

## The New Romanticism, Aldous Leonard Huxley

### The New Romanticism

The Romantics have come in for a great deal of varied abuse. The classicists have reproached them for their hysterical extravagance. The realists have called them liars and cowards who are afraid of the unpleasant truth. Moralists have disapproved of their exaltation of passion and emotion. Philosophers have complained of their prejudice against reason and their appeal to a facile mysticism. Socialists and believers in authority have disliked their individualism. Each enemy throws a different brickbat. But brickbats can be flung back. The Romantics can retort on the classicists that they are dull and rationally cold; on the realists that they are exclusively preoccupied with muck and lucre; on the moralists that their ideal of mere repression is stupid, because always unsuccessful; on the philosophers that their famous Pure Reason has taken them no nearer to the solution of the cosmic riddle than a cow's Pure Instinct; and on the authoritarians and socialists that their state tyranny and collectivism are at least as unnatural as limitless individualism. Pots and kettles may quarrel; but their colour is proverbially much the same. Most of the enemies of romanticism are, in their own way, as extravagant and one-sided (that is to say, as romantic) as the Romantics themselves.

The activities of our age are uncertain and multifarious. No single literary, artistic, or philosophic tendency predominates. There is a babel of notions and conflicting theories. But in the midst of this general confusion, it is possible to recognize one curious and significant melody, repeated in different keys and by different instruments in every one of the subsidiary babels. It is the tune of our modern romanticism.

It will be protested at once that no age could be less like that of the genuine Romantics than ours. And with this objection I make all haste to agree. The modern romanticism is not in the least like the romanticism of Moore and de Musset and Chopin, to say nothing of the romanticism of Shelley, of Victor Hugo, of Beethoven. In fact, it is the exact opposite of theirs. Modern romanticism is the old romanticism turned inside out, with all its values reversed. Their plus is the modern minus; the modern good is the old bad. What then was black is now white, what was white is now black. Our romanticism is the photographic negative of that which flourished during the corresponding years of last century.

It is in the sphere of politics that the difference between the two romanticisms is most immediately apparent. The revolutionaries of a hundred years ago were democrats and individualists. For them the supreme political value was that personal liberty, which Mussolini has described as a putrefying corpse and which the Bolsheviks deride as an ideal invented by and for the leisured bourgeoisie. The men who agitated for the English Reform Bill of 1832, who engineered the Parisian revolution of 1830, were liberals. Individualism and freedom were the ultimate goods which they pursued. The aim of the Communist Revolution in Russia was to deprive the individual of every right, every vestige of personal liberty

(including the liberty of thought and the right to possess a soul), and to transform him into a component cell of the great 'Collective Man'—that single mechanical monster who, in the Bolshevnik millennium, is to take the place of the unregimented hordes of 'soul-encumbered' individuals who now inhabit the earth.

To the Bolshevnik, there is something hideous and unseemly about the spectacle of anything so 'chaotically vital,' so 'mystically organic' as an individual with a soul, with personal tastes, with special talents. Individuals must be organized out of existence; the communist state requires, not men, but cogs and ratchets in the huge 'collective mechanism.' To the Bolshevnik idealist, Utopia is indistinguishable from one of Mr Henry Ford's factories. It is not enough, in their eyes, that men should spend only eight hours a day under the workshop discipline. Life outside the factory must be exactly like life inside. Leisure must be as highly organized as toil. Into the Christian Kingdom of Heaven men may only enter if they have become like little children. The condition of their entry into the Bolshevniks' Earthly Paradise is that they shall have become like machines.

Lest it be imagined that I have caricatured the communist doctrine, let me refer my readers to the numerous original documents quoted by Herr Fulop-Miller in his very interesting book on the cultural life of Soviet Russia, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism*. They show clearly enough that the political doctrines elaborated by Lenin and his followers are the exact antithesis of the revolutionary liberalism preached by Godwin and dithyrambically chanted by Shelley a hundred years ago. Godwin and Shelley believed in pure individualism. The Bolshevniks believe in pure collectivism. One belief is as extravagantly romantic as the other. Men cannot live apart from society and without organization.

But, equally, they cannot live without a certain modicum of privacy and personal liberty. The exclusive idealism of Shelley denies the obvious facts of human biology and economics. The exclusive materialism of Lenin denies the no less obvious and primary facts of men's immediate spiritual experiences. The revolutionary liberals were romantic in their refusal to admit that man was a social animal as well as an individual soul. The Bolshevniks are romantic in denying that man is anything more than a social animal, susceptible of being transformed by proper training into a perfect machine. Both are extravagant and one-sided.

