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German Romanticism

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THE MID-WEST QUARTERLY

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GERMAN ROMANTICISM

Welch ein Unfug! Welch Geschrei!

GOETHE: *Faust*.

The German romantic movement was the result of defective culture, of bodily and mental derangement, of spiritual and nervous disorder. It is a work of degeneration, deformation, and disease. And it bears on its front the stigmata of its infirmities—absurdity, folly, inanity, and confusion. There is Hardenberg, the pattern of the school, who falls in love with a chit of thirteen and at her death a year or so later dedicates himself to the grave, an unblemished sacrifice of love, unblighted by sickness, violence, or sorrow, the cheerful victim of his own regret. In the meanwhile he begins a new era and dates his note-books from the epoch of her decease. By the end of the following twelvemonth, however, he has sufficiently vaporised his emotions in various scribblings to choose another bride and is reduced to faking metaphysical nonsense to pass off an infidelity which would never have been cast up against him but for his own extravagant protestations. Sophie and Julie are two, such is his magic arithmetic, only in the land of phenomena; in the land of fulfilment, where all differences are reconciled, they are but one. There again is Friedrich Schlegel, grubber of ideas for the whole party, proclaiming in sublime paradox that formlessness is the highest form of art; the fragment, the consummate *genre* of literature; the dissolution of poetic illusion, the signet of poetic genius. Prophet of transcendental buffoonery and irony, of *Freiheit* and *Willkür*, he has ended his days in the service of the two narrowest *Autoritätsprincipien* that ever were, Austrian imperialism and

Roman Catholicism. There is Tieck too, after an education little better than an emotional and intellectual debauch, writing dramas backwards and demonstrating the identity of poetry and music by "transposing" notes into words:

"Die Farbe klingt, die Form ertönt."

There is Schleiermacher, the priest, the *Geistlicher*, preaching free love and the "emancipation of woman," making himself, in Walzel's words, "the forerunner of the modern French novel," the gospel of lubricity and license. And finally there are poor Hölderlin and Wackenroder, the one crack-brained at thirty or thereabouts, the other fretted out at twenty-five between his duty and his inclinations. Nor are their friends and lovers much better. On the whole they are pretty much of a piece with Dorothea Veit, the daughter of Moses Mendelssohn, who deserts her husband and two children to run after Friedrich Schlegel, and Caroline Michaelis—Dame Lucifer, Schiller called her—Böhmer's widow, Gallic agitator, inmate of a German prison, mother of a nameless child, who accepts Friedrich's brother, Wilhelm, as a *pis aller* and under his nose carries on a *liaison* with Schelling, for whom she finally leaves her husband.

I

But enough of personalities. The thoroughly significant thing about German romanticism as a literary phenomenon is its sterility. It has almost no works, literally next to nothing to show for itself in the way of literature. A little vapid verse, two or three staggering dramas, a few rickety *Märchen* and twaddling rhapsodies, several dilapidated novels, or rather romances, to sustain the claims of a school that pretended to derive from the *Roman*—this is just about all its literary capital, the greater part of it unreadable, inexpressibly childish, silly, and dull. In itself it were all equally harmless, though for different reasons, because all equally ineffectual. If there is something almost disarming about the naïveté which could seriously busy itself with a performance like *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, the preposterous crudity and flatulence of a *Sternbald* is no less disabling. Both were alike negligible, had it not been for the impudence of their exploiters. Indeed, as a general thing the illustrators of the

movement were not in the first instance responsible; they were merely let in for it. In its inception the school consisted virtually of a pair of *doctrinaires* and theorists—Wilhelm Schlegel, diletante and eclectic, and his brother, Friedrich, pedant and *mauvais tête*—who attempted to create a criticism *a priori* and who, impotent to illustrate it themselves, were forced to have recourse to what they were able to pick up elsewhere. After a fashion it resembled those institutions which are universities in name but in fact are nothing but examining boards. It criticised the productions of others, and if pleased therewith, graduated them romantic. It lived on foreign conquest and annexation, and made capital of the fruit of other men's labours. In such wise it cannily took possession of Tieck, who was at bottom an independent man of letters, a free lance, even a journalist in the sense that with him literature was before all a business and a livelihood. In a word Tieck was too much of a Dryden to be a romanticist by vocation. The significant thing about him is that he outgrew his romanticism, which in his case was only a malady of adolescence, a distemper or kind of green sickness. It was merely one of his manners and no more permanent or final than that which marked his period of "enlightenment."

In particular, however, romanticism found its most advantageous affair in the inadvertencies and indiscretions of acknowledged genius. So it laid hands upon certain work of Schiller's and Goethe's, and insisted upon making them romantic leaders in spite of their protests. To be sure, Goethe was in some sense romantic and not wholly irresponsible for many of the positions his name was used to cover. But the capital fact of his life, after all, was his conversion from romanticism, even after his own kind, which was at worst of quite another complexion than that of the school's. What importance he himself attached to this change of colours, is shown by the circumstance that he is constantly preoccupied with it during the latter part of his life—endlessly affirming, explaining, justifying, and commenting it. Unfortunately, however, for a just perception of the facts it is the romantic Goethe with whom we are better acquainted, partly on account of the currency which he himself has given his earlier years in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* and partly on account of the assiduity with which the romanticists have continued painting his portrait after their own likeness. But for all the seduction of his youth and the apotheosis it has received, the significance

of his manhood, of his intellectual being, should not be overlooked—and that was irreconcilably at odds with the romantic error.

