

# POSTMODERNISM IN THE LIGHT OF ROMANTICISM

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## ABSTRACT

Postmodernism is a philosophical and intellectual movement that started in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it is very well alive even today. It challenged the rationalistic framework of the modern period. More specifically it challenged the objective of knowledge and hence very suspicious of any sort of meta-narrative. While, Romanticism was an artistic and intellectual movement that started in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction against the growing backdrop of the industrial revolution. It was a movement, as its name suggests, that embraced strong emotions of all kind as a important source of art. Considering the importance & movement starting of both; Postmodernism and Romanticism, this paper is a humble attempt to discuss about the Postmodernism in contemplation of Romanticism.

**Key words:** Postmodernism, Romanticism, Movement, Theory, Perception

## INTRODUCTION

The way to start thinking about postmodernism is by thinking about modernism, the movement from which postmodernism seems to grow or emerge. Modernism has two facets, or two modes of definition, both of which are relevant to understanding postmodernism.

The first facet or definition of modernism comes from the aesthetic movement broadly labelled “modernism.” This movement is roughly coterminous with twentieth century Western ideas about art. Modernism, is the movement in visual arts, music, literature, and drama which rejected the old Victorian standards of how art should be made, consumed, and what it should mean. In the period of “high modernism”, from around 1910 to 1930, the major figures of modernism literature helped radically to redefine what poetry and fiction could be and do: figures like Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Proust, Mallarme, Kafka, and Rilke are considered the founders of twentieth-century modernism. Postmodernism, like modernism, follows most of these same ideas, rejecting boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejecting rigid genre distinctions, emphasizing pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness. Postmodern art favors reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity, ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the de-structured, de-centered, dehumanized subject. While, Romanticism is a movement in art and literature in the eighteen and nineteenth centuries in revolt against the Neoclassicism of the previous centuries. The German poet Friedrich Schlegel, who is given credit for first using the term romantic to describe literature, defined it as “literature depicting emotional matter in an imaginative form”. This is as accurate a general definition as can be accomplished, although Victor Hugo’s phrase “liberalism in literature” is also apt. Imagination, emotion and freedom are certainly the focal point of romanticism. Any list of particular characteristics of the literature of romanticism includes subjectivity and an emphasis on individualism; spontaneity; freedom from rules; solitary life rather than life in society; the beliefs that imagination is superior to reason and devotion to beauty; love of and worship of nature; and fascination with the past, especially the myths and mysticism of the middle ages.

## DISCUSSION

The present article's title refers to two separable but closely related expressions. One is a genetic thesis about the persistence of Romanticism in the present, both in thematic and stylistic tendencies: just as it has often been claimed that Modernism is essentially a re-molding of Romanticism, so this volume addresses the proposition that Postmodernism is also yet another mutation of the original stock. The present work is especially to the typically postmodern discovery of Postmodernism in Romanticism, or whatever is taken to be Romanticism. There might appear to be a dubiety here: is the tendency of this volume genetic, or is it about a hermeneutic problem? But the dubiety is only an apparent one. The questions of what influence the past may have on us, and how that influence may operate, must be closely bound up with the question how we decide what the past is, and whether the interpreter's view is altering the evidence.

The first matter to discuss is those about terms, and their definition. Patricia Waugh has written about how, by the early eighties, the term Postmodernism shifts from the description of a range of aesthetic practices involving playful irony, parody, parataxis, self-consciousness, fragmentation, to a use which encompasses a more general shift in thought and seems to register a pervasive cynicism about the progressivity ideals of modernity'.

Perloff in his study also suggests a doubt about the ability of the postmodernist idea to generate new vitality in art, overwhelmed as it now is by theory and theorists. Yet despite the undoubted presence of a theory industry on the subject, the irony, parodic tendencies and cynicism appear to be persisting long after the first forecasts of the death of Postmodernism were made. The theory serves to answer a hunger to understand these undeniable features of the cultural production of the late twentieth century, both in popular and high art.

A relevant point to the answer about the use of the term Romanticism is that the tendency nowadays is to think in terms of Romanticisms in the plural, as Stephen Clark points in his study. That tendency, it might be argued, is itself an example of a typically postmodern piece of de-essentialising. Yet it has long been recognized that Romanticism is a dubious essence. O. Lovejoy's in his study, 'On the discrimination of Romanticisms', first appeared in PMLA in 1924, but its work is more radical even than its title implies, for it claims that Romanticism resists all categorization; and many authors have alluded to the conflicting definitions offered by so-called Romantics themselves of a word which, in the English language, did not even refer to the notion of an artistic movement until 1844.

