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The Hero and the Only One

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CHAPTER I

THE RENAISSANCE SELF

It is well known that Kierkegaard wanted the brief inscription, “That *Individual*” on his epitaph. He left it written on a note from 1847, that is, one year before the century was about to demonstrate the disintegrated breakup of subjectivity after having exacerbated it to impossible limits of daring.

However, there commonly is a mistaken, or at least confused idea of the nineteenth century when one presumes that it was exclusively the period in which the “Self” sailed on its voyage.

Before Romanticism, the Renaissance was the great historical moment of emergence of the Individual. Thus, when evaluating the formation of modern thought, it would be good to maintain permanently the idea that Romanticism was to a great extent a renaissance and the Renaissance was enormously romantic. Who would not attribute to a Romantic poet verses like these, unless the stamp of his unmistakable style didn't guide us beforehand?

*But when my glass shows me myself indeed
beated and chopped with tanned antiquity
mine own self-love quite contrary I read:
self so self-loving were iniquity
Tis thee, myself, that for myself I praise,*

*painting my age with beauty of thy days.*¹

Indeed, in which collection of poems, aside from those in the poetics of the “Tragic-Heroic-Romantic Self,” can one encounter the Individual more violently and dramatically engaged than in Shakespeare’s sonnets?

Only the Greeks rival Shakespeare in their romantic idolatry. Keats would like his soul to transmigrate to that of Shakespeare; disdainful Goethe reveres it without fear; and even later, Nietzsche —romantic insofar as he is the codifier and heir to all the destructive lucidity of the romantics — although in his austere critique he values hardly anybody, he keeps on naming Shakespeare together with the greats: Heraclitus, Sophocles and Homer.

The romantics are, without doubt, Shakespearean, but, for the sake of playing with time, one would have to add that they are so, in the same way Shakespeare is romantic. Lionel Trilling noted the parallel between the Shakespearean and the Romantic Self, faced with the common “horror of life’s truth,”² with an identical and high sense of its own veracity. Maybe the basic difference between the one and the other —a difference in which playing with time is no longer possible— is that whereas Shakespeare’s will is vigorous and spontaneous, tragically offensive, the Romantic will is decidedly defensive, heroically “Numantine.”

However, is that Romantic-Renaissance affinity attributable only to Shakespeare? Of course not. Shakespeare is only the last scene of the first act of the modern “tragedy of the Self” —a tragedy whose second act is Romanticism and whose third act (or maybe conclusion) is carried on by Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Kafka, Joyce, Beckett...The first scene should be placed, undoubtedly, the moment Giotto paints the frescoes on Santa Maria Della Arena in Padua, and Petrarch writes:

*O tempo, o ciel volubil che fuggendo
inganni i ciechi e miseri mortali...*³
[O time, O revolving heavens that fleeing,
deceive us blind and wretched mortals]

And Dante uses Vergil to descend to the subsoil of a dark and scholastically uniform metaphysical continent.

According to Schelling (in *Ueber Dante in Philosophischer Beziehung*), Dante is the initiator of a modern epic based on the absolute hegemony of the Individual. This is perfectly correct considering that Dante inaugurates, with an exceptional poetic force, the centrifugal impulse —that optimistic expedition of man towards the world— which, after demolishing the foundations of traditional knowledge, will culminate in the magnificent yet desolate clairvoyance of the science of the Renaissance. Before Dante and Petrarch the self lies encased within the fortress

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets (LXII)*, *Complete Works*, Oxford University Press, 1971, p.1114.

² Lionel Trilling, *The Opposing Self. Nine Essays of Criticism*, New York, The Viking Press, 1950, p.48.

³ Francesco Petrarca, *Le Rime*, CCCLV, Turin, Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1955, p.453.

of a tyrannical yet consoling ontology. After Galileo and Shakespeare and past the adventure of self-recognition, its drained vitality will get lost in the ways of empiricism, rationalism and the restoration of traditional metaphysics. In between each moment the human —now the modern human— has managed to see for the first time, with a mixture of fascination and horror, the true dimension of its loneliness and power.

In spite of Copernicus' and Kepler's doubts, the Renaissance reinstates, albeit in a different conceptual landscape, the pre-Socratic ideas of unity and the infinity of the universe. But, even more importantly, Renaissance philosophy introduces the fact that this unity is not the result of syllogisms but "it is the feeling by itself that brings the tendency to unity and infinity."⁴ This antagonistic tension, this *coincidentia oppositorum* between the unique and infinite physical Universe and the Universe of the Self which aims, without success towards that infinity and unity, is the basis of both the "Renaissance anguish," already perceptible in the philosophical discussions of the *Florentine Quattrocento* and in Durer's and Michelangelo's art, as well as in the well known Romantic pessimism. Therefore, when young Goethe writes : “

Wo fass ich dich, unendliche Natur?”⁵
[Where may I grasp thee, infinite nature?]

His appeal is not only appropriately representative of a recurrent aspect of Romantic thought, but it also falls into one of the greatest obsessions of the modern spirit soon to be illustrated in the “*world as unlimited limitation*” by Nicola Cusano.

After the euphoric erosion of the old world, the perception of this “unlimited limitation” slows down the centrifugal tendency of the Renaissance revolution which, in a sharp historical turn, takes on a centripetal character. “The Renaissance man,” previously open to the world with confidence, seems to return to the “know thyself” of the Delphic oracle. It does not seem far-fetched to link the modification of the course of the itinerary of Renaissance art, from Masaccio's Naturalism to Raphael's Classicism, and from there to the Expressionistic “*terribilità*” of Michelangelo. Maybe one cannot encounter a better testimony of the perplexity of “the Renaissance man” before his own adventure, than Durer's *Melancholy*. There, through a difficult to discern equilibrium between iconographic elements, we can perceive the magical indecisiveness of the man who seemed to have reached the desired divine status by means of science and reason .