And yet it must be acknowledged in the same breath that whatever his principles, Goethe was always inclined to coquette with romanticism more than was good for him. Personally I fail to see much choice, as literature, between the second part of *Faust* and Tieck's *Prinz Zerbino*. As a system of philosophy, metaphysics, or *Symbolik* the former may be vastly superior; that is a question to be decided by those who understand it. But at all events it was by no means difficult for the romanticists to find in him excuse or precedent for some of their worst follies. So it was in particular with the gigantic egotism which underlay their pretensions to artistic vocation. There is something almost *bête* in the complacency and open-mouthed stupefaction with which Goethe—and even Schiller, who had less reason for it—contemplate their own productions, as though they were some great and inevitable work of nature, to say nothing of the exaggerated respect which they have for their own occupation. And while perhaps the frequent fatuity of the romanticists was less innocent as it was less excusable, they might have pointed to this common trait among others as a plausible evidence of kinship.

Nevertheless the lesson to be drawn from the careers of Goethe and Tieck as a whole is perfectly obvious. The notions of the romantic school are, in the most favourable interpretation, those of youth and immaturity; it is impossible for any sane man to grow old, not to say ripe, in them. Their very begetters abandoned them in later life—or rather, the other way about, their ideas abandoned them, and they went out one after another like draughty candles. Even the two Schlegels became, the one a functionary of authority and tradition, the other a literary *cicisbeo* or *factotum*. In short, there is about romanticism nothing permanent or achieved. It is not a state of attainment in which it is possible to rest content, as Goethe rested in his classicism. It is not even a stage of development; it is a mood, an aberration of spirit, to which youth, together with periods of dissolution and transition, is particularly liable.

No wonder, then, that the existence of German romanticism was parasitic; it lacked the constitution to live independently and relied upon other sources for its sustenance and support. Hence in part its mischievousness. It deranged the intellectual economy and impaired the moral health of the whole age and its

posterity by disturbing the natural circulation of ideas and stimulating a set of abnormal and artificial appetites and reactions. The ideas which it appropriated, the work which it approved, were seldom their authors' best or sanest. To be sure, there was at the time little enough that was excellent to choose from; still of what there was it failed to take the best. Or if by any chance it did, the reasons for its choice, as well as the use it made of its selections, were anything but judicious. Naturally its acquisitions were exceptional and accidental when considered with reference to the entire work of the author from whom they were extracted; and since they formed no *ensemble* of themselves, they were as frequently inconsistent and incongruous one with another. In this way arose endless difficulties—multiplied explanations, reconciliations, compromises, adjustments, extenuations—and in general an impression of confusion and inconsequence about the whole ingeniously tessellated fabric. This is the explanation too of that inextricable mixture of truth and falsehood in the romantic doctrine by which so much that is erroneous has succeeded in passing current in the past until our criticism and appreciation are honeycombed with it and by which the wariest critic is liable to be disconcerted still.

Upon this confusion it was inevitable that the intellectual sterility peculiar to the movement should react disastrously. As a matter of fact, the two characters are hardly separable, and it would be difficult to say whether the romantic confusion is a result of literary impotence or *vice versa*. It is merely a case of action and reaction. Inasmuch as its promoters had few ideas of their own, they were thriftily disposed to make these ideas go as far as possible by applying them to all sorts of subjects indiscriminately. So Friedrich Schlegel transferred to current criticism the principles he had originally derived from the study of Greek. He judges *Wilhelm Meister* by the same criteria as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and arrives, as might be expected, at an insanely jumbled estimate of both. Nor did the school, under his able tuition and that of his brother, proceed otherwise with such general subjects as art, nature, religion, and philosophy, as though to justify Schleiermacher's saying, "*Es gehört zu dem sich noch immer weiter bildenden Gegensatz der neuen Zeit gegen die alte, dass nirgend mehr einer eines ist, sondern jeder alles.*" So little sense had they of the just measure that they seldom touched an idea without spraining it. They broke up wholes

into parts and erected parts into wholes. They isolated single factors and treated them as complete in themselves. They mistook means for ends and ends for means. They added and subtracted unlike denominations to make a desired product. They slurred distinctions and ignored resemblances. They invented such hybrids as the "religion of art" and the "religion of nature," terms which they took literally, not metaphorically. "Any man is a priest," says Schleiermacher, "who under a form original and complete has developed in himself, to the point of virtuosity, the faculty of feeling in any mode of representation." With Schelling they turned poetry into philosophy and with Novalis they turned religion into poetry. For the latter, indeed, the gospels derive their authority chiefly from the fact that they have to do with the dissolution of a spell (*Verzauberung*) and hence resemble a *Märchen* or fairy tale, the favourite romantic *genre*. In a word, confusion—chaos they themselves define as the romantic element—is, with futility, the constant character of the movement, and our present universal deformation of ideas is but an heirloom of the school.

