The Romantics

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I AM HUNTING pheasants with my eldest son, Brendan, a young man of fifteen. Empty handed and tired from our long hike through meadows and fallow fields, we stop in a stand of oak trees to rest in their shade and perhaps take a squirrel or rabbit. The temperature is in the high fifties, warm for late-October Michigan. Brendan sits in the amber grass about twenty feet from me at the base of a pin oak, his twenty-gauge resting in the crook of his left arm. Dappled light flickers about and upon him. He is tall for fifteen, nearly six-three. The ends of his deep chestnut, nearly black hair just touch his shoulders. His eyes are clear and blue, his skin very fair but touched pink with the wind and our walking. It is only at this moment, in this place of sudden objectivity, that I see how beautiful he is.

Of course, "objective parent" is something of an oxymoron, if not an outright lie. Yet, at this moment, I thrill at seeing Brendan, if only for the instant, not as my son, but as an image, an icon even, something representative of the ideal, a manifestation of what Plato might describe, capitalized, as the Good, the True, and, especially, the Beautiful.

Between the ages of nine and twelve, Brendan read my copy of *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* almost constantly, cycling through the stories over and over again. Then he moved into Tolkien and Harry Potter. For the last couple of years he has been especially fond of the Dune series, that fantastic world where science, philosophy, and religion offer opportunity for contemplation upon a dystopia grounded in hope. Last week I saw a copy of *Great Dialogues of Plato* on his bed stand.

Like most teenagers, Brendan loves music and looks there to find meaning, even philosophy. He particularly favors bands from the eighties, like X, but he also likes listen-

ing to the Everly Brothers and U2. If I had to guess, I would say that Brendan's favorite song is the Mason Williams chestnut "Classical Gas." And his tastes are not limited to popular music. Last spring we attended a concert at the University of Michigan where a performance of Vaughn-Williams's sublime "The Lark Ascending" entranced Brendan, its deeply moving flights of solo violin soaring in the atmosphere of a sustained ninth chord. For a month afterwards it was, at his insistence, our constant companion on the van CD player.

Around that time Brendan was reading *Wuthering Heights* in his tenth-grade English class. I found an old CD of mine, Kate Bush's *The Whole Story*, which I hadn't seen or thought about since Brendan was a baby. I played him the disc's opening cut, Bush's "Wuthering Heights," a lovely song in an idiosyncratic time signature (at times 4/4, at times 3/4, even slipping into 2/4); a song filled with mist and despair and based on Brontë's tale. He liked it better than the book. I told him Kate Bush was only eighteen when she wrote the song, a fact that could impress anyone, considering her musical inventiveness and the emotional earnestness on the piece.

Following "Wuthering Heights" we heard "Cloudbusting," a song written from the perspective of Wilhem Reich's son Peter and based on the younger Reich's memoir, *A Book of Dreams*. Wilhelm Reich, a psychiatrist trained by Freud himself, claimed to be the discoverer of "Orgone energy," a life energy somehow connected to the sexual impulse. The cloudbuster of Bush's song is a device Reich invented that could make it rain in the desert, returning health and fecundity to what the doctor saw as a seriously psychologically damaged environment. Reich was a genius, but he was also a nut. Though, from the description his son gives, he was also a loving father and a good man.

This story completely captured Brendan's imagination. He began to read all he could about Reich, scouring the Web and local libraries for information. He argued about the possibilities of the existence of Orgone with his friend, Ben, who, though interested at first, finally dismissed the notion as bunk.

Brendan even wanted to do a presentation on Reich and cloudbusting for his psychology class. He went so far as to make a miniature cloudbuster, but it was too small to make it rain; and, as we live in Michigan where we get plenty of precipitation, it wasn't such a pressing issue. Yet, for at least that brief time, Brendan was captivated by the Idea. Brendan is a Romantic.