It is precisely from this clash, from this confrontation between the power and the impotence of man, from which the most Romantic of the Renaissance spirit emerges. Speaking of Durer, Erwin Panofski referred to his “quasi Romantic conviction of the individual value of artistic *Ingenium*.”⁶ Thus the concept of

⁴ Karl Joel, *Der Ursprung Der Naturphilosophie*, Jena, 1906, p.29.

⁵ W. Goethe, *Urfaust*, v. 102. *Goethes Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe, ed. Erich Trunz, Hamburg, C.H. Warner Verlag, 1960, III, p.369.

⁶ Erwin Panofski, *Idea*, Madrid, Catedra, 1977, p.108.

“genius,” as well as the blossoming of Self which emerges in the Renaissance and again in Romanticism, do not feed from this unlimited power but from power continuously confronted with its own impotence. *From this perspective, one could say that the “modern spirit” is born the moment the Renaissance man perceives the true meaning of his “endless flight,” marveling at his power and trembling in the face of his impotence.*

Only someone who was a witness and, because of their place in history, could keep track of the Renaissance, could have taken note of this birth. This, to a great extent, is the case of Montaigne in his *Essais*. In the same way that Rousseau’s *Confessions* open the way to Romanticism, one could consider that these other confessions close the Renaissance. When Montaigne, in a Heraclitian tone, writes that: “there is no permanent existence either in our being or in that of objects. We ourselves, our faculty of judgment and all mortal things are flowing and rolling ceaselessly”⁷ it reflects not only the certain destruction of Ecclesiastic ontology but also the profound skepticism that takes over the last “Renaissance man,” he who, by the force of his findings, is forced to go from centrifugal enthusiasm to the centripetal withdrawal into self.

As a consequence, two hundred years before historical Romanticism, Montaigne is ready to advance the core of the Romantic *Weltanschauung* when he notes: “*I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics, that is my physics*” because “every man bears the whole stamp of the human condition.”⁸ This affirmation was too revolutionary to be accepted either by the supporters of the reinstatement of pre-Renaissance ontology or by those who refused to accept the “optimistic-pessimistic” double teachings of the Renaissance. If for Malebranche and the Jansenists, who deny man access to his own subjectivity, the “modern Self” exposed in the *Essais* is unacceptable, neither Bacon, with his illusion of man dominating nature, nor Hume, with his idea of man as a passive subject, converge at the crossroads of this doubtful and skeptic Self vigorously defended by Montaigne. This very Self which in the end will be the one that the Renaissance will eventually leave as legacy for the romantic consciousness.

2

A TOAST AGAINST NEWTON

Thus, the rebirth of the Self during Romanticism undoubtedly implies recovering the Renaissance concept of man as a unity of power and impotence, of knowledge and enigma, of subjectivity and nature. A unity that denies both the anti-Humanistic transcendentalism (which gave rise to the Catholic Counter-Reformation as well as to a great part of the “Protestant” Reformation), as well as the “*Imperium hominis*” with which Bacon infused both Empiricism and the Enlightenment. A unity that rejects man as beggar or man as god since

⁷ M. de Montaigne, *Essais*, Paris, Gallimard, “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade,” 11, 12, p.589.

⁸ M. de Montaigne, op.cit., III, 13, p.1042, and III, 2, p. 779.

it accepts both when it claims that “man is a god when he dreams and a beggar when he thinks” (Hölderlin, III, 10).

The Romantic man abhors the idea of “dominating nature.” His relationship with it is neither religious nor scientific and does have a lot to do with magic. He does not refuse to know it but refuses to ill-treat it with the rudeness of positivism. Its enigmas both fascinate and unsettle him; nature is magic and life⁹, just as it was during the Renaissance. It is known that Goethe devotes extensive effort to develop a general theory of color (*Farbenlehre*) which, by all accounts was scientifically wrong after what Newton demonstrated a hundred years earlier in his *Optics*. But this Goethian stubbornness, equally comparable to his unusual idea that the fundamental object of mathematics is not to make phenomena measurable but must specifically engage itself in making them *visible*, cannot be separated from that special relationship that the Romantic Self establishes between nature and his own subjectivity.

However if tenacity will not make measured Goethe forget caution, the same is not true of the majority of the Romantics who do not disguise at all their open rebellion with the “Newtonian man.” “Confusion to Mathematics!” shouted John Keats and Charles Lamb in their famous tavern toast against Newton, whom they accuse of having destroyed the poetry of the rainbow. (Later, Keats himself in *Lamia* will unknowingly apply similar arguments to those exposed by Goethe in *Farbenlehre* and exactly like those employed by Hölderlin in *Empedocles*). This toast is rounded off by Blake with mediocre as well as significant verses:

*And here behold the loom of Locke whose wool rages dire
Washed by the water-wheels of Newton.*¹⁰

D’Alembert, with his enthusiasm for the English idols of the Enlightenment, defines with great clarity the Janus *bifrons*, enemy of the Romantics: “<Locke> ... created metaphysics almost as Newton had created physics.”¹¹ Facing the dialectic tension between subject and object present in Renaissance and Romantic thought, Newton and Locke’s systems disassociate the one from the other, turning them both into passive organisms. In Newton’s synthesis of the science of the Renaissance —unilateral insofar as it annuls its magical space— nature becomes a gigantic “hydraulic wheel,” ready to be passed from the hands of a transcendental god to those of an omnipotent man. In a life understood as a blank page written on by experience (the central idea of article I of *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*), Locke denies man any possibility of accessing his own subjectivity, his own Self.

Logically, like in D’Alembert, Romanticism also perceives the complementary nature of these world views. Thus, if the Romantics refute the Lockian

⁹ A. Koyré, “Paracelsic nature, as well as the nature of Renaissance philosophers is magic and life,” *Mystiques, spirituels, alchimistes du XVI siècle allemande*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971.

