

Revolutionary Romanticism

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I. Radical Critical Consciousness

Those usually referred to as ‘the intellectuals’ (as if they form a homogenous social group) have come to learn a painful but valuable lesson.

Better informed (with the exception of men of government and politicians) or more sensitive than many others, they have reacted before events in a new way. Because of the great lack of reflective attitudes and informed reactions amongst the other social categories, they have created their own journals and organisations. They establish their own clearly defined currents of opinion. As a result they want to weigh more in the political balance than is enabled by their actual social weight or influence. They want to have an effect not as scattered individuals in diverse groups and formations, but as a specific group (thereby justifying *a posteriori* that at times vague and pejorative designation that has been imposed on them: the ‘intellectuals’).

They hope, more or less clearly, for an intelligent politics, meaning a politics of the ‘intelligentsia.’ They envisage this politics as revolutionary and above all as introducing into public life their own concerns of clarity, truth and justice.

This effort is not in vain on the level of information. However, on the level of effective politics, its failure is bitterly obvious.

If there is a political intelligence, then it cannot be a politics of intelligence, let alone of the ‘intelligentsia’ (who do not constitute a social class, even when they represent a social force). The intellectuals involved have as a result experienced this bitterness: finding themselves even more in the wrong for having been right – to see themselves afflicted because of their understanding of facts and events.

This does not mean that they need to cease to act politically by the side of the working class, nor suspend their concerted efforts to reevaluate before the masses and in the heart of revolutionaries the ideal which is simultaneously being compromised by Stalinism, by putting it on trial and by an abortive ‘destalinisation.’

However it would be advisable to draw lessons from this failure, and its significance. It brought to light for critical reflection the idea that the role of the intellectuals is exercised precisely on the level of values, of culture, of art; in Marxist terms: of superstructures. Here, on this level, they can introduce their preoccupations and create something new, as intellectuals, individuals and groups. Must they not today return to this creative function with vigorous lucidity and clarity, with the benefit of recent experience?

The movement which has been emerging for a few years signifies that aspirations are appearing, of which there is not yet a clear consciousness. One past disappears; a new horizon opens up before us.

To talk today of ‘crisis,’ or of one ‘crisis’ in particular – to say that we are going through a period of multiple crises – is a banality. Effectively, whatever the realm envisaged, in science, philosophy, art, social and moral life, culture, one can easily describe symptoms of crisis, sometimes of collapse, always with grave *problems* (this word ‘problem,’ one uses and abuses; one begins to like ‘problems’ for their own sake, without wanting to pose them in solvable terms, without drawing from their position a critical and positive lesson, without organising them into a true ‘problematic’).

What is new, from this perspective, is that the socialist or communist ideal no longer escapes questioning. This is a problem. It cannot escape critical examination, and an assessment which balances the negative and the positive. It demands new arguments. Until this last year, this ideal (that is, socialism and communism regarded as ideas) remained intact. Adversaries could only reject it with arguments in which the sense of *class* was quickly obvious. They were unable to attack or obscure it. Today this shining ideal is tarnished even in the heart of its most faithful and sincere partisans. It has faded, above all, in sincere hearts. It no longer stimulates action and courage. It no longer adds to the demands, the partial actions, the practical forces acting in the class struggle, in order to crown it and bring them greater conviction. Even if one does not question the direction of history and the mission of the working class, the current absence opens up and deepens.

How will this ethical, aesthetic and cultural absence, which makes itself felt so cruelly and deeply, be filled? Evil, an absence of enthusiasm and confidence, spreads itself well beyond the rows of ‘the intellectuals.’ And it is not with sermons or objurgations that one will cure it.

The present text is limited to the domain of art, without neglecting the fact that the ethical and the aesthetic have a certain connection; the question of *style* concerns life as well as literature.

One would like to begin an inventory here and especially to trace an outline of the lines of force leaving the present, and linking it to the future, without claiming to cover the whole horizon, yet orientating it, as a whole, towards the future, with all of its problems.

One would first like to emphasise, in giving it an increase of consciousness, the problematic character of modern art. That is to say, that it is not based only on original (technical or subjective) ‘problems,’ but that it rests on the fundamentally problematic – thus uncertain – character of real life and the moment which we must traverse and accept as it. This problematic character determines the usage of the means of expression and what is imprecisely termed the forms and the contents of this art.