Though it is easy to describe Brendan as a Romantic, describing Romanticism is not very easy, as its nature remains open to interpretation. The word calls forth different reactions from different people, and not even literary critics can agree as to what it means. One of the best definitions, I think, comes from H. G. Schenk in his *The Mind of the European Romantics: An Essay in Cultural History.* Schenk sees Romanticism as

> a unity . . . characterized as contrariness, dissonance and inner conflict of the Romantic mind. Utopian dreams for the future side by side with nostalgia for the past; a marked nihilistic mood accompanied by a fervent yearning for faith; serious attempts to bring about a Christian revival followed, in an admittedly marginal case, by the very abandonment of faith on the part of the former apologist; the long tug-of-war between the old religion and the new ideologies—these are some of the unresolved contradictions which lie at the core of the movement. No shorter formula can be devised to define the essence of Romanticism. All short-cut definitions that have been put forward—well over a hundred—are unsatisfactory. (xxii)

Many, if not most, postmodern critics avoid defining or describing Romanticism altogether, preferring to expose it (especially literary Romanticism) as the folly of aristocratic dreamers suffering a paroxysm of delayed adolescence. This attitude harkens back to Matthew Arnold in the nineteenth century and resurfaced with New Criticism in the twentieth, Eliot be damned. Marxists and feminists are especially severe with the Romantics, interpreting even the use by male poets of "feminine" imagery ("blood, milk, and tears") in reductively political and flaccid terms as an "appropriation" (Richardson, 21). Please.

Speaking of adolescence, postmodern and post-structuralist ridicule of not only the assumptions of the Romantics, but of any phenomenon or movement, seems to me the most adolescent of pastimes. How hard can it be to prove *anyone* a hypocrite? René Girard, a scholar not known for his sense of humor, makes a wry observation on postmodern criticism. "The modern intellectual," he writes, "is a romantic soul who likes to think of himself as the boldest iconoclast in history" (130). Though Romantics themselves, threatened by the weight of their *agon* and in obvious oedipal despair, these intellectuals dismiss Romanticism categorically.

Not all critics agree, of course. Harold Bloom, that voice crying in the academic wilderness, certainly would not suggest that we "expose" the Romantics. Bloom's former colleague Paul de Man, while in his life on the vanguard of deconstruction (before his reputation was dashed by posthumous reports of his Nazi affiliations) had great admiration for Romantic "interiority;" though, in general, he sat on the fence, striking a disinterested and affectedly superior pose. Feminist iconoclast Camille Paglia, on the other hand, enthusiastically embraces Romanticism. She might be outrageous in some of her opinions (not an unromantic posture), but she is a much more original thinker and much more interesting to read than most of her peers. Paglia is not ashamed of the Romantics.

Neither was poet and critic Kathleen Raine, perhaps the last of the English Romantics. In 1966, as postmodernism's dawn raid on meaning began, Raine asserted, "It is not 'the words on the page' which create the god in question, but the reverse" (118). This is a daring statement, but one which most contemporary critics would greet with derisive howls, preferring, as they do, their own gods and demons of nonexistence. Romanticism begs questions of faith and affirms the reality of the ideal. Because of this, it also courts suspicion and contempt.

My definition for Romanticism is as subjective as any other. Romanticism, for me, is both a variety of natural reli-

gion and a humanism of an idealistic timbre. It is characterized by bittersweetness, itself a recognition, unspoken, that life is complex, but that there exists *something* profoundly significant in living, whatever it may be, however transitory and protean its forms. In short, Romanticism signifies the ability, intimately bound to the experience we describe as "love," of human beings to identify with transcendent qualities, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, in the face of evidence to the contrary.

However, when I consider Romanticism in my own biography, I think less of Shelley and Keats, than I do of music, which the high Romantic E. T. A Hoffman called "the most romantic of all the arts" (Schenk, 181). But I don't mean Beethoven and Mendelssohn. The music I have in mind is from the soundtrack of my youth, the time when I found myself baptized in Romanticism's fiery ocean. It began during the spring I turned seventeen and first encountered *Layla and Other Love Songs* by Eric Clapton's group Derek and the Dominos.