¹⁰ W. Blake, “Jerusalem, emanation of the Giant Albion,” in *The Complete Poems*, London, Longman Edition, 1963, p.655.

¹¹ Jean le Rond d’Alembert, *Discourse préliminaire de l’Encyclopédie*, Paris, Gonthier, 1965, II, p. 99.

restriction of passive perception and demand a double function of the mind, both perceiving and creating in an identical way, they find the mechanic passivity of Newtonian nature unacceptable. In the “Newtonian man” the Self, the subject receptive to “a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity and are in a perpetual flux and movement” (Hume) is annihilated precisely by the weight of his own power: the power of the beggar who believed he managed to become a god through reflection and who, by renouncing dreams, has reduced himself to the condition of beggar.

Under the brilliant cloaking of the optimism of the Enlightenment and the Empiricist progress, the Romantics cannot ignore the double reduction to which modern man is subjected; when drawing open the discreet veil that hid the tyrannical grandeur of nature, man has become smaller, but since he is incapable of discovering the greatness of his own subjectivity he feels doubly minimized. *The great “Age of Reason” has created the great anguish of reason.*

In the sonnet “To Science” an irritated Edgar Allan Poe questions science:

*Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities? ¹²*

And in *Diechterberuf*, probing into the scientific destruction of magic, Hölderlin complains that:

Zu land ist alles Göttliche dienstbar schon,
Und alle Himmelskräfte vercherzt, verbraucht,
Die Gütigen, zur Lust, danklos, ein
Schlaues Geschlecht und zu kennen wähnt es,
Wenn ihnen der Erhabne den Acker baut,
Das Tageslicht und den Donnerer, und es späht
Das Sehrohr wohl sie all und zählt und
Nennet mit Namen des Himmels Sterne. (II, 48-49)

[Too long the servitude to the divine lasted /and lost is all celestial strength; squandered /the benefactors out of pleasure, ungratefully by /a perished race who thought had the knowledge /while the Highest tills the fields,/the light of day, and the thundering god and /the spyglass spy and he numbers and/names the celestial stars].

So is the Romantic mood anti-scientific? To a certain extent, although from an entirely different perspective: “emancipating science from its practical servitude was probably the greatest feat of liberation by Romanticism.”¹³ Following Wieland’s attempt in *Die Natur der Dinge*, what Romantic thought seeks, as it appears for example in the works by Goethe and Novalis, is to redress the relationship between science and poetry according to the non-Newtonian concept of the nexus between nature and mankind.

¹² Edgar Allan Poe, *Complete Stories and Poems*, New York, Doubleday and Company, 1964, p.771.

¹³ Herbert Cysarz, *Erfahrung und Idee*, Leipzig, 1921, p.215.

The Romantics never renounce the myth of the “Golden Age,” —neither does Goethe himself when he decides he is a “Classicist.” It is an age that they identify with the ancient Greeks but acknowledge that it is truly timeless, that, in fact, nature and beauty formed a unique and organic whole to which man, who was hero and god, had access. It is an age that is regarded as the ideal mirror image to that of a much sought for unity between science and poetry. This state of being characteristic of all *Naturphilosophie* —and monistic insofar as it is an alliance between Self and nature as opposed to the duality of the “Newtonian man”— is reflected in Adam Müller’s writings from 1808: “The view that our contemporaries tend to have, divides all phenomena into two clear types, as if one law prevailed in the reign of reality and a completely different one in the reign of ideas as well as in the intimate productions of man. This was not the view of things maintained by the ancients! Ethics and physics both have the same object!”¹⁴

For Romantic *Naturphilosophie*, the “Golden Age” had its logical followers in the pre-Socratic natural philosophers so that, according to Ludwig Börne, “in not making any distinction between science and life they could think about their lives and live their thoughts which were strong and lasting because the plenitude of the existence of their creators was imprinted on them.”¹⁵ But this union between science and life, in which science is basically “a science of life,” gives ground and breaks down when scientific-philosophical thought loses, or else abandons, its privileged magic-speculative tone in favor of the empiricist one. Thus, in the same way as in the metaphoric Nietzschean “death of tragedy,” the “death of science” (insofar as it is joined to poetry) originates as the first step to the formation of the “science of death” (as defined by Friedrich Schlegel in a letter to Boisserie from 1810).

For the Romantics, the “science of death” is evident when like Francis Bacon, “they bet everything on the victory over nature,” as well as when, paraphrasing the well known aphorism by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, the term “soul” is reduced to the X,Y,Z of algebra.

Romantic thought, in attempting to reconcile men with nature by means of the mythic dream of the “Golden Age,” seeks to restore harmony between science and poetry in order to save the Self from the “anguish of reason.” (One of the main causes of the Romantic “desolation,” violently perceivable in Leopardi, as well as in all the “poetics of the tragic-heroic Self” will be, precisely, the impossibility of such reconciliation and restoration).

¹⁴ Adam Müller, *Vorlesungen über die deutsche Wissenschaft und Literatur*, Munich, A.Salz Verlag, 1920, p.119.

¹⁵ L. Börne, “Altes Wissen, neues Leben” (1823), in *Schriften*, Leipzig Reclam, s.f. I, 96.

For the relation between *Naturphilosophie* and the pre-Socratics see Karl Joel, *op.cit.* One of the top exponents of *Naturphilosophie*, Franze Baader, writes on this topic: “We have in no way overtaken the ancients in physics as a science but only in experimental and observation techniques. Likewise, we have overtaken their moral codification but in no way their morality.