One does not consider this problematic character in advance as hostile to art, as damning; indicating the ugliness of ‘modern’ life and demanding a transfiguration, or as finally diverting attention towards non-problematic areas (religious, moral, philosophical or political).

One does not assume that the problematic element dooms the artist to sterility, and that creation necessarily implies security, certainty, sure concrete facts and categorical affirmations. Quite the opposite. Without opposing adventure and security, or unhurried work with a vocation, one suggests that within the ugliness of bourgeois life as such, and in contradiction with it, during the transformations of the ‘modern world,’ and even because of the problematic character of ‘subjective life experience,’ there emerges elements that are of style and beauty (and that from techniques, even though in themselves the techniques pose only problems, and open possibilities, but only give forms empty of substance).

With an increase in critical consciousness, one arrives at the conclusion that forms of art are already spontaneously determined by this character.

This is what brings about the decline— momentary or definitive – of certain existing tendencies. The radical critique of what exists and the shake-up of inherited assumptions must begin with this assessment.

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II. The New Romanticism

It is defined against the old romanticism, and is nevertheless its continuation: as the renewal of certain themes, and the elimination of certain others.

It takes for its point of departure, its concrete presupposition, the spiritual *absence* of the moment. Including all of its social, ethical and aesthetic symptoms (including the famous ‘malady of the youth’ and ‘malady of life’ of which we hear so much without being told what it consists of, its cause, its conditions or its implications.)

The new romantic attitude does not propose to allow this absence to deepen, nor to fill it with imposed certainty. It supposes that in pushing to the limit – instead of masking – the problematic character of art and life, it draws out something new.

Why? Because the feeling of the ethical, aesthetic and social ‘spiritual absence’ effectively envelops the obscure consciousness of the *possible*. And moreover: its closeness at hand. Only the possibility of a new plenitude brings the realisation of such a consciousness of absence, and of such an absence of consciousnesses. Only the possibility of a communication by new and more powerful means than before, of a more profound communication, brings the realisation of the stifling impression of incommunicability. And where does this growing indignation against injustice and falsehood come from, now more powerful and more omnipresent than ever, other than from the presentiment of the possibility of new equality and truth? Only the demand of a more total life justifies the feeling of dissatisfaction and incompleteness which literally besieges the most lucid and sharp sensibilities.

The specifically bourgeois individual grounds himself in his consciousness and his private life, and he is comfortable there. Making a virtue of necessity, his *alienation* appears to him full and whole; he conveniently locates himself in the ‘qua;’ he speaks or acts as a man, qua the head of the family, qua citizen or political man, qua

bourgeois or non-bourgeois or intellectual, qua man caught in the division of labour and man overcoming the division of labour, etc...

The system is ruptured. More precisely, the impression that this system no longer holds, that *something else has become possible*, has brought about its rupture in an unbearably painful way, as nothing has replaced this failing organisation. At once fragile and solid, it covered in practice, in its own way, a totality by concealing it. Discredited and overtaken, or rather in the process of being overtaken, it leaves an absence, but only because the possible encircles the present. This already effective feeling can serve as a conductor for simultaneously organising, through critical consciousness (and the word critical designates here the moment of crisis and transcendence in consciousness) both the deep problematic of the present and the virtual nature of individuality. Marxism has until now wrongly wanted to constitute a new individuality by ideological means, whereas it is a matter of a concrete new unity and totality, in formation, already virtual. What counts is not an ideological or theoretical totality, but a concrete totality of possibilities, in so far as requiring first the negation, and then the reconstitution, of types of consciousness and individuality. So that these natures become today (in themselves) entirely problematic.

Modern man recognises this requirement, obscurely or lucidly, although objective conditions – either general or individual – can divert and obscure it and render it ineffective.

The man in thrall to the possible, such would be the first definition, the first affirmation of the attitude of revolutionary romanticism. Or, if you prefer, its first premise. Diffuse today, though unevenly according to the domains of art and life, one can try to precipitate it, to expose it didactically.

