

The Romantic Neo-Medieval Synthesis: Nominalism, John Ruskin and the Destruction of Thought

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The Romantic idea has remained the cultural, ethnic and folk-anarchist alternative to modern rationalism for 200 years. Whether critics realize it or not, the language of Herder, Scott or Ruskin remains the verbiage of the revolutionary. The target is the urban, bureaucratic and stratified life masquerading not only as "freedom" or "reason," but reality itself. In the hyper-bureaucratized, standardized, mass production culture, the mystic and ethnic populism of the medieval, Gothic and Romantic idea is either considered hopelessly Utopian or the weapon of choice.

It is part of the challenge also to the "Americanist" paleo-conservative idea. The revolutionary nationalist looks to foreign models, since the world of the Founding generation was itself problematic, but now rendered irrelevant in an age of media empires and total Jewish control. The US was built as a hybrid state partly resembling the Roman Republic and part Enlightenment. The Constitution was a compromise cobbled together with tremendous opposition, largely in secret, and with little hope of success. The Civil War would prove that correct. The Romantic idea refuses to take written constitutions seriously.

Art, religion and politics all derive from something more fundamental, and this is the Romantic stress on the Whole, the All, which is and must be beyond categories of thought. The modern argument forces nature to conform to itself as the self is seen as outside of the natural order. This vitiates and distorts the external world for the sake of extracting more and more resources from it.

Romantics sought a return to the diversity of medieval life untainted by industry or mass warfare. Rather than the imperial categories of logic, the Romantics sought to grasp nature intuitively, that is, prior to the imposition of concepts upon it. Peasant wisdom, long ignored, was rediscovered while rural life was seen as far more authentic, popular and democratic than the factory floor or the crime-ridden urban mass. Folk tales, ancient songs and old traditions were far closer to the people than the elite, urban scientific establishment. These medieval conceptions were both democratic and representative of the folk. Romanticism, in short, was a mixture of ethnic, religious and medievalist ideas. Today in 2016, the peasant medicine and life now has an impressive scientific backing for its significance. It rejected the linear view of history.

The basic composition of Romanticism is the rejection of abstraction. There might be Germans, Swedes or farmers, but there is no abstract "citizen." Ethnic collectives have very concrete elements that are easily discerned. People, societies and civilizations self-contained and followed their own internal path. This implies that no single ideological conception can be imposed universally. Significantly, the ethnic ideal was close to the romantic imagination in that it was popular, spontaneous and holistic. The ethnos and its language was not imposed from above as the state was. The folk humanized the natural world so as to make nature a home, a homeland. The organic connection between societies and nature and of the persons within the social order is made explicit through language.

Modernity in the Romantic view created moral disorder, state centralization and urban industry. These are the very opposite of liberty. The Classical idea of both the ancient and post-

Renaissance worlds focused on straight lines, sharp contours and harsh, foreboding facades. Power and empire were the only messages. The spiritual life, inner peace and the intuitive connection of All creation were more significant than any labour saving device. It was this obsession with regularity and material wealth that doomed Modernity to be the expression of mass culture.

Romantic architecture reassessed the Middle Ages and acknowledged the genius of the Gothic, or the cultural world of the High Middle Ages. Academic Classicism and its offshoots were the expression of the new world of control and urban finance. The Romantic was the counter-revolution of tradition, ethnicity, the peasant commune and the moral economy. In brief, the Romantics made war on any ideology that believed the individual can exist apart from the whole.

The architecture of the 19th century was a battle between cosmopolitan Classicism and popular, folk-Romance. The Classic school focused on simplicity, power, and the use of new, stronger materials in construction. Instead of the logical abstraction of the Classicist structure, the Romantic edifice offers a sophisticated and complex entity connected with local values. Tradition, culture and nature are synthesized in the Romantic world. Symmetry and regularity were tedious to the Romantic since nothing in either life or nature was symmetrical, abstract or simple.