However this desired unity is not an effort that is exclusive to the romantics. It is present in the Renaissance and continues after it within some veins of thought which had a definite influence on the Romantics, such as the so called “German metaphysics” and, of course, Spinoza. The destruction of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic universe of the Renaissance is not just simultaneous with the inevitable Newtonian order.¹⁶ In fact, in some of those primary factors of that destruction, like Copernicus, highly influenced by Pico della Mirandola and Ficino, or like Giordano Bruno, the liberation of the tight religious cloak does not imply abandoning the magic-poetic side of knowledge. Faced with the vertiginous awareness of an infinite and eternal Universe, thinkers like Bruno or Paracelsus try to have men grow towards those dimensions precisely through the unification of science and poetry, of man and nature.

Their failed effort is what makes them the prophets of the attempt started two centuries later by the romantics, also without success.

3

“ANIMA MUNDI”

A myth derived in an unorthodox way from Plato, serves Romanticism in the same way as it served the Renaissance, that is to give birth to the projected union between man and nature: it is the myth of *Anima Mundi*. Against the “man of scholasticism,” Renaissance uses it to humanize nature and naturalize men. Against the “Newtonian man,” reduced to the norms of the physic-mathematical truth, Romanticism uses it to give nature a human heart and man a natural soul.

The Renaissance-Romantic interpretation of the “Anima Mundi” needs to be understood *not as a transcendental-religious interpretation but as an immanently-critical one*.¹⁷ What matters is not so much the convoluted cosmogony in the *Timaeus*, but the fact that the soul, given to the world by the Platonist demiurge, transforms the latter into a “*living creature*.” (Note that the “Romantic Plato” is far from having a linguistically rigorous hermeneutics because he is inherited practically intact from the “Renaissance Plato.”) Only with the decline of the Romantic movement will the 19th century erudite philology restore the “literal Plato” with fairness. The Neoplatonist Academy in Florence —the most important exponent of this “Renaissance Plato”— when recovering the original concept of “Anima Mundi” by means of Marsilio Ficino’s *Platonic Theology*, it does it as a synthesis of Plato, with Arabic and Cabalistic Neoplatonist traditions, in a confusing and non-systematic philosophical amalgam.¹⁸

¹⁶ Alexandre Koyré proved it for Paracelsus in *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (New York, 1958), and for Bruno in *Mystiques, spirituels, alchimistes du XVI^e siècle allemande* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

¹⁷ Francis Conford in *The Philosophy of Plato*, Oxford University Press, 1958, p.129, provides an extensive explanation of this aspect.

¹⁸ Eugenio Garin, *La cultura del Rinascimento*, Bari, Laterza, 1973, pp. 130-134.

In the height of the Renaissance the world, conceived by scholasticism as a “living creature,” allows Pico della Mirandola, undoubtedly the key character of the *Quattrocento*, to define the *centrality of man in the Universe*. Pico shares the hypothesis of the unlimited and eternal universe with Nicola Cusano, to whom he is linked. From his pen, man, inherently endowed, unlimited and eternal, will reach a cosmic dignity never before seen, later to dissolve tragically with the Galilean perception of the impossible anthropocentrism of the earlier Renaissance. Pico della Mirandola —who likes to quote the precept: “a great miracle is man, oh Asclepius!” that Hermetic thinking puts in Mercury’s mouth— synthesizes in man himself, man’s fusion with nature because “man joins and gathers, within the plenitude of his own substance, every nature that forms part of the world.”¹⁹ As a consequence of this, Mirandolian *pax philosophiae* points towards the unity between man and nature, philosophy and poetry, science and magic.

The attempt by the German *Naturphilosophie* is akin to that pursued by Pico della Mirandola and the Neoplatonist tradition of Florentine origin. However, the irreparable ontological schism between man and nature took place between these two attempts, resulting in the mechanization of nature and the minimization of man. From the crucial discoveries of Copernicus —also a Mirandolist— and Columbus, Giordano Bruno will still attempt to deduce a magic-natural system based on the infinity of space, the unity of matter and the creative potential of man and nature. However this concept will not be the one to take root at this time, but rather the one originated by Kepler and Galileus that is systematized by Newton and Locke.

Between the periods of the Florence Academy and the *Naturphilosophie*, the idea of the “Anima Mundi” —being more akin to the Renaissance and Mirandola than Platonist— becomes diluted by the historical superiority of the “mechanical world order” of Newton and the Enlightenment. However, running parallel to the hegemonic philosophy of the time, it is possible to encounter a well developed tradition centered on the Neo-Platonist schools of Oxford and Cambridge and specifically on the figure of Shaftesbury who safeguards the concept of “Anima Mundi” from the Renaissance for its eventual Romantic development.²⁰ More specifically: *the bio-centered view of nature, and of the human aspiration to the One, so central to the Romantic conscience, proceeds directly from the English anti-empiricist opposition* (a bridge, together with Spinoza, between the Renaissance and Romantic concepts of nature.)

¹⁹ G. Pico della Mirandola. *Oratio de Homines Dignitate*, Italian ed. By E. Garin, Florence, Sansoni, 1942, p.326.

²⁰ W, Dilthey in *Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation*, Gessamelte Shriftn, Band 11, p.284 and 398, describes this tradition as Moneist-Pantheist. Fred J. Powicke, *The Cambridge Platonists*, London, Dent and Sons, 1962, ch.11, analyses extensively the notion of “bridge” of the British Neoplatonists.

Shaftesbury regards the “Anima Mundi” as that “... original soul, diffusive, vital in all, inspiring the whole.”²¹ Reality is also conceived by means of another archetype dear to Romanticism: a tree in which everything conflates through the branches forming an organic solidarity which is, at the same time, a unit of aesthetics. “Everything we can perceive manifests order and perfection.”²² Thus Shaftesbury inherits and also leaves as a legacy the Florentine Neoplatonist belief of the priority of the aesthetic conscience, with its identification between Beauty and Goodness, which will open the way to the radical Keatsian expression that:

*Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*²³

At this point one should note the different caliber of intentions between Shaftesbury, on the one hand, and Pico della Mirandola and Bruno on the other. Whereas the last two, with the strength that is characteristic of the Renaissance revolution, still attempt to link man and nature “from within,” through a magical nexus, the former, undoubtedly more Platonist, conceives only of the link “from outside,” through aesthetic contemplation. Only later will the Romantic movement be the one that proposes, often with a desperate awareness of the unfeasibility of the attempt, a new “internal” link between man and nature by means of a recast magic-aesthetic dimension.