The original songs on *Layla* (there are several traditional blues numbers, as well) were mostly written by Clapton, either alone or in collaboration with various band members. The songs are Clapton's *katharsis,* his therapeutic bleeding at being rejected by Patti Harrison in favor of her husband, Beatle George. The name Layla (also the name of the album's very famous title cut) was apparently Clapton's pet name for Patti. The title cut, "Bell Bottom Blues," "I Looked Away," "Any Day," "Why Does Love Got to Be So Sad?" are all burnt offerings to Clapton's immortal beloved. Joining Clapton on the recording is fellow guitarist Duane Allman. All of twenty-three-years old, Allman would be dead within a year of recording with the group from injuries sustained in a motorcycle accident. One of highlights of the album is the group's harrowing rendition of Jimi Hendrix's outstanding "Little Wing," recorded September 9, 1970. In London nine days later, Hendrix died of a drug overdose, turning the Dominos' recording into a haunting tribute.

I discovered *Layla and other Love Songs* in 1979. That spring my circle and I, a group of artistically-bent eleventh and twelfth graders, listened to that album and related its legends—of Patti and Eric's tragic love, of the Orphic deaths of two young men—in a festival of *pathos*, albeit a *pathos* that existed more in our imaginations than in our experience. The songs, the playing, the singing—a sweet fire of heartbreak and impending doom pervades them all. But the sweetness is the sweetness of *joy*, the joy of love. Love may be terrible at times, but it contains ecstasies. To live without it is unthinkable.

Perhaps the Romantics even more important to me in my youth, though, are two other recording artists, these from the nineteen eighties: The Waterboys and the Emily Brontë of the Fairlight keyboard, Kate Bush again.

Through the first half of the eighties I was in my late teens and early twenties; trying to figure out love and life, failing at both. My girlfriend through much of this time was a young woman named Marie. Marie, a kind girl possessing a sweet intelligence, dark brown hair, and eyes as large and brown as a deer's, was my first love. I did not deserve her. I was immature, unsure of myself, and weak-willed. I cheated on her as a matter of course, using these occasions as an opportunity for self-hate. Marie, though not as blatantly shameless as I, was not without a share of the responsibility. She feigned illness most weekend nights, so I spent a lot of time flying solo. She missed—or avoided—many events that were important to me. My birthday, for instance. We broke up and got together again several times. We loved each other, but not as we were. We loved what each could be.

Three songs from that era stick out in my mind. One is The Waterboys' "The Whole of the Moon." The other two are from Kate Bush: "Wuthering Heights" (again) and "Running up that Hill."

"The Whole of the Moon" is an idealistic portrait of romantic love. As a pop song, it is a masterpiece. Songwriter

and singer Mike Scott describes his beloved by juxtaposing her attributes to his:

> I pictured a rainbow
> You held it in your hands
> I saw flashes
> While you saw the plans
> I wandered out in the world for years
> While you just stayed in your room
> I saw the crescent
> You saw the whole of the moon.

Marie would sit in her room listening to this song over and over again, while I wandered through the bars and alleys of Detroit. Of course, she was feigning illness and I was fooling around; but that is beside the point. What is important is that she saw the whole of the moon, or at least she did in my imagination. As tragic as our friendship was, the ideal still had room to breathe within its confines. I remember her relationship to "Wuthering Heights" as well.

At that time we were broken up; but, reluctant to really let her go, I gave her a cassette copy of *The Whole Story*. I remember she had just bought a new car, a black Camaro. She would make her friends get into her car and she'd play them "Wuthering Heights" on the car's tape deck, tears welling in her deer-like eyes.

> Heathcliff, it's me, Cathy,
> Come home. I'm so cold.
> Let me in at your window.

I, on the other hand, had for my *katharsis* Bush's darker "Running up that Hill." Thunderous drums rumble beneath the opening C-minor chord played on the Fairlight while the singer contemplates making a deal with the Supreme Being: "If I only could, I'd make a deal with God, and get him to swap our places." She also considers her relationship to the beloved: "Is there so much hate for the ones we love? Tell me: we both matter, don't we?" This is Romanticism: love attempting to incarnate despite sure defeat.