One of the more important theorists of both the Gothic and Romantic reaction in architecture is John Ruskin (1819-1900). His vision of architecture is indispensable for understanding Romanticism and the concepts that formed it. For him, the Romantic idea was identical with the Medieval apogee roughly from 1200 to the beginning of the Renaissance. The Gothic was highly complex, immensely intricate and colossal in size. What impressed Ruskin was that these breathtaking structures were built without the slightest input from modern technology. The implication was that there was a way of life, a way of work and production that the modern thinker has forgotten.¹

Ruskin's idea of the Gothic stressed the workman and the guild as much as the product. These, in turn, stressed hierarchy, skill and objective values in work and life. These took the place of technology. The medieval cathedrals were expressions of both worship, the spiritual life and the collective importance of cooperation. Ruskin remarks:

For in one point of view Gothic is not only the best, but the only rational form of architecture, as being that which can fit itself most easily to all services, vulgar or noble. Undefined in its slope of roof, height of shaft, breadth of arch, or disposition of ground plan, it can shrink into a turret, expand into a hall, coil into a staircase, or spring into a spire, with undegraded grace and unexhausted energy. For, so soon as the workman is left free to represent what subjects he chooses, he must look to the nature that is round him for material, and will endeavour to represent it as he sees it . . . with small respect for law.²

The Medieval was natural, spiritual and quite logical. Logic was, however, subordinated to need, local custom, ancient church canons and the organization of the labour commune. The workman seeking to design what “he chooses” is the direct expression of democratic autonomy

1 Ruskin, John. Lectures on Art, Delivered before the University of Oxford in Hilary Term. Clarendon Press, 1870: 9-12

2 Ruskin, John. Selections from the Writings of John Ruskin. Smith, Elder and Company, 1900: 211

long destroyed in the filthy urban factories of Britain.

Ruskin's criticism of the Classical is based in part on its artificiality. It is the architecture of domination and administration: power, not authority.. The Gothic style creates huge spaces that imitate the sky – there is no closed box like one great prison cell, but an artistic model of the cosmos. Light was meant to flood this otherwise material world and the windows were made as large as possible: something was supposed to shine outward and reflect inward. The modern workplace was merely a rectangular box existing only because of cost-benefit analyses.

The rejection of the modern by Ruskin and many others, whether in politics, economics or art, is about the importation of an ideological, abstract and mechanical conception on a society with its own way of life. Form must be tightly bound to content and context. Importing material from external sources is irrational. The term “organic” is also essential here, since this is the very process of maintaining a close tie to nature and custom. The opposite of organic is mechanical, artificial, or unnatural.

Far more famous than either was GWF Hegel, one of the earlier exponents of Romanticism and its consequences in social life. Concerning Romantic art, its foundation and purpose, he states:

In the representations of Romantic Art, however, everything has its place; all spheres of life and phenomena, the greatest and the least, the highest and the most restricted, the moral, the immoral and base ; and the more art becomes secularized, so much the more does it take up its abode in the finite things of the world, conceive a preference therefore, procure for them complete validity ; and the artist is fortunate in them when he represents them as they are.³

Hegel is darkly suggesting that the Romantic idea goes beyond and negates the modern fetish with categories and boundaries. There was no “church” or “state” in the middle ages, since government was an aspect of Christian life while the bishops, parishes and monks were the moral guardians of education and spiritual truth. There was no clear boundary, since life is not so neatly organized.

Romantic literature reflects the idea. It advanced new heroes such as the lonely rebel individualist irreconcilably hostile to his environment. Driven by passion, the hero has refused all conventional, hidebound judgements and slogans more habitual than believed. Instead, they were forced to seek true life away from the middle class cities and the domination of money. Thus, in this era, the Asian and Byzantine past was rediscovered and used to confront the failures of the Enlightenment.

