarded as the bourgeois establishment, I mean the conventional pressure of habit and English philistinism, and repression on the part of Mr Pitt's police. Sometimes you get both in one - Blake, for example. For Blake the enemy is Newton. For Blake the enemy is Locke. For Blake the enemy is anybody who tries to capture the human spirit inside some kind of scientific box. When Blake says 'A Robin Red breast in a Cage / Puts all Heaven in a Rage', the cage is science. But Blake was also left-wing politically, for exactly the same reasons, because he thought the government and the police, and this awful English tidiness and their resistance to change, were part of the same awful search for order.

MARTIN This in fact would go back to your point about the romantic being the man who invents and creates values: he is therefore always going to be in some kind of antagonism with the settled condition, presumably.

BERLIN For romanticism it's an eternal process of unceasing creation, and if it's unceasing creation, then any attempt to arrest it by saying 'This is the right order' - the Communist order or the capitalist order or the clerical order, or this order or that order - is death. That's why in the German romantics you get this constant sermon, which gets into politics as well, of saying you can't really say anything of a final nature. How can you represent the forces of life by death? That's to say, how can you represent movement by rest? How can you represent the eternal movement of the human spirit by spick and span categories, by something which is fixed? A finished work of art is last year's calendar. It's over. The process is everything. This is extreme romanticism. I don't think you'll find much of that in England, but you'll find quite a lot of it in Germany. The creative process can't be described because it's in constant flux. You can have glimpses of it, you can have intimations of it, you can have symbols which stand for it. The whole of the universe is a kind of creative self which can be conveyed only on the run. It's in constant flight. You can't capture the flight. You can't photograph it: you can do it only by equally moving images. But images can't move. Words are static, fundamentally. Pictures are static. Sculpture is static. Music is better. Music is itself a kind of movement which captures the unfinishable, uncompletable, constantly forward-flowing, indefinable, impalpable. The music of Beethoven is the great romantic art because of the constant movement forward. Wagner is a terribly romantic composer with a kind of constant striving towards something which never quite finishes in a complete climax. This can take sinister forms. Let me make it quite clear: romanticism, with all its charms, is also at the base of Fascism later on. One must never blame movements for the sort of things in which they issue, and nothing of the sort was in the minds of any romantic artist at the time we're speaking of, but still the idea of the politician as an artist is



really a rather terrible one. It's all very well talking about Beethoven, that's all right. These are just great works of spiritual genius. But if you transfer it to politics you get Napoleon, who is admired by the romantics not because he is good at winning battles - because that of course is a technological attainment, which they despise - or because he produced the Napoleonic Code, which tidied up France: they don't like tidiness. They admired Napoleon because he was a great artist in human beings. Just as painters work in colour, and musicians work in sound, Napoleon worked in men. You mould enormous artistic creations called the great Napoleonic State out of human beings. This, of course, leads to the most frightful sacrifice of human life, and to the most sinister possible consequences. That's at the base of that romantic streak which is contained in all Fascist movements. So that has its origins in romanticism, too, undeniably.

MARTIN You wouldn't say, then, that this academic controversy about whether or not romanticism can be defined - you wouldn't think that this was just a matter for historical scholarship?

BERLIN I certainly wouldn't. I would think that romanticism was the biggest single shift in human consciousness for a very long time indeed, simply because it's a shift away from the belief that there is a faculty called reason, which is able to discover correct answers to all the most important questions which bedevil mankind, if only the correct method is used. It's a shift away from that towards the belief that there is no answer to these questions. All there is is just a continuous process of expressing your personality in some sort of way. And I think people feel that now too: I think among the young today you will find a great deal of devotion to the principle of expressing yourself, of doing your own thing in your own way, of not caring what other people may say, everybody for himself. Among action-painters, for example, or among various sorts of political rebels, the idea is not to conform to some kind of pattern which has been invented for you - even by Marx himself, it may be, or by some other thinker you may

respect or admire - but simply to live the kind of life which is born of your inner dreams.

Everyone who tries to prevent you from doing that is in some way suffocating you, boxing you in, trying to prevent that which is human in you from realising itself freely and spontaneously - that's romanticism all right.

*Interview for for the Open University, first broadcast October 1972, Radio 4 (Open University)*