The Russian theologian and philosopher Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900) wrote about Romantic love and its re-

lationship to transcendence. For Solovyov, this kind of love is the only antidote to self-interest. In falling in love, our focus is turned to the other; and in sacrificing our selves, we find ourselves in that other. "There is only one power," he writes,

> which can from within undermine egoism at the root, and really does undermine it, namely love, and chiefly sexual love. . . . Recognizing in love the truth of another, not abstractly, but essentially, transferring in deed the center of our life beyond the limits of our empirical personality, we by so doing reveal and realize our own real truth, our own absolute significance, which consists just in our capacity to transcend the borders of our factual phenomenal being, in our capacity to live not only in ourselves, but also in another. (45)

Solovyov was a visionary who experienced what he termed "the divine Sophia" at the age of nine and then again at twenty-three—even traveling to the Egyptian desert when his "Eternal Friend," the lady of his vision, told him to meet her there. He identified her with the feminine being identified as Wisdom (Sophia in Greek) in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. Solovyov never married, although he twice fell in love with women named, curiously enough, Sophia.

Falling in love is a most transcendent experience. Its sweet fire awakens us to the possibilities of the other and, ultimately, of ourselves. I do not think this is relegated to romantic love alone, though it is there most sublimely illustrated. I also see it in the youthful idealism of "trying to make the world a better place." Young people who become possessed of an idea, be it socialism or animal rights, feminism or macrobiotics, are also Romantics. They fall in love with an idea, rather than a reality. The problem for them, as for those who fall in love with the higher ideal of a person, is that this love cannot be sustained. Neither can the beloved live up to the ideal. The lover is unable to maintain the quality of his or her love, and the beloved is unable to maintain the dignity accorded. Both become caricatures of themselves. What is noble dissolves. What is transcendent disappears. The love that so possessed the lover, like the gold of dreams, vanishes. But it was there for a moment.

Love for another human being, I assume, is something everyone, even the most materialistic Marxist, experiences. And everyone also experiences or has experienced the fading of love, or even its resolution in tragedy. Divorce rates alone attest to this. Loving, then, is an act of faith, and it is an act of faith—whether we are willing to admit it or not—in the Good, the True, and, especially, the Beautiful. What else could we love?

The great sagas of love, those which critics from Denis de Rougemont to Julia Kristeva (talk about strange bedfellows!) have viewed with suspicion, speak to this manifestation of the Ideal in romantic love. The tales of Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Iseult, Lancelot and Guinevere, Dante and Beatrice are all representative of the idealism of falling in love and its tragic realization in this world. This is a philosophical, even a theological aesthetic. We can only have a foretaste of perfect love in this life, these stories whisper to us: but this foretaste comes at a price.

While acknowledging romantic love's idealism, philosopher M. C. Dillon dismisses romantic love as inauthentic. A neo-nominalist, he is wary of romantic love's idealism, distrusting its promises of perfection and "union with the beautiful object" (55). He is concerned with phoniness and adolescent mooning, here, rather than the experience of loving. However, *authentic* love is, for him, a reality worth seeking. "To love," he concludes, "is to put oneself at risk. Not to love is to turn the risk of catastrophe into a certainty. . . . The relationship that confers meaning, the relationship that more than any other, defines our relationship to the transcendent whole of human existence . . . is, I believe, love" (156). How interesting that, even in his positive definition of love, Dillon cannot refrain from using the term "transcendent." He proves himself wrong. For what is the transcendent, if not ideal?

Romantic love's transcendent vision of the beloved—given profound treatment by Dante—is also Romanticism's vision of the ideal. The transcendent is not an object to be possessed: it is, as Raine suggested, a possession of the sub-

ject. The experience of the ideal, like Jacob Boehm's vision of the Eternal in the dull reflection from a pewter mug, takes an instant and lasts a lifetime. It is the manifestation of the Beautiful, a theophany comparable to Solovyov's vision of Sophia. Speaking in theological terms, Pavel Florensky describes the experience of the ideal as an experience of *knowing:* "Knowing is a real *going* of the knower *out* of himself, or (what is the same thing) a real *going* of what is known *into* the knower, a real unification of the knower and what is known" (55). That the experience does not stay is no reason to doubt its reality.