Modern romanticism is by no means confined to Russia or to politics. It has filtered into the thought and arts of every country. Communism has not imposed itself anywhere outside the boundaries of Russia; but the Bolshevniks' romantic disparagement of spiritual and individual values has affected, to a greater or less extent, the 'young' art and literature of every Western people. Thus, the whole 'Cubist' tendency in modern art (from which, one is grateful to notice, painters and sculptors seem to be in fairly general reaction) is deeply symptomatic of that revolt against the soul and the individual, to which the Bolshevniks have given practical and political, as well as artistic, expression. The Cubists deliberately eliminated from their art all that is 'mystically organic,' replacing it by solid geometry.

They were the enemies of all 'sentimentality' (a favourite word in the Bolsheviks' vocabulary of insult), of all mere literature—that is to say, of all the spiritual and individual values which give significance to individual life. Art, they proclaimed, is a question of pure form. A Cubist picture is one from which everything that might appeal to the individual soul, as a soul, has been omitted. It is addressed exclusively (and addressed very often, let us admit, with consummate skill) to an abstract Aesthetic Man, who stands in much the same relation to the real complex human being as does the Economic Man of the socialists, or the mechanized component of the Bolsheviks' Collective Man.

The Cubist dehumanization of art is frequently accompanied by a romantic and sentimental admiration for machines. Fragments of machinery are generously scattered through modern painting. There are sculptors, who laboriously try to reproduce the forms invented by engineers. The ambition of advanced architects is to make dwelling-houses indistinguishable from factories; in Le Corbusier's phrase, a house is a 'machine for living in.'

'Young' writers are as fond of machinery as 'young' artists. What dithyrambs in praise of machinery have issued, in free verse, from the Middle West of America! On the continent of Europe advanced writers have invented for their own delectation entirely fabulous Chicagos and New Yorks, where every house is a skyscraper and every skyscraper a factory full of incessantly turning wheels; where there are elevated railways in every street, aeroplanes circling round every chimney-pot, electric sky-signs on every blank wall, motor cars never doing less than sixty miles an hour, and a noise like seventy pandemoniums. Here is a translation of Maiakovski's lines on Chicago:—

Chicago: City

Built upon a screw!

Electro-dynamo-mechanical city!

Spiral shaped—

On a steel disk—

At every stroke of the hour

Turning itself round!

Five thousand sky-scrappers—

Granite suns!

The Squares—

Mile-high, they gallop to heaven.

Crawling with millions of men,

Woven of steel hawsers,

Flying Broadways . . .

Tom Moore's descriptions of the Orient in *Lalla Rookh* are far less fantastically romantic than this.

The passion for machines, so characteristic of modern art, is a kind of regression to what I may call second boyhood. At twelve we were all mad about locomotives, ships' engines, machine tools. It was the ambition of every one of us to be a stoker, or an engine-driver—anything, provided only that our job should entail hourly contact with the adored machine. But growing up, most of us found that human souls are really more odd and interesting even than the most elaborate mechanism. The modern artist seems to have grown down; he has reverted to the preoccupations of his childhood. He is trying to be a primitive. So, it may be remembered, was the romantic Rousseau. But whereas Rousseau's savage was noble, refined, and intelligent, the primitive our modern artists would like to resemble is a mixture between the apache of the slums, the African negro, and the fifteen-year-old schoolboy. Our modern Rousseaus are contemptuous of psychology (how violently Proust was attacked by all the really advanced young people in Paris!); they deride metaphysics in any form; they despise reason and order, and though, illogically, they continue to write and paint, they regard all art as a waste of time. The ideal life, in their eyes, is one in which there is plenty of sport, noise, machinery, and sociable agitation.

Personally, I have no great liking for either of the romanticisms. If it were absolutely necessary for me to choose between them, I think I would choose the older one. An exaggeration of the significance of the soul and the individual, at the expense of matter, society, machinery, and organization, seems to me an exaggeration in the right direction. The new romanticism, so far as I can see, is headed straight towards death. (But then, what I call death, the new romantics would call life, and vice versa.) No, if I had my way, I would not choose either of the romanticisms; I would vote for the adoption of a middle course between them. The only philosophy of life which has any prospect of being permanently valuable is a philosophy which takes in all the facts—the facts of mind and the facts of matter, of instinct and intellect, of individualism and of sociableness. The wise man will avoid both extremes of romanticism and choose the realistic golden mean.

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