Capital, in particular, for its critical temper is the crass eclecticism with which it sought to run the arts together, into a kind of indiscriminate medley, without regard for their natural differences of aim, effect, material, and method. With the phenomenon itself we are only too well acquainted nowadays when our critics are still discoursing as though the *Laokoön* had never been written while our poets are industriously creating pastels in prose and symphonies in verse, to say nothing of the painters' marvels in tone and the musicians' miracles of colour. But appalling as it is to observe how quickly a distinction once achieved may be totally obliterated, it is not we in this case who are the first offenders. Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Tieck, and "many more whose names on earth are dark"—they are all with one accord for the promiscuity of art. "Hence it is desirable to bring the arts together again and to seek transitions from one to the others. In this wise statues may rouse into paintings, paintings become poems, poems music, and who knows what noble church music will mount once more like a temple into the air!" So the elder Schlegel; and to much the same effect Novalis: "In general it is impossible for the poets to learn enough from the musicians and painters. . . . They should be more poetic and as who should say more musical and picturesque." While

the younger Schlegel in his own very best manner raises distraction to its highest power: "Romantic poetry is a progressive universal poetry. Its mission is not merely to unite all the separate varieties of poetry and to reconcile poetry with philosophy and rhetoric; it will and must also now blend, now fuse poetry and prose, genius and criticism, art-poetry and nature-poetry." As for Tieck, it must be acknowledged, he is by no means so universal a spirit; he is merely an advocate for the poetry of music and the music of poetry: "What! is it not permissible to think in tones and to make music in words and thoughts?"

In all these quotations, it should be noticed, the word poetry has come to have a meaning so vague, shifty, and ambiguous as to be incapable of supporting any conclusion—or what amounts to the same thing, as to be capable of supporting any conclusion whatever, an advantage which Wilhelm Schlegel finally pushes home in his Berlin lectures on *belles-lettres* and art by substituting the term "poetics" for the "theory of art" (*Kunstlehre*) in general.

All this has a very familiar ring. It is quite in our own way—so much so as to seem rather trite and hardly worth consideration save for the sake of its genealogy. But then, which of the romanticists' errors is likely to appear novel in the eyes of their heirs? At the same time I may be pardoned in the interests of completeness for calling attention to still another obsession and that the most striking and significant of all. I mean that which at bottom a disciple of Freud's might be disposed to think responsible for the whole romantic neurosis. To be sure, there is ever a disposition at periods of ecstatic agitation to confound love erotic with love charitable. But in this instance the symptom is particularly important because what seems to result from a study of the romantic doctrine of passion, is the suspicion that a great part of the disorder of the school was the result of nothing more or less than sexual unrest. The manner in which this sensual ground of uneasiness appears and reappears at frequent intervals, like a shoal under ruffled water, is startling. How much of Novalis' piety is due to the loss of his Sophie it is hard to say; but its kind or quality is unmistakable—it bears the marks of a thwarted or perverted desire, a momentary vacancy of the senses. In his own words, "the exaltation of the beloved object to a divinity is applied religion." And equally characteristic of the

confusion between Eros and Charity is the jotting in his notebook, "*Christus und Sophie*." But it is Schleiermacher in his *Reden über die Religion* who puts the official and theological seal upon this notion that "*die Lösung aller Rätsel im Geheimnis der Liebe liege*."

"For him who stands alone the all exists in vain, for in order to take up into himself the life of the Universal Spirit (*Weltgeist*) and to have religion, man must first have discovered mankind, and that he finds only in love and through love. For this reason are the two things so intimately joined; longing for love, ever fulfilled and ever renewed, comes at once to constitute for him religion. . . . Therefore religion withdraws into the still more confidential intercourse of friendship and the dialogue of love, wherein face and figure are plainer than words and even a sacred silence is intelligible."

With these tenets it is hardly astonishing that the promoters of the movement should be, on the whole, so little edifying in their relations with the sex. One and all they were dominated not by women but by woman. The gallantry of Wilhelm Schlegel is notorious. For the riotousness of Friedrich his *Lucinde* is sufficient evidence, not to mention his early letters to his brother. But why multiply examples? The lubricity of *Ardinghello* seems to have awakened a response in every one of them, even Tieck. And not only this, which might be paralleled in more robust natures; about all their love affairs there is invariably something morbid and uncanny. Caroline was eleven years older than Schelling; she was thirty-five and he was twenty-four, when he first fell in love with her. Sophie von Kühn was a mere child of twelve or thirteen when betrothed to Hardenberg. I have already spoken of Wilhelm Schlegel's inglorious conquest of Böhmer's widow after her experience in Mainz and her political incarceration. He seems too to have borne with exemplary equanimity her infatuation for Schelling, which took place under his very nose, and to have accommodated himself to the *liaison* with a complaisance in no wise short of ignominious. Even after Dorothea's divorce from Veit, Friedrich Schlegel insists upon keeping up the irregularity of their relationship as long as possible in sheer delight apparently in his own depravity. Characteristic too is the well-known passage of his *Lucinde* in celebration of the transposition of the masculine and feminine rôles in love. Schleiermacher himself must needs fall in love with a married woman to begin with and finally marry the widow of a friend. But something

in which they saw their own figures a thousand times repeated and of colossal dimensions. "*Mich führt alles in mich selbst zurück*," confesses Novalis. Or if it failed to admit their pretensions to magnitude, they shut their eyes to it and denied its competence altogether:

"Ich komme nur mir selbst entgegen
In einer leeren Wüstenei."