Shaftesbury’s man does not achieve the highly anthropocentric dignity that he achieved in the Renaissance as “homo secundus deus” or as “alter deus.” Only one type of man achieves it, the aesthetic man, the artist, the poet; he is *just Prometheus, under Jove*, the only man who is able to get immersed into the “soul of the world” to become one with it. It is obvious that under the reign of the “Newtonian man,” Shaftesbury cannot attempt to recover the totalizing visions of Bruno or Paracelsus, so he is addressing a small minority. Thus, the Promethean concept of the poet is born and takes momentum. It is a concept unequivocally Romantic by which the poet, like Prometheus, even knowing the futility of his attempt at a historical moment of an irreversible schism of man and nature, tries to take from the adverse fate of his time the fire capable of regenerating the unity between man and nature, the *fire of the One*.

Even though it is true, as Panofsky writes, that this psychological and individual image of “genius” is also a product of the Renaissance²⁴, it is undoubtedly this second concept by Shaftesbury of the “poet as Second Maker” the one which crystallizes during Romanticism. The distinct quality of the “romantic genius,” both from the *Genieperiode* as well as the later one, with respect to the “genius

²¹ Anthony Ashley Cooper, Count of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, etc.* Ed. J.M. Robertson, Gloucester, 1942, II, p.10-11, p.65.

²² Idem, *ibidem*.

²³ The ending of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Shaftesbury’s idea of the priority of the awareness of beauty opens the long eighteenth century tradition of “aesthetic reflection”: Du Bos, Vico, Baumgarten, Young, Burke, Diderot, Kant...

²⁴ Erwin Panofsky, *op. cit.*, p.65.

of the Renaissance” is that whereas the former has to fight the contradictory *pathos* of his time, facing unknown darkness, the latter takes on his suffering with a clear image of his torn destiny.

In Shaftsbury, however, the Second Maker still maintains aesthetic caution when communicating with nature. This is undoubtedly the result of his optimistic view of the “Anima Mundi,” a universal harmony clearly evoked by the learned Diderot, translator and a partial follower of Shaftesbury with the enthusiasm of Theocles in *Entretiens sur les fils naturel*. This aesthetic optimism continues to be present in Wieland, who in *Die Natur der Dinge* affirms that “majesty, simplicity, beauty, and harmony, all of them in their highest possible manifestation, are the soul of the universe.”²⁵ However, what characterizes the romantic reception of the “Anima Mundi” is its progressive transformation into myth, initially searching for its most devoted ally in “mother” nature, and later, like in the last Leopardi, seeing in her the most despicable enemy. What in Shaftesbury, in Wieland, in Herder (in his *Gott*) and even, although less sincerely, in Schelling is still a religious-pantheistic concept, in the “tragic-heroic-romantic poetics” is basically an immanently-mythic interpretation linked to its titanic and promethean intention.

In *Weltseele*, Goethe attempts to define a mythic cosmogony penetrated by man. Novalis, taking it a step further, presents the possibility, already suggested by Baader, of accessing an *pan-psychism* mind and a “universal psyche.”²⁶ But where the “Anima Mundi” acquires its highest degree of mythologizing, serving as a magic-poetic fusion of man and nature, is in Hölderlin’s work and, particularly, in *Der Tod des Empedokles*. In this tragedy, the hero, epitome of Hölderlian-ism, is the result of the counterpoised tension between nature made divine, and the poet who, attempting to become flesh in nature is also searching for his own promotion to the divine. On the one hand, like Orpheus, the poet, Second Maker — where the first is no longer a transcendent God, but rather immanently divine nature — attempts to penetrate the entire magnitude of the Universe by uniting heaven and hell:

*Stieg ich kühnen Sinns zum Hades nieder
Wo kein Sterblicher dich noch ersah
Schwänge sich das mutige Gefieder
Zum Orion auf, so wärst du da... (An die Stille)*

[If with my brave spirit to Hades I were to descend/to the place where no mortal ever found you/ If with the flight of daring feathers I would throw myself/to Orion’s heights, there I would also find you...]

²⁵ Alexander Gode-Von Aesch, *El Romanticismo alemán y las ciencias naturales*, Madrid, Espasa Calpe, 1947, p.59.

²⁶ Goethe was a translator and commentator of Shaftesbury and was influenced by him, as proven by Dilthey, Gusdorf, Ayrault, and others. It is visible, for example, in the *Weltseele* and the aphorsims on nature. One can see the same influence in Schelling, author of an article entitled “Weltseele,” though mediated by Herder, Novalis’s “Anima Mundi” was especially influenced by the ideas of natural magnetism and pan-psychism supported by Franz Baader, the strongest supporter of *Naturphilosophie*.

On the other hand there is the “soul of the world,” sometimes ethereal, as sweet and welcoming, sometimes Jovian²⁷ and implacable but always impenetrable to mortal man: the cruel destiny of Empedocles, throwing himself into the Etna volcano, represents in fact the tragic conviction that the communion of the hero with nature is as impossible to achieve in life, as it is to give up the attempt.