It can be state that philosophical viewpoints evolve as human culture develops over time. Art is often made in reference or response to philosophical positions. To a practicing artist, dialectical tension between two interacting forces or elements can inform, in a constructive way, creative production. Often the same conceptual entity is best seen by looking in two opposite directions. Comparative analysis develops an understanding of contrasting ideas while providing a method of combining opposed ideas into a new unity.

The history of Western literature is a dualistic history because it is assumed to begin with two traditions: Hellenism and Hebraism. But, as we see, the spirits or values these two traditions represent seldom blend equally at any supposed period of the history. The Classic/Romantic contrast and the Modernist/Postmodernist dichotomy are in fact the result of having some Hellenistic or Hebraic qualities serving as the dominant. It is only that the postmodern style seems to be the consequence of pushing the Romantic Movement, with its Hebraic/Dionysian tendencies to an extreme. Thus, we find waywardness, randomness, absurdity, indeterminacy, immanence, popularity, non-referentiality, anti-form, intersexuality, heterogeneity, nihilism, etc. those Postmodern attributes, have all stemmed logically from Romantic characteristics.

Logical inference needs to be strengthened by factual evidence. In considering the world situation today together with its changes concerning the medium, the language, the author, the reader, the work, and the theme of literature, we cannot but admit that the Romantic spirit of loving freedom, change and difference has really brought about an unthinkable revolution in our art of literature. For our literature today, the postmodern kind is often so different that it becomes simply anti-art, anti-literature-, a trend worshipping Chaos, a voice full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

In the Romantic period, Thomas Peacock postulated a theory called the Four Ages of Poetry. In his view, poetry has been rising and then declining all the time cyclically from the age of iron through the golden age, the silver age, and the brass age, back to the age of iron again. For him the iron age of classical poetry is the bardic; the golden, the Homeric; the silver, the Virgilian; and the brass, the Nonnic. For him modern poetry also has its four ages: the Dark Ages can be considered the Iron Age again; the Renaissance, the golden; the Neoclassical Period, the silver; the Romantic Period, the brass. As Peacock placed himself in the brass age, he did not live to see the next Iron Age. But the satire he directed against his contemporary poets was enough to impel Shelley to write his *Defence of Poetry*.

Peacock's theory might be a joke. Yet, it is not without sense. The criterion, he has used to differentiate the four ages of poetry is the relative dominance of Hellenistic/ Classic/Apollonian virtues or Hebraic/Romantic/Dionysian virtues. The Iron Age comes when the latter virtues overwhelm the former completely whereas the golden age arrives when the former suppress the latter thoroughly. The silver and the brass ages are respectively somewhat dominated by the former and the latter. In this light, then, our present age could be the Iron Age again, as our Postmodernists do not want reason, sense, order, and culture; they want irrationality, nonsense, disorder, and anarchy instead. "When the lamp is shattered," certainly "the light in the dust lies dead." The Romantic lamp has now shattered itself, and so darkness is everywhere. Although the Postmodernists are striving with all sorts of lens to inspect, reflect, or refract each other, what avails in sheer darkness?

Happily, however, change is the permanent rule. We can predict that after some decades of darkness literature is sure to see light again. Another lamp may bring with it another form of art. As, this postmodern phase wanes, another full moon is expectedly in sight.

So far as *Possession* is concerned, it is a title that uncannily prophesied its readily effect. Unabashedly subtitled *A Romance*, *Possession* concerns the illicit passion of two Victorian poets, and the contemporary scholars who discover, and subsequently map, their relationship. As weighty as any of its Victorian antecedents, *Possession* encompasses two centuries and a good many of the generic forms of literary history. In more than five hundred pages, the reader is presented with substantial examples of memoirs, fairy tales, academic essays, diaries and journals, public and private correspondence, and, of course, poetry over sixteen hundred lines of it, in fact. Clearly, *Possession* is no ordinary novel. Reviewers were unanimous in their praise, and virtually unanimous in their implicit or explicit tagging of the novel as postmodernist. Highly forthcoming in their approval, they were less forthright in outlining the reasons for this postmodern classification. Perhaps this is so self-evident as not to require explanation? Even the most cursory of surveys of literature on the subject, however, shows that "postmodernism" is by no means an uncontested category; indeed, to claim that "postmodernism" is problematic is almost a satiric understatement of the case. No doubt, if questioned, these reviewers' responses to the question of what postmodernism is would run the length of the definitive spectrum. What is more interesting to me is the repeated descriptive attribution to *Possession* of that single term. Thus it is not my intention to throw another definition of postmodernism into the theoretical arena; rather, I want to examine those aspects of the novel that may have led to its categorization as postmodern, and the political and aesthetic consequences of that critical understanding. Here, concern is less with what postmodernism is, than with what its proponents and detractors claim that it does. How might the debate settle on and around *Possession*, and, more important, how does *Possession* quite self-consciously activate this debate? What's love got to do with it? Everything, it seems.

