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Conclusion: political romanticism as the concomitant emotive response to political events

Wherever a serious political interest confronts political romanticism, either the latter is placed at the disposal of politics as a welcome medium of political suggestions, or moral reproaches are made against the inner "untruthfulness" of the romantic. Every political activity — regardless of whether its content is merely the technique of conquest, the claim or the expansion of political power, or whether it rests on a legal or a moral decision — conflicts with the essentially aesthetic nature of the romantic. A person of political or moral energy quickly perceives the substitution of categories and knows how to distinguish the romantic interest in a thing from the thing itself. Because the concrete point around which the romantic novel develops is always merely occasional, everything can become romantic. In such a world, all political or religious distinctions are dissolved into an interesting ambiguity. The king is a romantic figure as well as the anarchist conspirator, and the caliph of Baghdad is no less romantic than the patriarch of Jerusalem. Here everything can be substituted for everything else.

Under the impression of the lack of objectivity that a romantic treatment of political questions easily evokes in an honest opponent, it is especially opponents of Adam Müller, such as Rehberg and Solger, who called him a sophist. The word has a positive sense. It is not simply an empty term of abuse. That is because the connection between subjectivism and sensualism that is exhibited in Greek sophistry also nullified all objectivity and made substantive argument into a capricious productivity of the subject. The orator felt no other sense of responsibility than that of speaking well, and he knew no other satisfaction than the pleasure taken in the well-executed, artistic form of his speech. For example, in the letters of Libanius, Julian's teacher, this completely amoral and natural enjoyment of his own oratorical achievement is expressed in similes, in which he says that he speaks like the bird sings and has no other wish than to sing like the nightingale. Even though the aestheticism of these Sophists provides the basis for many similarities with romantic productivity, they still lack what is specifically romantic: the occasionalistic displacement into a "higher third" sphere that leads the romantic into mysticism or theology, the secularization of God into the genial subject, who is not satisfied with a formal perfection even in art, but instead employs forms in an arbitrary and occasional fashion in order to find the higher meaning and a metaphysical or cosmic resonance for his subjective experience. The essential contradiction of the romantic — which, especially in political romanticism, justifies the impression of inner untruthfulness — is that the romantic, in the organic passivity that belongs to his occasionalist structure, wants to be productive without becoming active.

This remains the core of political romanticism. As subjectified occasionalism, it did not have the power — even in relation to itself and in spite of numerous psychological refinements and confessional subtleties — to objectify its intellectual nature in a theoretical or practical-substantive connection. Its subjectivism directed it, not to concepts and philosophical systems, but rather to a kind of lyrical paraphrase of experience. The latter could be combined with that organic passivity. Or, where artistic talent is lacking, it is linked with the half lyrical, half intellectualistic accompaniment of the activity of another person described above, following political events with marginal character glosses, catch phrases, viewpoints, emphases and antitheses, allusions and permutational comparisons, often agitated and excited, but always without making its own decision and assuming its own responsibility and risk. Political activity is not possible in this way. But criticism is, which can discuss everything and inflate it ideologically, revolution as well as restoration, war and peace, nationalism and internationalism, imperialism and its renunciation. Here as well, its method was the occasionalist departure from the domain to which the disputed opposition belongs, from the domain of the political into the higher domain. During the restoration, that meant an occasionalist departure into the domain of the religious. The result: absolute governmentalism; in other words, absolute passivity. The outcome: a lyrical and discursive tremolo of ideas that sprang from the decision and the responsibility of others.
Where political activity begins, political romanticism ends, and it is no contradiction and no accident that the successors of Bonald and de Maistre, the politically active royalists of the Third Republic, derided the revolutionary ideology of the liberal bourgeois as romanticism with the same determination that the liberal German bourgeois — when he made an attempt to become politically active — discovered the romantic in his reactionary brother. In the nineteenth century, both bourgeois revolutionaries and bourgeois reactionaries have a romanticism alongside them as a companion, like a colorful moving shadow.