In Hölderlin, as in Wordsworth and the first English Romanticism, the mythologizing of nature is renovated with a surprising vigor. If in the Renaissance the world can be considered an “animal organism” where “*ogni cosa si muove*” (Bruno), in Romanticism, on the one hand biocentrism and on the other the general biologization of the Universe are both completed. The discovery of electricity and the certainty of a *fluidum universale* – as stated by the revered Mesmer in his medical-circus exhibitions – weren’t they perhaps, the necessary scientific signs to confirm a biodynamic concept of the world as opposed to the dominant physic-mechanic view of the world as “living creature”? For Hölderlin, the mythic-poetic cult to Father Ether (“Vater Aether”), a strategy in support of bi-centrism plays a similar function to the Heliocentric solar cult presented by Copernicus in *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* in support of anthropocentrism.²⁸ In Father Ether and Mother Earth (“Mutter Erde”),²⁹ the Hölderlinian “soul of the world” develops and materializes, and the poet cries out to one in order to obtain in the other the final deification.

...und eeingedenk
Der alten Einigkeit die dunkle Mutter
Zum Aether aus die Feuerarme breitet
Und itzt der Herrscher kömmt in seinem Strahl
Dann folgen wir, zum Zeichen, dass wir ihm
Verwandte sind, hinab in heilige Flammen (IV, 145)

[...and aware/of the old unity, the dark mother extends her arms of fire towards the ether/ and now that the sovereign comes with his bright ray/ we will follow him, signaling our affinity, towards the sacred flames].

Perhaps only within Hölderlin’s tragic sincerity does the magic fusion between man and nature, sought by the romantic myth of the “Anima Mundi,” find full poetic manifestation. The same seems to be true in Pausanias’ comment about the marvelous and mortal destiny of his friend Empedocles: “He who is infinite receives everything infinitely.”

²⁷ See chapter 36: “Romantic gods: Jupiter,” pp. 317 ss.

²⁸ Eugenio Garin, op. cit., pp.150-51, details the mythic meaning of the Copernican system and its Heraclitian, Hermetic, and Neoplatonist heritage.

²⁹ H. Stierlin, in “Hölderlins dichterisches Schaffen im Lichte seiner schizophrenen Psychose” (*Von der Psychoanalyse zur Familientherapie*, Stuttgart, Ernst Klett Verlag, 1974) counts more than a hundred instances of the expression “Mutter Erde” from 1799 to 1806 in poems written by Hölderlin.

THE NEW SENSIBILITY

Half way through the 18th century the conditions are set in almost all of Europe for a *new sensibility* to emerge in the shadow of the established Enlightenment with a force characteristic of a phenomenon that had been latent for a long time. The rebirth of Self is at the center of this sensibility. Against the “Newtonian man,” emerges literature, painting (Piranesi, Fuseli), music (the last Mozart) that returns to subjectivism, seeming in a way to restart the road interrupted after Montaigne’s *Essais* and Shakespeare’s tragedies. The common roots of this new sensibility and this new art brought by Romanticism grow and develop as much in the skeptic or dramatic distrust towards its times, as well as in the cultivation of a radical individualism. In contrast with the *esprit de corps*, characteristic of rational men and schools of thought, the mood of the new artist is strongly opposed to being socially or intellectually gregarious. The *genius* — forged in the Renaissance, recovered by Neoplatonism, now exacerbated— the brilliant artist is aware of his complete independence from rules and norms. It is an art that will have to be based not on *imitation* but on *inspiration*, that will have to stop regarding outside reality as the only model fit for reproduction and that turns, searching for raw material, into the only credible source: the inner self, the *Self* of the artist.

The new sensibility stops seeing only through the eyes and sees mainly through the heart. It is tired of scanning the outside world —which always diminishes it— and is eager to look inwards. In 1778, Herder defends a “physiognomy of the Self”: “What a live physiognomy would be created, no doubt so much deeper than the one deduced from the configuration of forehead and nose, if one man would precisely, exactly represent himself as he knows and feels himself to be, if he had the courage to immerse his view into the deep abyss of Platonist reminiscence and not be quiet, the courage to follow the path along the entire length of its living structure for the totality of his life, even towards those things that each of his fingers, pointing towards his *intimate Self*, would reveal to him.”³⁰

These words contain the central idea of the *roman personnel*, the *Entwicklungsroman*, the *literature of Self*, which replaces the plural with the singular and the third person with the first. A long list of works marks the stages of the romantic introspection into subjectivity, from *La Nouvelle Héloïse* by

³⁰ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele*, 1778, cit. in G. Gusdorf, op.cit., p.357.

Rousseau, to Goethe's *Werther*, Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinda*, Tieck's *William Lovell*, or Chateaubriand's *René*. In all of them the young protagonist, *âme sensible* and unhappy because of the unfair incomprehension of his time, is a barely veiled self-projection of the author.

This confidence, this quasi-obsession with subjectivism is totally characteristic of the new sensibility. The hero-artist tends to identify with his hero-protagonist to the point that it becomes difficult to distinguish the thoughts of one from those of the other. What was peculiar to lyric expression becomes generalized into other genres — otherwise not formally very respected. The “lyric Self” for the romantic poet becomes what Coleridge calls the “representative Self.” Thus, when considering romantic literature, it is impossible — as well as improper — to differentiate the *Weltanschauung* of the theoretically fictitious characters from that which the writers exhibit in their confessions, letters and plays. If what Rousseau expresses in his *Confessions* is substantially similar to what he places in the mouths of his characters in Romanticism proper, this will always be the case. In Hölderlin's letters one can read *Hyperion* and *Empedocles*; in Novalis' letters, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is visible; in Kleist's writings, *Michael Kohlhaas* and *Prinz von Homburg* (as well as in all of them, their own poetry). The philosophical and moral positions stated by Leopardi in the *Zibaldone dei pensieri* and in the *Operette morali* are exactly the same. Keats' “epistolary,” a true masterpiece, reveals the rest of his work. Wordsworth's unfinished work, *The recluse*, is previously reasoned in the fourteen autobiographic works of *The Prelude*. In his last days, Nerval explains his oneiric and fatal adventure in *Aurelia*, and, what can we say about Byron, whose work is a continuous outpouring of his personality, of what he is and what he persists on appearing to be!