On the other hand, modernity was represented by realism, manifest in psychology and the social sciences, seeking to explain all through the simplest mechanical movements. To an extent, certain realists such as Leo Tolstoy rejected the naive mechanism of the Enlightenment, and associated “realism” with what was actually real: the folk and the traditions that permitted them to survive through war, famine and modern life. Since Enlightenment realism and a certain form of classicism did not grasp man's inner world (since it was not an object like others), they concerned themselves with external relations in economics and politics. From this rose the absolute state, social science and Darwinism.

The Renaissance, by contrast, was the cancellation of the Gothic, and extolled the mathematical, the scientific and the desire to alter nature. The modern is based on the

3 Bryant, WM. Hegel on Romantic Art. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1879): 352

Renaissance's conception of itself as resurrecting ancient paganism, alchemy and magic. These are significant since they seek to harness elemental forces for the sake of the practitioner. Technology does the same thing, just without the incense. The Renaissance idea was urban while the Romantics were rural. It looked to ancient empires rather than the people around them. They termed the Gothic “barbaric” and “fanatical,” while Rome was the apogee of truth.

The Renaissance in Italy and elsewhere was tightly bound with banking oligarchies and the rule of the moneyed few. Partly because of this, Renaissance buildings were decked out in ornamentation afforded only by those at the very top of the social ladder. Rather than the popular, peasant connection with nature, the new elite used straight lines, pediments, and geometric shapes of all kinds precisely to reflect their alienation from a natural order whose only purpose was to be acceptable for their will.

Johann Herder is one of the founders of the Romantic idea. His epistemology remains part of modern debates as it has become essential to all anti-Enlightenment critiques of the purely mathematical and logical conception of the universe. As a founder of this school, his thought ties all the above together into a holistic theory of man, nature and God. His work can serve to summarize what has been said. Concerning the development of human language, Herder remarks concerning the nature of human thought:

If, that is to say, reason is no compartmentalized, separately effective force but an orientation of all forces that is distinctive to his species, then the human being must have it in the first condition in which he is a human being. . . . Posit the human being as the being that he is, with that degree of sensuality and that organization, in the universe: from all sides, through all senses, this universe streams upon him in sensations. Where the separate force of reason? It is the positive, single force of the soul which is effective in such a disposition.⁴

The idea has been stated all along: separating reason from feeling, history or family is unrealistic, impossible and distorting. Humanity cannot be split up into functions or “faculties” because his very presence is that of a single entity. The same goes for society, nature and the spiritual realm. Reason and logic are only aspects of human society and desire. More specifically, our thought process cannot ignore love, or the bond that unites all things into a single, organic whole:

All volition indeed begins from cognition, but also in its turn all cognition only arises through sensation. I can only attain my own perfection through the perfection of others, as the latter can only do so through the former. . . . We stand on higher ground, and with each thing on its ground, move in the great *sensorium* of God’s creation, the flame of all thought and sensation, love. Love is the highest reason, as it is the purest, divinest volition.⁵

Love is not some syrupy sentiment. It is the very existence of the whole: it is the interaction of all cosmic parts to the extent that to damage one tiny part will lead to the gradual destruction of the whole. Love refers to these intensely powerful ties without which no life is

4 Herder, Johann. *Philosophical Writings. Treatise on the Origin of Language*. Cambridge University Press, 2002, 85

5 Herder, Johann. *Philosophical Writings. On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul*. Cambridge University Press, 2002: 214

possible. Romantic love is distinct, but only makes sense when it begins to look like the very organization of the natural order. Parts of the whole only become truly individual to the extent that they serve the whole. Otherwise, they are useless m, parasitic and diseased criminals and outcasts.

In the 1840s the Romantic revolution is victorious over its rivals, but its victory was short lived, surviving in art and literature rather than economics or social life. It was based on a direct, lively and open-minded perception and true reflection of reality, or the humanization of society and nature according to traditional, popular ideas. In truth, Romanticism moved easily to idealism, where the brute object, of itself, told the world nothing. Only when the object (such as a house, a river or a language) was brought to the daily life of a people and made a part of their identity, did the object have any reality. This is the essence of idealism, since objects are not actually known as such, but are symbols of deep and complex meanings.