In my undergraduate years I took a course on poetry during one spring semester: the entire history of English poetry, from Beowulf to the Beats, in six short weeks. As a senior, I was expected to give a presentation on a poet (I did Dylan Thomas). Another senior, a woman named Felicia, gave a presentation on John Keats that I will never forget.

Felicia was very tall, at least five-ten. All of her features were long: long hands, long fingers, long legs, long eyelashes, long face, and she was given to wearing long skirts. Only her black hair was short. What I remember most about her presentation is not the insightful commentary on Keats or his poetry. In fact, I don't remember what she said at all. What I remember is hearing and watching her read. It was a moment of literary and human communion, a moment of ecstasy.

The evening of her presentation was warm and sultry, and twilight was just touching the windows as she began to read, a purple glow warming the Detroit skyline. Among the pieces she read was "Ode to a Nightingale." Felicia read in a mellifluous contralto, a trifle husky, and stopped when she came to the lines "Darkling I listen: and for many a time / I have been half in love with easeful death." Though I'd read them many times before, the beauty of Keats's words entered my ears and my being through Felicia's voice. She put her hand to her heart, saying, mostly to herself and with complete sincerity and conviction, "This is so beautiful." It is.

Certainly, the poetry of John Keats is exceedingly beautiful, but beauty is a quality many contemporary critics and poets look upon with distrust, if not utter contempt. Even Philip Levine, who despite his bolts and axle grease reputation writes some beautiful poetry, sidesteps the imposing beauty of Keats's verse when he says he was influenced by the Keats "of the letters" and not of the poetry (103). Nevertheless, Levine identifies himself, or did in 1977, as a "romantic poet," saying, "I feel the human is boundless, and that seems to me the essential fact of romanticism" (103).

Beauty, according to postmodern suspicions, is nothing but manipulation, a rhetorical ploy. Derrida himself eschews beauty—and even coherence—in his rhetoric, supposing, it appears, that writing shorn of elegance and beauty is somehow more honest. It is not. Keats's dictum, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," expresses an aesthetic we like to pretend we have outgrown. But perhaps we have not outgrown it so much as we have distanced ourselves from it. We see clearly, but from a distance; we have penetrating vision, but no perspective, no depth perception: all things are of equal value to the indiscriminating eye. We are the beneficiaries of scientific advances in the optics of criticism that we interpret as improvement. William Blake saw this warped conception of progress as a fundamental error of rationalist perception, proclaiming, "Improvement makes strait roads, but the crooked roads without Improvement, are the roads of Genius" (line 66). To our detriment, we have resolved upon the more utilitarian straight roads in aesthetics and criticism. I long for something more crooked.

I lament that university programs in English literature today, especially at the graduate level, are more concerned with criticism and politics than with the Being of literature, a phenomenon which has engendered what Bloom calls the "School of Resentment." Enlisting students in one of the schools of criticism has superseded engaging them with literature on the whole, or so it seems. After all, there is no such thing as a solitary author.

In considering this situation, I recall how, in an essay entitled "The Body of Father Christian Rosencrux," William Butler Yeats compared criticism to a tomb. "It seems to me," he wrote, "that the imagination . . . during the last two hundred years . . . has been laid in a great tomb of criticism, and had set over it inextinguishable magical lamps of wisdom and romance." Yeats penned these words in 1895. Yet he was not despairing: "I cannot get it out of my mind that this age of criticism is about to pass, and an age of imagination, of emotion, of moods, of revelation, about to come in its place" (197). Yeats awaited this age of imagination as Christians await the Second Coming. Like a poet-saint, he worked to bring about its realization.

Postmodernism, ironically (isn't *everything* ironic when it comes to postmodernism?), is often painted as the inheritor of Romanticism's place in culture. I disagree with this widely held opinion. Postmodernism has only the self in common with Romanticism.

But whereas the self is the beginning and end of postmodern aesthetics (if they can even be called aesthetics), the self is only the beginning of the Romantic aesthetic. To be sure, the Romantics are guilty of all of the sins of which they are accused: solipsism, emotionalism, decorativeness, melodrama, hyperbole, and the fall into decadence and gothic silliness. But the primary aesthetic—and value—of Romanticism is its idealism, its belief in something bigger than the self.