As a matter of fact they had all been spoiled in the nursery, and spoiled children most of them remained all their lives. The work with which they won a hearing was almost uniformly unfit for publication; in France it would never have got into print at all. It was only the abject poverty of German letters at the time which allowed them to pose as writers, and precocious ones at that. Tieck's origins are incredibly crude and mawkish. Friedrich Schlegel's first critical efforts are execrably written and composed, and reek of intellectual coxcombry and pretension. Novalis is jejune and silly. The best of them all is Wilhelm Schlegel, and he is commonplace and foppish. But finding themselves indulged in their whimsicalities and mannerisms, and flattered by their ability to dumbfound the respectable Philistine, the Nicolais, and other *Aufklärer* of the day, they had no incentive to correct themselves and clarify the ferment of their youth. And particularly so, since there was no authority capable of impressing or overawing them. For a graphic picture of the spiritual conditions at the time as they appeared even to the romanticists themselves, whose very element was confusion, I can do no better than quote Schleiermacher:

"It is a time," he says, "when nothing human remains unshaken; when every one sees just that which determines his place in the world and secures him to the earthly order, on the point, not only of escaping him and falling into another's possession, but even of perishing in the universal maelstrom; when some not only spare no exertion of their own powers but also call for help on every side in order to keep fast what they consider the axes of the world and of society, of art and of science, which are by an indescribable fatality upheaving as though of themselves from their deepest foundations and are leaving to destruction what has revolved about them for so long; when others with restless impetuosity are busy in clearing away the ruins of fallen centuries in order to be among the first to settle upon the fruitful soil which is forming underneath out of the rapidly cooling lava from the frightful volcano; when every one, even without leaving his own place, is so greatly agitated by the violent convulsions of the universe that amid the general vertigo he must needs

rejoice to see a single object steadily enough to hold by it and gradually be able to persuade himself that there is something still standing."

Amid the universal trepidation Goethe and Schiller alone exercised some sort of steadying influence. But even Goethe and Schiller, as I have already remarked, were not invariably level-headed. And by the time the youngsters might have profited by their better example the mischief was done; they were confirmed in their folly to the point of resenting criticism and admonition. They quarrelled with Schiller and even with Goethe, and consorted only with those like-minded with themselves, "*Brüder im Geiste*." From their early corruption, therefore, they never recovered. If they were not thwart and perverse from the start, they soon became so under the process of deliberate self-cocking and mutual admiration which was the breath of their life.

Psychologically their leading motive was egotism. From this one characteristic it would be possible to derive pretty nearly their whole activity. "*Das Ich soll sein*." The self was their favourite, their exclusive pursuit; *Selbst-beobachtung*, their darling study. It is with utter rapture that Schleiermacher describes the glorious moment when he first discovered his I, unique and unmatchable—like Childe Roland's dark tower, "without a counterpart in the whole world"—and recognised it for the foundation of all morality and religion. Eminently representative too is the letter written to her husband by Rahel Varnhagen, their disciple, when the cholera was raging in Berlin: "What I want is a death of my own. I won't die of an epidemic like a blade of grass in a field, parched by malaria among its companions. I will die alone of my own disease—that's the kind of woman I am."

As a result the whole history of their ideas is individual; it is a part of their biography, not of the history of thought. In this sense it is almost physiological, like their figures or their faces. In spite of the liberty about which they were always prating, they lay themselves under the very worst of tyrannies—the tyranny of self. Their intellectual and moral life was as completely subdued to the accidents of their own persons as was their digestion or bodily health. Their mental and ethical tone was as exposed to the weaknesses and disorders of their own temperaments and as helpless before them as was their physical

tone to the weaknesses and disorders of their constitutions. Tieck had romanticism just as he had rheumatism—as passively and as unintentionally—however much he may have brooded over it when he once came down with it. So it was that they never succeeded in abstracting their thought—there is nothing universal or even general, impartial, and inevitable about their ideas.

In no respect, perhaps, is their egotism more strikingly shown than in their attitude toward literature and art in general. As *littérateurs*, ergo artists, at least in intention, they were so deeply immersed in their own profession as to be incapable of seeing anything else. Not only was it the one serious concern of life, it was also the standard or norm of all other concerns whatever. Even in Goethe the importance attached to æsthetics strikes us nowadays as rather naïve, if not actually silly—at all events as beside the mark. The kind of artistry which runs through *Wilhelm Meister* as the sole preoccupation of every character of any account and which indeed is the one touchstone of character, is quite in the romantic vein and belongs to the same order of things as the *Sternbaldisieren* with which Goethe himself reproaches Tieck. But though Goethe may have given a kind of currency to the idea, it was reserved for the romanticists proper to complete the confusion between art and morality, between the conception of life as an accomplishment and as a duty. As for so many other of our vices we are indebted to them too for the disposition to “literatise” and “artifice” life. Indeed, so far did they carry the practice, so impotent were they to think outside of their own categories, so inflated with their own assumption that they must needs make existence a play and God an artist also because they, forsooth, were themselves second-rate literary men. Even Schelling is so carried away with the draught created by these ideas as to place æsthetics above morals, to find the consummation of philosophy in a work of art, and to justify metaphysically the conception, which is represented even by Schiller and Goethe, that the only complete man is the poet—“*die Poesie das Höchste und Letzte sei.*” Heaven forfend! What a world this would be if all of us were artists! But with this conception, at all events, the distinction between philosophy and poetry, between art and life is wiped out at one stroke; and reality and fancy mingle in graceful phantasmagoria. “*Was wir Natur nennen ist ein Gedicht, das in geheimer, wunderbarer Schrift verschlossen liegt.*”