In Michael Cohen's article on Romantic idealism, he skilfully sums up its foundational idea, using EM Forster as his example:

In fact, Forster's criticism is aimed as much at the perils of the modern marketplace and the shortcomings of democratic processes as at the lingering social orthodoxy. Forster's sublime aesthetics and Romantic idealism extends Ruskin's democratizing emphasis on the sanctity of the individual's craft and the divinity in the individual's visual experience. Forster's values embody both a liberal social statement celebrating the promises of a progressive modernity and an ominous warning as the modern world appears to spiral downward into industrial exploitation, class struggle, and moral corruption.⁶

The argument here is clear. Romantic art, its rejection of the modern and the classical, whether it be in architecture or science, argues that the whole is not only greater than its parts, that the parts are not really parts, but come into their own identity only when they realize that they are dependent upon one another and the whole. Whether it be a building or a civic meeting, the concept of unity remains the same.

Ruskin states that art is the joy that man takes in God's creation and "not his own." He writes this underlined. He stands in relation to the rest of creation and is not creation itself. He is the pinnacle of creation, but this does not endorse egotism. His entire ethical system was that happiness derives from contentment, to be satisfied with little, to maintain few desires and hence, be free from dissatisfaction. One of the most powerful condemnations of modernity can be found here:

A moral practice is not a prudential act concerned with the success of the enterprises of agents; it is not instrumental to the achievement of any substantive purpose or to the satisfaction of any substantive want. No doubt there may be advantages to be enjoyed in subscribing to its conditions: perhaps honesty is the best policy; perhaps speaking the truth is a condition of all durable association for the satisfaction of wants. But a moral practice, unlike an instrumental practice, does not stand condemned in no such advantages were to accrue. Indeed, recognizing and subscribing to those conditions may be expected to add to the

6 Cohen, M. *The Aesthetics of Change: From Ruskin's Gothic to Forster's Romantic Idealism*. Discoveries: Cornell University, 2011: 153

cost of those transactions..⁷

The modern nominalist would have no tools to interpret this passage. To separate action from efficient production is absurd. In fact, it is the very essence of absurdity. The modern cares nothing for truth. He cares most of all for rationalization, for a good reason to ignore his conscience. Truth, the modern tells himself, is not obtainable. Therefore, all is permitted, but still, the nature of the human mind does not permit this nihilism. A good moral rationalization is needed to temporarily quiet the collective unconscious.

Generally speaking, Ruskin and the Romantics in general, see capitalism as synonymous with modernity in that the money economy is. If this is true, then usury is essential to modernity. Capital removes work from service and forces it to become mercenary. Service implies a strong social bond. Capital implies isolated egos. It becomes an “exploitative and calculating relationship.”

Work, when it becomes a matter of utility, loses its ethical function. Capitalism sets men against one another since it implies isolation. True work implies service and this implies social life and hierarchy. This gets worse when the exploitation of the common workman is then applied to luxuries that have no real useful or intellectual purpose. Exploitation, nominalism and ego are one and the same.

Occult Theft - Theft which hides itself even from itself, and is legal, respectable, and cowardly, - corrupts the body and soul of man. And the guilty Thieves of Europe, the real sources of all deadly war in it, are the Capitalists - that is to say, people who live by percentages on the labour of them; instead of by fair wages of their own. The Real war in Europe, of which this fighting in Paris is the Inauguration, is between these and the workman, such as they have made him. They have kept him poor, ignorant, and sinful, that they might, without his knowledge, gather for themselves the produce of his toil. At last a dim insight into the fact of this dawns on him; and such as they have made him he meets them, and will meet.⁸

This is part of the revolutionary heritage of Romanticism. Romanticism comes down to the relations of men that have been destroyed through the revolutions of modernity. Regardless of the formal labels, all modernity is about the duplicity that Machiavelli made essential to human life. Only in such a debased life can something like usury or rent be defended.