The Romantics personify this "something" as nature, or the beloved, or the imagination, or as art itself. All of these imply a conviction that something integral to human life exists beyond the tangible. "Make me thy lyre," invokes Shelley, "even as the forest is" ("Ode to the West Wind," 5:1). The surrender Shelley here describes amounts to a type of human *kenosis*, an emptying of the self for the purpose of allowing the ideal to take on bodily form, even if that body consists only of ink and paper.

Indeed, Shelley is the most idealistic of poets, as was Byron. Contemporary critics often see Shelley's university

stunt of avowing atheism as an act of heroism anticipating Nietzsche and postmodernism and not as the gesture of adolescent posturing it was. Shelley was no atheist, though he was vehemently opposed to his England's tea-and-crumpets Anglicanism. Shelley was a Platonist. The word "soul" occurs with such frequency in his work that it must cause many a materialistic critic to wince uncontrollably upon encountering it. On the other hand, Byron, incestuous rogue that he was, gave, or tried to give, his life for an idea—the liberation of Greece (itself a conception of Byron's tied to Greek ideals, long deceased by Byron's time, of the Beautiful). Byron, indeed, represents Romanticism's polarities: its loathsome decadence and its heroic idealism.

This ability for decadent creatures to rise to heroism, inspired only by an *idea*, is, for me, an example of Romanticism's virtue. It leads—or can lead—to a better selfhood, indeed, a vocation. And to have a vocation, one must feel *called*—an intuitive act inclining toward transcendence. Romanticism's vocation manifests itself through an act of such faith.

Romanticism's subjectivism, though, has long been regarded as its weakness. But subjectivism is not Romanticism's problem: it is humanity's. In reality, subjectivism is Romanticism's—and humanity's—strength. This subjectivism, indeed, this personalism, is the only experience of reality we can have. To pretend otherwise is absurd. And we don't need the Heisenburg Principle to prove it. Only through our subjectivity can we attempt to incarnate the ideal; only through it can we experience love. In fact, objectivity itself is an ideal, unattainable. But the inability to realize the ideal, like the inability to sustain the image of the eternal beloved, does not render the ideal a falsehood merely because it cannot be fully realized.

The true Romantic, I would suggest, is a person concerned with icons, images that point to a greater reality. But the problem with Romantics is that we all too often become lost in the icon, the image, and forget the ideal reality behind

it. The image by itself is not enough. Falling in love with the image and forgetting the ideal reality eventually lead to decadence. We end up with narcissistic poseurs, stereotypes, and caricatures: poets wearing berets, painters smoking clove cigarettes, musicians shooting heroin, snarky literary critics.

The point, I believe, is that to be human *is* to be a Romantic. No one is completely rational. We all have moments in which we ascend to idealism. We all experience, at one time or another, the transcendent power of *erōs*. We all lapse into self-parody, into emotionalism and decadence. To deny this—or to think we can or should evolve past this—is to deny our humanity. And while this daring denial may be noble, in a sense, even that audacity is evidence of Romanticism. Romanticism betrays a faith in something, even if it is faith in nothing. The Romantic gesture, finally, is the characteristic gesture of the human being.

Percy Bysshe Shelley met his end in Italy while sailing into a storm. Unfortunately, though a decent sailor, the poet could not swim. When the Tyrrhenian Sea's waves brought Shelley's sodden corpse back to land, a volume of Keats was found in one of his jacket pockets, a volume of Sophocles in the other. At Shelley's funeral, while the poet's body burned on the shore of Leghorn, his friend Edward Trelawney poured libations of incense, wine, and oil into the flames and consigned Shelley's remains to the love of Nature. Then, just before the flames devoured it, Trelawney grabbed the poet's heart.

The mystical body of Romanticism continues to burn, and we are in no danger of running out of fuel. No matter. What needs transfiguring in the fire of criticism will be transfigured—regardless of the smug knowingness of the critics. The treasures we find in its pockets we will cherish, despite fads and the affectations and disaffections of taste. What will remain is the heart, even if some need to risk burning in order to retrieve it. And how beautiful is fire.

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