Subdued as they were to the spell of their own being, they never discovered in all their aspirations after freedom that the only liberty is the liberty of self-restraint. They failed to perceive that life was constantly spreading its snares to involve them in a coil of fatal consequences, in a chain of determinations where their independence would be irretrievably lost and they themselves would become but creatures and slaves of circumstance. Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde* is to all intents and purposes a panegyric of sexual passion—or of love, as he preferred to call it. Its thesis, as far as it can be said to have such a thing, consists with the conviction that the realisation of liberty, of the infinite, *das Unendliche*, is possible through the unbridled gratification of this appetite alone. With pitiable short-sightedness he seems never to have reflected that the moment he yielded to his passions, he had become enmeshed in a network of influences over which he had no control whatever, that he had committed himself to the conditioned and given hostages to fortune. Only by an act of self-control and denial, only by standing aloof and refraining would it be possible to affirm his ego in withdrawing it from the consequences of its activity.

"Von der Gewalt, die alle Wesen bindet,
Befreit der Mensch sich, der sich überwindet."

But consequences was the last thing they thought of; they were totally devoid of discipline. And when they philosophised, they were merely trying to talk themselves into believing what they wished. Their freedom was the freedom to do as they liked; their liberty, the liberty to indulge their own caprices.

Whether the romanticists consciously recognised the discrepancy between their profession of liberty and their actual subjugation to self, it would be hard to say. In any case their whole dialectic was directed to the problem of reconciling just these two different notions; though it was only by a kind of sophistry, in invalidating the authority of achieved distinctions, that they succeeded in doing so. By obliterating the line of demarcation between the outer and the inner order and reducing the former to a tributary of the latter, by such means alone was it possible to make it appear as though the gratification of impulse, which makes man the slave of circumstance, was after all only a sort of self-determinism. It was for this reason that they welcomed with enthusiasm the philosophy of Fichte, which jus-

tified their existence in representing the universe as the creation of a glorified and transcendental ego. No doubt Fichteanism was in the air, and it was of these cobwebs that Fichte spun it. But it was as symptomatic of romanticism as acceptable to it.

For this reason their attitude toward nature becomes extremely interesting. It was to nature that they resorted in the first instance because her passivity had no embarrassments for their self-esteem. They sought to her as they did to those of similar mind with themselves. With her they could be themselves, unrebuked and unabashed. They were rid of the clash of wills, of the constraint of human intercourse, of the elementary decency which compels even the most obstinate and wilful in society to have some small regard for the rights of others, if for no better reason than a fear of the unpleasant consequences which result from neglecting them. Before nature they could flaunt their own personality as arrogantly as they pleased. Above all, they might have of her the supreme satisfaction which the egotist finds in the conviction that his influence is irresistible; they could make her over in their own image so that she should bear their very seal and impress. That they never saw her as she is—passionless, irrational, meaningless, a pure illusion—is clear from their account of her. They saw her only as they were; they discovered in her only what they brought to her. It is after their example that we have learned to identify the moral and the natural world. Cramped as they were by their own limitations, they were incapable of conceiving another order distinct and remote from that with which their own consciousness acquainted them. Like Novalis they took nature to be the "systematic index or plan of our spirit" just as we ourselves are "*Analogien-quelle für das Weltall.*" And in that consciousness of theirs they found little that was not sentimental. They had no principles, no criticism—hardly a purpose; they were moved by accident and caprice. Such is the sense of every word they wrote. Heinrich von Ofterdingen falls in love with Mathilde because he happens to feel, on seeing her, as he did in a dream on seeing the little blue flower. It is circumstance alone which determines them in one direction rather than another—circumstance and mood. And as they were themselves, so they thought of nature—as of something equally moody, capricious, and passionate. "*Das grosse Weltgemüth*" Novalis calls her. It was a later and different turn of romantic thought which by

an analogous error made her out a being essentially intellectual, while by an inevitable reversal of the original confusion it is man who has become a creature of nature's, a natural product, instead of nature's being an achievement of consciousness, a sentimental creation, a gigantic *Kunststück* or transcendental *tour de force*—or in Novalis' words, "*ein Universaltropus des Geistes*."