The heroic identification between the artist and his characters is the great link that will bring about the seductive veracity of Romantic plots, beyond resorting to fantasies and legends. *Even, more strictly one can say that the Romantic mind only exists if that identification, by which the poet feels complete solidarity with his poetic creature, exists.* Empedocles anticipates Hölderlin's destiny; the Prince of Hamburg, Kleist's; Jacopo Ortis, Foscolo's. The great counterpoint in this sense is Goethe. The romantic identification seems to be ruling his *Werther*, *Prometheus* and *Ur-Faust*, though later he seeks to break, and does indeed break, the nexus he regards — for good reason — as sickly and fatal. His theatrical self-proclamation as “Classical” is undoubtedly driven by his need to detach himself from the positions, some of them too destructive, that he himself has built into some of his characters.

From this perspective, Goethe's position is also an excellent point of reference about how the new sensibility deals with the decisive issue of the recovery of Antiquity. Wincklemann, in his *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* from 1764, introduces a Copernican twist in the subject, proclaiming that classical art is governed by the principles of harmony and the austere grandiosity of forms: “In the same way ‘he manifests’ that the depth of the sea remains always peaceful regardless of how agitated the surface is; in the same way that the expression on the Greek figures manifests, together with all of their passions a great and

peaceful soul”³¹ The enthusiastic teachings of Wincklemann grow deep inside the spirit of young Goethe, still drunk by the *Sturm und Drang*. What the great Greek art expresses is exactly the opposite of what symbolic Mannerism of the 17th and early 18th century expressed. It is not enough to imitate the form, not enough to use the symbols and myths. In order to *recover* — and not only reproduce — Hellenic Classicism, it is necessary, above all, to penetrate the *spirit* of Ancient art. The first Renaissance carries out a great part of this task, but later the purity of the Quattrocento gets lost in the ideological labyrinth of the Baroque as well as in the cold concepts of Neo-classicism. The great principles that spurred Greek art have been reduced to an empty series of rules and laws due to post-Renaissance normativism (Boileau and Pope). Following Winklemann’s lead, though surpassing him, since he never abandoned his neoclassical concepts, Goethe attempts to return to a non-formalist Antiquity. Works such as *Iphigenie*, *Torquato Tasso*, or the second *Faust* are fruits of the Goethian effort to recover the Hellenic harmony.

After his first trip to Italy, Goethe revindicates for himself the qualification of “Classic.” The contemplation of the works of the Renaissance and the remains of ancient Rome apparently convince him, once and for all, to detach his art from the tension and the violent dramatics which he had accepted when he was immersed in the expansive wave of the *Stürmer*. He understands that the Apollonian serenity³² is the most essential trait of the great Greek tragic heroes and he closes the door to the “Romantic lack of balance” that, in his opinion, has nothing to do with the Hellenic soul.

The Romantic’s recovery of Antiquity is different from Goethe’s. Of course it follows Goethe’s lead against the formalism of Neoclassicism but separates strongly from it by not participating in his belief of the *ataraxia* of Greek art. For Romanticism, the tragedy of Hellenic art and literature did not abandon, but stemmed from, a “Romantic lack of balance.” The thesis, which Nietzsche would systematize in the mid 19th century, about the origin of tragedy as the convergence of the Apollonian and Dionysian,³³ was contained in part, through different embryonic developments, in the romantic recovery of the Greek spirit. *Not only Apollo but also Dionysus; the twisting of form, the darkness, the orgiastic violence and the self-destructive passion are what constitute the classic elements for Romanticism.*

³¹ J.J. Winckemann, *Historia del arte en la Antigüedad*, Barcelona, Iberia, 1967, p.133.

³² See chapters 32, 33, 34, and 35, pp. 278 ss.

³³ See chapter 34: “Romantic Gods: the Apollonian and Dionysian”

CLASSIC AND ROMANTIC

The distinction established by Goethe —with such success in both literary and artistic criticism— between “Classic” and “Romantic” is nothing but the consequence of his unilateral and self-serving understanding of ancient art. “The concept of Classic and Romantic poetry which are now being spread around the world, generating endless controversy, originally came from Schiller and from me,” tells Goethe to Eckermann on March 21st, 1830. “In my poetry I chose the principle of objectivity and did not want to distance myself from it. Schiller on the contrary, sought efficiency in subjectivism. He had his interest in that which was authentic and truthful and, in order to defend himself from my attacks, he wrote his essay on innocent and sentimental poetry. He tried to demonstrate to me that, even against my will, I was completely Romantic and that even my *Iphigenie*, given its predominance of feeling, was not as Classic or as close to the Ancients as one would believe. The Schlegels seized those ideas, taking them even further, and we now see them spread throughout the world. People discuss classicism and romanticism when forty years ago nobody was using these terms.”³⁴ Some time before, on April, 2nd, 1829, speaking with the same interlocutor, Goethe not only recollects but establishes categorical value judgments: “I have just thought of a sentence that seems to be very expressive: to name the Classic sane and the Romantic sick. Thus we will see that the *Nibelungen* are as Classic as Homer because both works are healthy and strong. However most of what is new is not Romantic because it is new, but because it is weak and sickly, likewise many ancient things are not Classic because they are ancient but because they are fresh, happy and healthy. If we attempt to distinguish classic and romantic according to these principles we may be able to perceive things with some clarity.”³⁵

It’s unarguable that the success of a fallacy is dependent on the confusion in the milieu where it is pronounced and the prestige of the one pronouncing it. Believing that the salient characteristics of Homer, Aeschylus, or Sophocles are freshness and happiness is as absurd as pretending that Kleist, Hölderlin or Leopardi represent weakness. Shakespeare is the author that best helps discover this incongruence. For Friedrich Schlegel —who distinguishes classic poetry as *Poesie des Besitzes*, from romantic poetry as *Poesie der Sehnsucht*— Shakespeare is romantic whereas for Schiller he is undoubtedly “ingenuous” which in Goethian terms means Classic. For her part, Madame de Staël’s view is that Classic is what follows the aesthetic traditions of the Ancients, whereas Romantic is guided by the medieval-chivalresque... A long succession of works,

³⁴ Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe*, Francfort, Inselverlag, 1970, p.379.