Against the old romanticism

This, with some exceptions, was defined wholly *by the man in thrall to the past*. This past always signifies temporal regression, either historically or psychologically, towards origins. It was sometimes a matter of the ‘primitive,’ of simplicity and native purity: sometimes the middle ages or antiquity, sometimes infancy. The myth of the past thus took various forms, always poignant, going all the way to the fascination with the unconscious. More generally, the old romanticism transformed fetishism and alienation into the criteria of truth and authenticity: possession, fascination, delirium. They therefore had a reactionary content. The new romanticism simultaneously maintains a critical lucidity, the use of concepts – as well as the imagination and dreams, for the investigation of the possible.

The old romanticism, being conscious of the interior alienation of the individual (in ‘private’ life), attempted to satisfy it by returning to the past, and denied it by exalting it. It transposed or transfigured it by force. The Ego was opposed to the world (the Non-Ego), a permanent challenge which appeared in life through provocation, scandal and relish of scandal, grand disdain and a frenzy more affected than real. There followed an ensemble of staged events and personal dramas. Revolutionary romanticism rejects this attitude. Specifically in the name of the possible, it proclaims that nothing human leaves it indifferent. It advocates understanding: to denouncing the alienations of human life, it is first necessary to determine and understand them.

However, they conceal themselves. They constitute the most secret of private consciousnesses, alienated and fragmented. To bring these wounds to consciousness to light does not involve calm disdain but a lively sympathy for human beings, with their inner conflicts, which in no way implies the acceptance of that which alienates them. Revolutionary romanticism reconciles romantic revolt with an integral humanism. Instead of the desired exaltation, it entails an - apparent – coldness which is corollary to its steadfast opposition to the actual in the name of the possible.

The old romanticism confines itself in solitude (contradicted by the quest of expression and imagination *for* the others, real life, represented or realised in an artwork [*oeuvre*]). It tended to constitute societies of insiders, socialites and secretives. The new romanticism excludes both isolation and complicity. It consists of a calm connivance, an alliance for (the possible) and against (the alienation which rends existence entirely problematic, and staves off the human possibility of existence). *We* take a direction which is open, controlled and broad at the same time.

The old romanticism proposed to blur the boundaries - to mix the ‘genres.’ It introduced ambiguity amongst the categories of aesthetics.

The new romanticism insists, on the contrary, upon the clarity of outlines. - each work [*oeuvre*] forms a whole – a privileged object – and cannot not form a whole (even when it aspires to free itself from this law). It cannot be defined by an aspect: form or content, language or writing, expression or plan (proposition).

The problem of *genres* has nothing fundamental about it. It is subordinate to expressive intentions (with what has been grasped of the ‘content’ and meaning). In this level, the separation and confusion of genres reduces the horizons. Theory can determine dialectical relations between ‘genres’ simply on the basis of the analysis of a moment in their practical transformations. One cannot leave behind the concepts of the epic, the dramatic, the comic or the romanesque, defined outside of their contents and their presence as immutable essences.

The *image* must assume and already assumes novel and subordinate functions. The overestimation of the image as such characterises the whole of the old, outdated romanticism. It has thus logically advanced towards the absolute primacy of the image, towards the confusion between the magic of the image and the imagination. The theory of the imagination which emerges from the tendencies of modern art (of cinema in particular) makes it into essential *mediation*, which cannot compensate for or supersede the elements it connects organically: the subjective and the objective, the individual and the other, man and the world, the everyday and the extraordinary, the distant and the near, etc...

The old romanticism always loads and overloads meaning upon the idea of youth.

For cosmological romanticism, childhood played a determining role: mediation in time (psychological, historical, metaphysical) and in the imagination between the original and the human – the absolute of depth and spontaneity. For anthropological romanticism, adolescence plays an analogous role, both more human and more ambiguous.

For revolutionary romanticism, youth does not assume a symbolic significance. It does not support a meaning exterior to itself, but carries real claims, of *possibilities* which it has a presentiment of and senses better than the adult. Which, today, generally, blunted its conflicts and reduced its contradictions in order to adapt to reality while renouncing other possibles. The adult sees itself today as both real, adapted to what exists – and entirely unreal and problematic. A painful situation from which youth escapes. However, youth as such unifies in an great disconcerting rupture blurring the sense of the possible and of the impossible. Hence its *malady*. This introduces us into the dialectic of the possible and the impossible.