The *volte-face* is noteworthy. But after all the two attitudes are only counterparts and are in reality so represented by Schelling, who finally gave a philosophical organisation to all these indefinite ideas that were crossing in the air. "It is our view of nature," he says, "not that it accidentally coincides with the laws of consciousness . . . but that it necessarily and originally realises as well as expresses those laws, and that it is nature and is called so only in as far as it does this." It follows that "the system of nature is at the same time the system of consciousness"; that "nature is visible mind and mind invisible nature." While, further, "nature thus appears as the counterpart of consciousness, which consciousness itself produces in order to return thereby to pure self-intuition or self-consciousness." "Hence in everything organic there is something symbolic, every plant bears some feature of the soul." And he ends by transferring the whole scheme of consciousness to external nature, using his metaphysical principles to fill in the gaps in the positive knowledge of the physical universe which existed in his day, exactly as Novalis advises in the *Lehrlinge zu Sais*: "The careful description of the history of this inner world of consciousness is the true history of nature; through the consistency of the world of thought in itself and its harmony with the universe is formed of itself a system of ideas for the accurate representation and formulation of the universe."

At this point the confusion has culminated in the complete identification of the law for man and the law for thing. Such is the fallacy of the romantic conception of nature past and present: with Schelling it offers man as the measure of nature, or else with Renan it offers nature as the measure of man. How much clearer, or at least how much less prejudicial is the Greek idea of nature as of something in itself indifferent or inert, as a decoration or accessory of voluntary action or a machine which it requires intelligence to move! It is responsible for the whole marvellous Greek mythology. Between the modern and his landscape there ever swims a haze—the fume of his own distempered imagination.

"Die Wesen sind, weil wir sie dachten.
 Im trüben Schimmer liegt die Welt,
 Es fällt in ihre dunkeln Schachte
 Ein Schimmer, den wir mit uns brachten."

With Tieck he is like a man in a trance, a somnambulist in a limbo between night and morning:

"It often happens that the world with all its tenants and occasions reels before my eyes like a flimsy phantasmagoria. And I too seem but an accompanying phantom, which comes and goes and comports itself amazingly without knowing why. The streets look to me like rows of mimic houses filled with silly occupants, who simulate human beings; and the moonlight, shimmering pensively on the pavements, is like a light that shines for other objects and has fallen upon this wretched and ridiculous world by chance alone."

In this particular, it must be confessed, the hands of the romantics were again strengthened by the example of Goethe, in spite of his superior clarity of vision and his sterner sense of actuality. For his own part he was never able to conceive of nature, in the passive sense otherwise than as a work of art or in the active sense otherwise than as an artist, for his pantheism involved the one with the other. As such it must exhibit, on the one hand, the same sort of design as any other artistic product, a poem or a statue; at the same time it must proceed, on the other hand, in accordance with certain ideas similar to those which determined his own work. His investigations of nature, therefore, consisted in a series of attempts to explain that design by penetrating to the ideas behind it. In other words, the universe was an artistic illusion, whose significance resided in the motif which it realised—just as a novel is an illusion whose only principle of coherence resides in the author's conception. Practically, therefore, since it was a mere mode of artistic expression, the problem was to find the animating and creative ideas which as artist it was trying to communicate. It never occurred to him that it might be nothing more than a mechanical what-not—a something which had fallen together and operated, not in virtue of a set of ideas, but in accordance with a set of formulæ, that it might be something in and for itself, independent of consciousness and without reference to it. Hence Schiller's perfectly just objection to his *Urpflanze*, "that is an idea, not a fact." In short Goethe was, in reality, not scientific, but literary. While art begins by assuming that nature is an illusion, science

begins by assuming that it is a reality. While the former endeavours to discover an idea that will give it significance, the latter endeavours to discover a formula which will express the manner in which it works. For this reason the mathematical theory of light was simple nonsense to Goethe. It was not an idea, a creative conception at all; it was a mere *modus operandi*. On the other hand, in those cases where our organisation of the universe is nothing more than the interpretations of the human spirit—or in those sciences which consist largely in classification, which are little more than arrangements of data, in accordance with our own notions, and in which the generalisations are in a sense only categories of the human intelligence—in sciences like botany and biology he was quite at home. But even there, notwithstanding his profounder divination, he was virtually at one with the romanticists.

As a result of their exclusive and consistent egotism, when they came to write, they had naturally nothing to write about but themselves. That was all they knew, even if anything else had happened to interest them, as it seldom did. With one or two unimportant exceptions they had divorced themselves from all the active and practical concerns of existence. At the one end Tieck had disassociated poetry from life and reflection; at the other Schleiermacher had disassociated religion from virtue and morality—"everything with religion, nothing for it." Their forms were almost devoid of content—in short, the form was the content; hence the famous definition of transcendental poetry as the poetry of poetry and their curious doctrine of second powers or the multiplication of a subject into itself. The French Revolution alone of all the stirring historical movements that were eddying around them seems to have roused them to a faint flutter of excitement—mainly because they saw a way to turn it over to the account of their own subjectivity. "The French Revolution, Fichte's *Theory of Knowledge*, and Goethe's *Meister*," declares Friedrich Schlegel, "are the greatest tendencies of the century." In consequence their own novels are all autobiographies, revamped and redated, but cribbed, cabined, and confined by the writers' own limited experience of themselves. It is so with *Sternbald* and *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, with *Lucinde* and *Hyperion*. Indeed, this is Friedrich Schlegel's definition of the romance—an individual confession. And it is equally so even with their philosophies; of Schleiermacher's *Monologen*

Haym remarks: "He talks as a man would do to his most intimate friend." In a word, all their writings are personalities and indiscretions.