³⁵ J.P. Eckermann, op.cit., p.310.

especially within German criticism, leads to the Classic-Romantic dichotomy up to the category of *Grundbegriffe*.³⁶

If the healthy-sick duality is ridiculous, the one that Goethe proposes between objective and subjective when establishing his differences with Schiller is not too efficient either. Doubting this latter duality and with a sincerity not necessarily devoid of respectful irony, Schiller writes to Goethe: “your way of alternating production and reflection is truly admirable and enviable. The two processes are truly divided for you and that is why you execute them both with such purity. While you work you truly are in the dark, with light shining only within you, but as soon as you start reflecting, your inner light emerges and illuminates the objects both for yourself and for others. *For me, though, the two activities are intertwined.*”³⁷ Schiller’s affirmation is doubly true: first for recognizing his methodological confusion —clearly perceivable in his work— and Goethe’s higher constructive clarity and second for supporting the indissolubility of darkness and light, or subjective and objective in the creative process. When referring to these processes it is much more useful to employ the Classic-Romantic dichotomy in the way that, for example, Paul Valéry does: “*Every Classicism implies a previous Romanticism. All the advantages and all the objections that are attributed to a “classic” art are related to this axiom. The essence of classicism is to come afterwards. Order implies a certain disorder which it tries to reduce. Composition, which is an artifice, follows a primitive chaos of intuition and natural development [. . .] Classic then implies acts which are voluntary and reflected upon and which modify a “natural” production.*

This is, of course, the core of the issue: the Classic-Romantic pair —as well as its logical successor, the Apollonian-Dionysian pair— illustrates effectively the impulses that contribute to the creation of an artistic work, but it is totally invalid, especially when using these two terms as irreconcilable opposites, in the way that the aged Goethe did when defining the traits of the *romantic mind*. In the connotation used intuitively by Schiller and explicitly by Valéry, there is no doubt that the most vigorous thread of Romanticism (from Hölderlin to Wordsworth and from Keats to Leopardi, naturally including young Goethe himself and *Stürmer* of *Prometheus*) produces works that are perfectly “Classic-Romantic.” *What distinguishes the Romantic mind is not the objective or subjective nature of its process of artistic creation, but a new and revolutionary concept of the world, based on the variously manifested conscience of the irresolvable tragic condition of modern man.*

The confusing itinerary of the word “Romantic” originates in the great error that has traditionally accompanied “the Romantic.” Appearing in England, half way through the 17th century, meaning “like the old romances,” it is soon used pejoratively by the prevailing rationalism. *Romantic* is equated with *bombast, unnatural, chimerical*. It is used to describe everything that expresses a distancing from reality and an exacerbated fantasy. It is significant that the anti-

³⁶ For example, the German critic Fritz Strich does this in *Deutsche Klassik und Romantik, oder Vollendung und Unendlichkeit, ein Vergleich*, by establishing a parallelism with the “fundamental concepts” applied to art by Wölfflin.

³⁷ Letter from January, 2nd, 1798, in *Briefe an Goethe*, Hamburger Ausgabe, Hamburg, 1967, Christian Wagner Verlag, Band I, p.298.

Shakespearian reaction fills numerous pages despising the lack of reality of the “romantic.” Pope manifested this in a distich:

...that not in Fancy's maze he wandere'd long
But stoop'd to Truth, and moraliz'd his song

and also the “avant la lettre” anti-romantic doctor Johnson refers to: “romantic and superfluous,” “ridiculous and romantic,” “romantic absurdities and incredible fictions,” etc. In parallel, the term “romantic” is starting to be used to describe certain physical landscapes, especially characteristic because of their unreal, grandiose, or desolate appearance; already in 1666 Samuel Pepys describes Windsor Castle as “the most romantic castle that is in the world.” For the reasons abovementioned, the French initially translate *romantic* both as *romanesque* (unreal, fabulous) and as *pittoresque*.

It is Rousseau we should credit for interpreting the term in the opposite way. His *romantique* in *Reveries du promeneur solitaire*, stops describing in order to indicate a *feeling*, stops indicating the properties of an object in order to describe the *feelings of the subject*. This decisive Rousseauian definition soaks into the appropriate milieu of a Germany shaken by *Sturm und Drang*. *Romantisch* is incorporated by Jean Paul in his *Magie der Einbildungskraft* as an aesthetic category central to the new sensibility that Germany has developed faster than the rest of Europe. Romantic implies a very special state of the spirit—dictated by the untranslatable *Sehnsucht*, longing, desire, nostalgia—by which man, extracting creative energy from his disenchantment and desolation searches, through his imagination and dreams, the road to plenitude and the unlimited. Despite its English origin and its Rousseauian transformation, it is in the “humus” of the German *Geniezeit*, where the romantic acquires consistency and resonance, and this same circumstance which contributes to enrich and vitalize it, also contributes to sending it deep into the whirlpool of German post-Kantian philosophy.

The vicissitudes in the gestation of the term “romantic,” as well as the complacent decadence after its success and fashion, muddle the true significance of the romantic mind in the formation of modern thought. One of the most vulgar yet more common errors is saying “Romantic” and thinking “past,” when in fact the Romantic movement is a strong *diagnostic of the future*. In the unsurpassable combination of disenchantment and energy, destruction and innovation, pathos and heroism, in the deep perception of the limited human condition and in the impossible titanic aim towards infinity, one can recognize that Romanticism is the true origin of all modern tragic thought.