In classicism, harmony is essential; dischord - conflict – subordinates itself to a harmony initially accepted or recognised and finally implicated in the harmonious unity of the artwork [*oeuvre*]. The tragic does not escape from this law of classicism.

All romanticism is based on dischord, on rifts and rupture. In this sense, revolutionary romanticism continues and even deepens the rifts of the old romanticism. But these rifts take on a new meaning. The distance (la mise à *bonne distance*¹) in relation to the actual, the present, the real and the existing, places itself under the sign of the possible. And not under the heading of nostalgia or escapism.

This gives rise to new forms of irony. One can no longer oppose fiction to established fact, dreams or irony. Fiction, like the image, instead presents itself more as the means of investigation, penetrating more deeply than description into the existing real to understand, discuss and express it – in order to be free of it and reject it.

Therefore, with the old romanticism and its descendents:

Firstly and lastly one notes the deep rupture between the objective and the subjective, the first of these terms designating the ‘real’ established social set up (and not society in general), the second designating consciousness, valorised by presentiment (and not the individual isolated ego). But at the same time, one exceeds this opposition while seeing the established reality and its alienating weight shaken: its inherently problematic and questionable character. Taking this to its logical conclusion, going further than the old romanticism, and taking the – non intuitive – logically consequent path of distortions, anachronisms, diachronisms and their analytic consciousness. If one establishes oneself, it is only within the possible. One thus takes on, in the process of investigating, the problematic character of the moment in order to draw out the only tenable position.

To transcend the opposition between the anthropological and the cosmic then becomes necessary. It becomes essential through technology and science, as much as philosophy and art. Today, the elements, concepts and images, borrowed from nature, directly or indirectly signify the power of man over nature. Reciprocally, the representative human elements also signify this power. This makes it possible to glimpse the end of the old quarrels between intuition and reason, between action and ideas. The abyss between realism and antirealism must also disappear, but paradoxically the point of view of flat realism, by the introduction of extreme images and liberating imagination, penetrating the ‘real,’ crosses the distortion between the

¹ ‘The *right* sort of distance:’ the viewpoint of objective, critical distance.

objective and the subjective, and not by conceiving of one as a flat reflection of the other. Essentially, the important new fact in the present moment is therefore power over nature. It poses the central problem, problem of problems, in relation to which all the others are posed, situated, organised and systematised. What to do with the great means placed at our disposal? And how to act so that the power (of man over nature) becomes more than a means: a substance, a shared power, in which each can participate more in ways other than through dreams and imagination?

The fundamental contradiction, from this angle, is formulated thus: the limitless nature of the possible, the open horizon, comes from power – and the gigantic power of men united over nature transforms itself for every one of them into powerlessness. This human power changes still – before our eyes, around us, with us, in us, over us – into the power of some men over others.

Like the old romanticism, revolutionary romanticism responds by tearing apart fixed contradictions. But they are not the same ones. In place of the pairs: ‘sleep-wakefulness,’ or ‘society-individual,’ or ‘childhood-adulthood’ or even ‘being and nothingness,’ or ‘convulsive-fixed,’ we can glimpse other pairs of opposites growing to the point of contradiction, which must be maintained together: ‘presence-distance,’ ‘refusal-acceptance,’ ‘adaptation-detachment,’ ‘defiance-humanity’ or even ‘partial-total.’ Maintaining them in their antagonism supposes transcending the old system of ‘being’ which evades the problems and problematics of the whole.

The possible.

The dialectic of the possible, as described above, offers the key to opening the closed doors of the present. The possible opposes itself to the real, and is an integral part of the real: in its movement. If the possible discovers itself today as an indeterminate horizon and without limits, it’s that the real carries radical contradiction within itself.

Here then is the bitter root of the real which revolutionary romanticism rejects in the name of a possibility more real than the real. Dischords, ruptures and aberrations show themselves because of the remote proximity (estrangement) of harmony, of universality. Alienation achieves maximum intensity and diversity at the moment when an event greater ‘disalienation’ approaches. Which renders necessary a consciousness more attuned to all forms of alienation, in order that it may refuse them.