Political romanticism is a concomitant emotive response of the romantic to a political event. This political event evokes a romantic productivity in an occasional fashion. An impression suggested by historical and political reality is supposed to become the occasion for subjective creativity. When the subject lacks real aesthetic — in other words, lyrical-musical — productivity, an argument develops out of historical, philosophical, theological, or some other scientific material, an intellectual music for a political program. This is not the irrationality of myth. That is because the creation of a political or a historical myth arises from political activity, and the fabric of reasons, which myth cannot forgo either, is the emanation of a political energy. A myth arises only in the real war. Romantic activity, however, is a contradiction in terms. Romanticism not only lacks the specific connection with the restoration, which erroneous German linguistic usage designates “political romanticism”; it has no necessary relationship to revolution either. The isolated and absolute ego is elevated above both and uses both as an occasion. One should not be misled by an unclear terminology from literary history — a terminology that is itself also influenced by romanticism — to confuse the pretentious expansion of the aesthetic, which the romantic movement is based on, with political energy; no more than one should, conversely, make the incidental feature most noteworthy in the everyday political polemics of the German reactionary period, the connection with the Catholic restoration (at that time, the strongest power), into the definitive criterion. It is also inaccurate to situate the “excessive individualism” of which Seillière and the other French speak in the subjectivistic elements of the romantic. Here individualism has a sense only if the word retains a moral meaning as the antithesis of what is collective or social, and only if it designates the autonomous in opposition to the heteronomous. There is, to be sure, a connection with the autonomy of the individual. By virtue of the displacement into the domain of the aesthetic, however, the concept of autonomy, which is essentially moral, is completely changed, and all such distinctions are dissolved. In every romantic, we can find examples of anarchistic self-confidence as well as an excessive need for sociability. He is just as easily moved by altruistic feelings, by pity and sympathy, as by presumptuous snobbery.

But all this has nothing to do with either autonomy or heteronomy, and it moves entirely within the sphere of romantic subjectivity. An emotion that does not transcend the limits of the subjective cannot be the foundation of a community. The intoxication of sociability is not a basis of a lasting association. Irony and intrigue are not points of social crystallization; and no societal order can be established on the basis of the need, not to be alone, but rather to be suspended in the dynamic of an animated conversation. This is because no society can discover an order without a concept of what is normal and what is right. Conceptually, the normal is unromantic because every norm destroys the occasional license of the romantic. In the face of a normative concept, even the romantic qualities of antithesis and contrast break down. The courage of a brave man is not the higher unity formed from depression and exaltation. The rationally ordered state is not a synthesis of anarchy and despotism. As such, legal ideas are unromantic in the same way. Viewed romantically, injustice is only a dissonance that is aesthetically resolved “in a sacred music, an endless feeling of the higher life.” This is not spoken in a metaphorical sense, but rather in the only category that is accessible to the experience of the romantic. That is why there is neither a romantic law nor a romantic ethics, just as it would be confused to speak of a lyrical or a musical ethics. There is a political romanticism in the same sense that there is a political lyric.

Thus the riotous disorder of the romantic is reduced to its simple principle of a subjectified occasionalism, and the mys-
serious contradiction of the diverse political tendencies of so-called political romanticism is explained as a consequence of the moral deficiency of a lyricism that can take any content at all as the occasion for aesthetic interest. The question of whether monarchist or democratic, conservative or revolutionary ideas are romanticized is irrelevant to the nature of the romantic. They signify only occasional points of departure for the romantic productivity of the creative ego. The core of this fantastic superiority of the subject conceals, however, the renunciation of every active alteration of the real world, a passivism whose consequence is that henceforth, romanticism itself is employed as an expedient of unromantic activity. In spite of its subjective superiority, ultimately romanticism is only the concomitant of the active tendencies of its time and its environment. Rousseau's historical significance is that he romanticized concepts and arguments of the eighteenth century; his lyricism worked to the benefit of the Revolution, the victorious movement of his time. German romanticism first romanticized the Revolution, and then the dominant restoration. After 1830, it again became revolutionary. In spite of irony and paradox, a consistent dependence is manifest. In the most limited area of its distinctive productivity, in lyrical and musical poetry, subjective occasionalism may discover a small island of free creativity. But even here it unconsciously submits to the strongest and most proximate power. And its superiority over the present, which is taken in a purely occasional fashion, undergoes an extremely ironical reversal: Everything that is romantic is at the disposal of other energies that are unromantic, and the sublime elevation above definition and decision is transformed into a subservient attendance upon alien power and alien decision.

Notes

Preface

1. Giovanni Papini, Il crepuscolo dei filosofi, 56.

2. Donoso Cortés, El clasicismo y el romanticismo, II, 5–41 (this first appeared in 1858 in the Correo Nacional).


4. K. E. Lusser, Hochland, May 1924. See especially p. 177. See also Kathleen Murray, Taine und die englische Romantik (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker and Humblot, 1924), introduction.

5. Kathleen Murray, Taine und die englische Romantik, 55f.

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2. See the essay "Friedrich von Gentz und das Prinzip der Genussucht," in Ruge and Echtermeyer, eds., Hallische Jahrbücher (1839), 281ff. See also Ruge, Friedrich Gentz und die politische Konsequenz der Romantik (Gesammelte Schriften, I, 432–530).

3. Friedrich Karl Wittichen, ed., Briefe von und an Friedrich von Gentz (Munich and Berlin, 1909–).

4. Friedrich Karl Wittichen, Mitteilungen des Institutes für österreichische Geschichtsforschung 50 (1910), 110.