It is only natural, therefore, that from the literary point of view their work should be as poverty-stricken as it is. But it was not only so, it was muddled too. As they were puppets of mood, without genuine character, all impressions were indifferent. Just as their criticism was destitute of principles, so their creative work, their *Dichtung*, was destitute of selection. What marked it most conspicuously was the raw eclecticism which is the note of romanticism everywhere—a seated contempt for the discriminations of a sane and disciplined taste. Hence a mishmash of motives, costumes, cults, civilisations—Hellenism and Mediævalism, Paganism and Christianity—jumbled together in inextricable medley. In this respect the elastic dream-economy of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is remarkable and amply justifies by its conveniency the *Märchen* or fairy story as the romantic type *par excellence*. All their *Dichtung* is essentially inchoate, as were the two products which served them as paradigms—Goethe's *Meister* and Tieck's *Genoveva*. And amid all this ferment and clutter only one distinctly discernible purpose—the desire of these young hotheads to reproduce the impressions made by life upon their feverish and excited imaginations.

III

Evidently an existence of such unremitting self-exploitation must have been extremely fitful and spasmodic. It must have had its moments of exaltation, of reckless intoxication and *Rausch*. But these moments must have been succeeded by intervals of desperate reaction and disillusion. Hölderlin alone is sufficient proof of it. As a result of this emotional insecurity, no doubt, originated the doctrine of Transcendental Irony. The title, ostentatious as it is, covers nothing more than an attempt, on the part of Friedrich Schlegel in the first instance, to pass off one's mortification at one's failings and shortcomings by being the first to ridicule them when they were too conspicuous to escape general attention. It is a common enough shift in every walk of life for those who are embarrassed by the discrepancy between their pretensions and their performance to make a virtue of necessity, and by anticipating detraction and

taking sides against themselves, to vindicate a kind of critical or intellectual superiority over their own practical activities. In such manner the romantic ego had at least the advantage of appearing to know better than it could do and of restoring its authority by a characteristically unprofessional intrusion or supervention upon its own work. Like Victor Hugo's theory of the grotesque the transcendental irony was a tacit confession of the writer's powerlessness to produce a perfectly congruous and satisfactory piece of work and an attempt to make a merit of the fact by erecting his weakness into a quality. In other words it was an effort to insure the romantic poet against the mediocrity of his own gifts. As Haym, who is usually so reserved in his strictures, remarks in another connection: "This is perhaps the most striking index of romantic poetry—that what is elsewhere an evidence of impotence and banality [*Unpoesie*] it construes as an indication of beauty and perfection."

From the point of view which has been gained at present it is impossible to mistake the nature of the transcendental conception of self engaged in these speculations—as of something distinct from all that is tangible, palpable, or in any way apprehensible or accountable. It is something quite noncommittal and irresponsible. It is uncompromised by a man's actions; it is as evidently unprejudiced by his character; nor has it apparently any manifestations by which you can bring it to book. You can not corner it, try as you will. Whatever he is or does, no matter how *bête* or fatuous or futile he may be, the romanticist has only to reply to your censures: "Ah! you are quite mistaken; that is not I. See, I have quite as much contempt for that sort of thing as you have." Verily, it was a dabster at evasion, this transcendental self. In every instance it eludes you and by a like expedient. It "dematerialises" like a "spirit" under your very eyes and leaves you gaping foolishly at vacancy.

Upon morality the effect of such a doctrine was bound to be fatal. This retirement of the real man from his character and occupation provided a ready excuse for all sorts of irregularities, which could be represented as merely impertinent to the genuine self. By this means it was possible to excuse any atrocity as transcendently irrelevant and indifferent. And as a matter of fact, the romanticist soon came to understand by morals nothing more than the uses of human nature in its laxest and most inclusive sense. The study of morality was the study of human-

ity; and it was a consequence of his eclecticism that he embraced in the term the animal as well as the spiritual, the earthy as well as the ethereal. And since the ponderable, if once admitted, is likely to weigh the heavier in the balance, it happened more often than not that his morality was, in the ordinary acceptation of the word, very immoral indeed. In fact, Schleiermacher makes no bones about proclaiming "the immorality of all morals." While further, as humanity is infinitely various, it will follow that there are as many moralities as there are human beings. It is again Schleiermacher who with great complacency makes the flattering discovery that the ego possesses a morality as unique as its individuality. Perhaps *Lucinde* is as good a map as we have of human nature after the romantic morality, where humanity is likely to display itself very much as it is. But alas for Schleiermacher, who went to the pains of defending it! it is not only a nasty book, it is also a stupid one.

"Der Pedantismus bat die Phantasie
Um einen Kuss; sie wies ihn an die Sünde.
Frech, ohne Kraft umarmt er die,
Und sie genas von einem toten Kinde,
Genannt Lucinde."

And its viciousness as well as its stupidity, like that of the school behind it, consists in its licentiousness, in the rejection of every principle of restraint or control. The conception of obligation as such seems never to have dawned upon this gentry. As Goethe said of the Schlegels, "Unhappily both brothers lack some sort of inner check to hold them together and keep them fast" [*"Leider mangelt es beiden Brüdern an einem gewissen innern Halt der sie zusammenhalte und festhalte"*]. About their conduct there is always something shifty, unreliable, incalculable—it is subject to a kind of aberration which seems to withdraw it from the province of morals altogether and relegate it to that of whim, caprice, and haphazard. It hardly belongs with the rational and providential at all. It very nearly substantiates their own claim of identity with nature.