The final part of the separation enters the cosmic and the human (cosmology and anthropology) removing the limits of old romanticisms: it frees new forms. It permits a new definition of the image of the imagination, of its functions (this does not presuppose that dreams, or irony, or the imagination, do not offer in their turn new dangers, new risks of alienation!).

Thus power and impotence, the real and the general dissolution of existence, crude solidity and the problematisation, go together, contradictorily. As for the internal contradictions of the possible, they are manifest in the opposition of the immediate to the *possible-impossible*. We only need to list:

The possible-possible

To settle into life (the bourgeoisie, today, in France).
To search for a job, a flat (which, once again, is not so easy)
To quietly dream of unruffled tranquility.
To ground oneself in love
To consider life in other men and women as a spectacle (worthy of attention and of a certain interest)
To take one's differences in the present, and in relation to the present, to render oneself invulnerable.
To implicitly or explicitly pose commodities as the criteria of the real, or of success, or money, or more humanly as kindness, etc...
To employ jargon
If one is writing, to place language above all else.
To cherish technicality.
To enjoy problems for their own sake (and pseudo-solutions which bury the problems). To become a man-of-problems.
To go to the point of cynicism and of false challenge (only as far as the propriety of the occasion allows).
To fall back on the car and speed, the dance, quantitative love.
To arrange for oneself lines of retreat, exits, etc.

The impossible-possible (the most remote)

The participation of the everyday man and woman in the accumulated power of the spheres of technology, of the state, of wealth.
Communication between private consciousnesses, that employs an appropriate language.
Calm without monotony, Joy without cruelty.
Plenitude, totality.

The new (revolutionary) romanticism affirms the primacy of the impossible-possible and grasps this virtuality as essential to the present. It thus looks towards crossing the abyss between a partial subjective life experience, and the total present. It proposes to give a new significance to that vague and often misused word: the *modern*. It will take this meaning away from the snobbishness and the technocracy present in the ideological convulsions of the bourgeois as much as in the anti-modern spirit which asserts the ugliness of the modern.

It will propose a style of life as much as a style of art, in accordance with the inspiration of the old romanticism.

The value of the future and its realisation can only result from a quiet and permanent challenge to what exists supported through a period of tension and waiting. Opposing justice to injustice, truth to illusion, authenticity to falsehood, becomes - for better or for worse - a romantic attitude. This is the way it is. And it will be thus during an historical moment, the time of an historical moment that cannot determine itself in advance.

Man in thrall to the possible: these words do not designate an individual, an intellectual or a prophetic poet. The youth also offer themselves in thrall to the possible, and the possible consumes them. Women are in thrall to the possible, which takes for them urgent and inaccessible forms. The analysis of the press and of literature written by and for women shows, on a low level (*Presse du Coeur*²) or on an elevated level (Françoise Sagan³), the pain of absence and the burning aspiration towards the impossible-possible. What's interesting is that despair no longer turns into the blight of lethargy, as in the old romanticism, nor even into indefinite possibilities as it would some tens of years ago, but into a rage, frenzy and desire to exhaust the possible-possible, in the absence of the impossible-possible.

'We' are thus not defined as a brotherhood of initiates, nor a dandyism of the intellectuals, nor a doctrine or a system, nor any analogous denomination, but a consciousness and an attitude. 'We' live our time completely, precisely because we are already the heart of transcendence. If the man of the present, 'in us,' knows himself to be in thrall to the future, the possible-man 'in us' knows himself equally in prey to the present, to an already obsolete present, and therefore all the more difficult. However, 'we' affirm the beauty and the intrinsic grandeur of modern life, as volatile, problematic and disruptive between the past and the future.

(pretty rough) trans. Gavin Grindon, from Henri Lefebvre, 'Le Romantisme Revolutionnaire,' in *Au-Delà Du Structuralisme*, Éditions Anthropos, Paris, 1971. pp. 27-50

² 'Press of the heart', a popular publishing press aimed at women.

³ A more serious popular French novelist who dealt with romantic themes and modern characters.