Labor for the romantic is something good in itself, and never should exist for exchange value. There should be no abstract unit that standardizes work. This leads

the men of the nations everywhere into vain, incoherent struggle for a freedom of which they cannot explain the nature to themselves. Their universal outcry against wealth and against nobility, is not forced from them either by the promise of famine, or the sting of mortified pride. They do much, and have done much in all ages; but the foundations of society were never yet shaken as they are at this day. It is not that men are ill-fed, but that they have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread, and therefore look to wealth as the only means of pleasure.

7 Anthony, PD. John Ruskin's Labour: A Study of Ruskin's Social Theory. Cambridge University Press, 1983

8 Ibid, 186

It is not that men are pained by the scorn of the upper classes, but they cannot endure their own; for they feel that the kind of labour to which they are condemned is verily a degrading one, and makes them less than men. Never had the upper classes so much sympathy with the lower, or charity for them as they have at this day, and yet never were they so much hated by them; for, of old, the separation between the noble and the poor was merely a wall built by law : now it is a veritable difference in level of standing, a precipice between upper and lower grounds in the fields of humanity, and there is a pestilential air at the bottom of it.⁹

The critique of modern art is not merely an abstract exercise. It is a social critique as well. Today, it's not an uncommon argument: there is tremendous production, more dissatisfaction. More information coupled with less knowledge and ability. A massive profusion of moral ideas and theories with a total rejection of moral behavior as even a possibility. The very existence of the university discipline of ethics that has no relation to anyone's behavior shows the radical disconnect of modern nominalism.

The purpose of this essay was to connect the aesthetics of Romanticism to social criticism and to show it as more than significant for the modern age. There is no such thing as a moral idea that is "no longer relevant." Truth is no respecter of time or persons. To hear the semi-educated yell "The Bible is not relevant to the modern age" has so many errors, assumptions and logical short-circuits that there are not sufficient data storage to contain it all.

One of its most obnoxious is the assumption that the Bible (itself a misnomer, as the "Bible" is a compendium of many books and not a book of itself) is false, as everything is, hence it made sense then, it's ideas could not possibly be taken out of its age. If it's true, then the age would not matter at all. To make such a statement is illiterate, since the thousands of pages of the "Bible" cannot be universalized into a single object regardless. Yet, this sort of sloganeering is common at church conferences, corporate boardrooms and university lecture halls and is often enforced by professors and churchmen.

The point is that only the modern could even make such a statement. Only a modern has the total lack of organic connection to the world around him. The term "Bible" in the statement above has nothing to do with that large book on our shelves. Normally, the person uttering it is really talking about his concern with sexual release or love of modern technocracy. The ethics that he thinks is connected with the "Bible" would contract this preoccupation and hence, must be rejected. He cares not for "ages" or "relevance," but only that his lifestyle be accepted by all.

Nominalism removes the word from its referent. It further rejects any universal truths or any intrinsic connection among objects themselves. It, ultimately, rejects any universal idea. No thought process called "nominalism" can believe in any form of universal. This means that words are arbitrary, as are the objects serving as their referents. Even more, it means that the total conventionality of meaning places the very definition of truth, the world and sanity in the hands of those powerful enough to define words and influence behavior.

The disconnect of words from both meaning and referents can be paralleled to the rejection of care of the wealthy for the poor or for society in general, as Ruskin says above. There is no intrinsic or organic bond connection these floating egos, therefore there is no imperative commanding their attention. University ethics has no relation to behavior and is not meant to. It is the endless multiplication of theories increasingly abstract and useless. Ideas are

9 Ibid 54-55

over-analyzed. The over-publication of concepts renders any concrete moral action inconceivable. Since this over-analysis destroys even the most basic moral definition and moral object, Nothing exists ethically, all concepts are fluid and the real is the domination of the powerful.