It is in this respect that German romanticism differs most strikingly from New England transcendentalism. The parallelism between the two is too close and obvious to be overlooked. To read Tieck is, in many cases, like reading Hawthorne translated into German, or *vice versa*. I am disconcerted by the

similarity every time I reread them. Not only is there a resemblance of general tone and spirit between Hawthorne's sketches and such stories of Tieck's in particular as the *Blonde Eckbert* and the *Runenberg*; but there is also a resemblance of style and treatment, as is obvious from comparing the opening of *The Great Stone Face* with that of *Die Freunde* or *Die Elfen*. And so likewise with Novalis and Emerson there is in both the same characteristic sententious, fragmentary manner, the same brachylogy. And what is so amazing, is that the scholars and literary historians would have us believe that there was no direct discipleship on the part of the Yankees. But however this may be, the leading ideas of the two schools or movements were much the same; their philosophy of life was, as a philosophy, identical. What New England transcendentalism amounted to in the end, as we have had a chance to see in this generation, was, like German romanticism, the apotheosis of a purely ideal and sentimental ego above character and conduct at large, and the arbitrary elevation of the dicta of this ego into a code of morality.

To be sure, Emerson was himself a man of character and he assumed the ego to be possessed of such character because he was. But it was just the weakness of Emersonianism that in its adoption by others it was bound to take on the peculiarities of those who adopted it—and they might have character, or more frequently, as it has turned out, they might not. In other words, there was nothing in the original doctrine to guarantee or insure character. And it is on this account that transcendentalism has again become the philosophy of an age and a country in which the general level of moral action is conspicuously low. It is just the philosophy for a race and a generation with our notions of liberty and self-interest—for a race and generation which wishes to be free to defraud its neighbours in the morning and boast of its moral elevation in the evening. It affords a sentimental refuge for self-esteem in any emergency. It enables us in the handiest way in the world to redeem the baseness of our practice by the nobility of our sentiments. No matter how low our behaviour, how contemptible our acts, our genuine self remains untouched. Herein lies the explanation of the curious anomalies of our civilisation—our unscrupulous and oppressive money-getting on the one hand and our ostentatious and munificent benevolence on the other; our sordid living and our grandiose declamation—the morose might call it hypocrisy; we call it idealism.

To make Emerson and the romanticists responsible for all these consequences seems at first thought unfair. In his own case there is present one idea whose absence is thoroughly indicative of the German transcendentalists as well as of contemporary idealists. Emerson was still animated by a sense of duty. Whether it was a survival of his descent or an independent acquirement of his own, the consciousness of responsibility and guilt had not yet faded from his mind. Though this conception does not appear explicitly in his work, perhaps, it was implicit in his character. It is virtually taken for granted, even though it may never be mentioned; and it is in this particular that his utterances have an immeasurable superiority over those of the Germans. The transcendental idea of liberty had succeeded in retrenching the categorical imperative altogether. Liberty consisted in following your own bent. Whatever gave the self range and opportunity was moral. In short, morality was egotism. Into this error Emerson never slipped. But it must be remembered that it was romanticism pure and simple that he preached; and that in preaching it at all, he is justly accountable for the results.

In other respects Hinduism, too, offers an edifying contrast with transcendentalism. In one sense they were both systems of the ego. While the latter, however, is optimistic, the former, on the contrary, is pessimistic. It all lies in that. The note of romanticism is eclecticism—indifferency, promiscuity. The note of Buddhism is discrimination, distinction, reservation. What saves Buddhism, in short, is its dualism; that is, its freedom from confusion. To the transcendentalist nature was but an extension of the ego; human nature was but "sister to the mountain" and "second cousin to the worm"; the insensate was but an *alter ego* of consciousness. To the Hindu nature was a derogation to the genuine self. And with nature we must understand all that part of human nature which was liable to "natural" law. Hence liberty for the Buddhist lay in the self-restraint which enabled him to withdraw more and more from the influence of the fleeting, the impermanent, and the earthy until he should emancipate himself wholly from the law for thing, the mechanical determinations of a material cosmos, and ensue the higher and spiritual, the true self. Whereas Hinduism would make religion consist in a recognition of the distinction between the eternal and the impermanent, the one and the many, and in an effort

to establish the former; romanticism in the person of its evangelist, Schleiermacher, would find the infinite everywhere and in everything and would swallow up both the one and the many in a miscellaneous all. "The meditation of the pious is only an immediate consciousness of the universal, of all that is finite in the infinite and through the infinite, of all that is temporal in the eternal and through the eternal. To seek and find this in everything that lives and moves, in all that grows and changes, in all that acts and suffers, and to have and know life itself only in immediate feeling as this being—this is religion." An illimitable diffusion, a boundless dissipation, an unceasing flux of sensation and emotion in which all distinction and definition melt away in a shifty confusion—such is the last word of the romantic religion as it is of the romantic ethics—endless dissolution.

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