While reviewers applaud *Possession* as a virtuoso performance of academic erudition, nineteenth-century ventriloquism, comedy, passion, and narrative allure, they are divided with respect to an explicit identification of its literary placement. Drawing attention to *Possession*'s generic pastiche, its self-conscious interrogation of literary and historical Truth, and a plot that resembles a corridor of mirrors, many critics employ the language of post-modernism, if not the label itself. To Ann Hulbert, for example, Byatt "mixes up styles, genres, voices in good postmodern manner" to produce "old-fashioned mystery, comedy, and romance tricked out in newfangled, self-reflexive style". Others are more definite in their categorization;

although some confusion remains as to what kind of postmodern tag best classifies the text. Possession is variously cast as “postmodern romance”, “postmodern gothic”, or as belonging to “that genre of ingenious books” known as “postmodern literary thrillers”. What is perhaps most strikingly common to all these responses is the reliance on comparative texts with which to illustrate the argument. Interestingly enough, the names that crop up with extraordinary regularity are those most often cited in postmodern literary criticism: Nabokov, Borges, Fowles, Eco, D. M. Thomas, and David Lodge.

As postmodernist theorists are highly doubtful about endeavors to either establish or comprehend the society on the basis of fixed and universal values, binary oppositions and their blurring distinctions are of significant importance in the postmodern age. *Arcadia* is a play shaped in a series of such dichotomies such as distinctions between thinking and feeling, order and disorder, and the Classical and the Romantic.

Stoppard represents a nice discussion for the fall of grand narratives in ‘*Arcadia*’. He shows that having just grand narrative is insufficient to fully reflect the truth. It is insufficient, because one grand narrative shows only one perspective.

Stoppard’s *Arcadia*, a play with multiple angles, discusses other important issues including irony, duality and parody. Different forms of irony have been applied in *Arcadia*, major among them are dramatic irony, Socratic irony, cosmic irony, philosophical and also periodical irony. As a kind of duel, *Arcadia* represents opposing couples in the past, Thomasina Coverly and Septimus Hodge and, in the present, Bernard Nightingale and Hannah Jervish, where each couple seems to represent one side of a double-headed coin, one, Classicism and the other, Romanticism. The play is, on the other hand, the parody of scholars, particularly Bernard, in general and history and new historicism, in particular, through which Stoppard satirizes the possibility of historical and bibliographical discoveries.

In *Arcadia*, as in most of Stoppard’s plays, there is no final meaning, no real authority and no transcendental signified. This feature leads to a sense of non-ending in the play. Everything is unreliable and ambiguous. The lack of final meaning results in lack of the closure, which is another characteristic of postmodernism.

Further, William Wordsworth’s is continuously at the centre of Romantic studies, and for good reason. The particular meta-poetics of Wordsworth, read in concert with Nietzsche’s sceptical idealism, brings these discourses together through their similar particulars, though vast differences still remain. As the Derwent flows towards its idealized end, we know it will empty out somewhere, but who can possibly find or name the singular end of an ocean? An ocean, mind you, that reverses its flow and provides the waters of its tributaries with their means.

Ian McEwan’s late novel *Enduring Love* in light of the theories of postmodernism. The aim is to reveal post-modernity as the subject matter of the given novel. *Enduring Love*’s inherent debate over the change of the approach to science in aftermath of the demise of the pro-Enlightenment modernity will be identified. The main protagonist’s tendency to suppose an “objective” truth, his relentless endeavoring of rationalizing the reality and providing a unified account of it, will be described, along with the related postmodernist interest in deconstructing notions of truth and rationality. The thesis supposes the central character likes for a “universal” judgment, his tendency to “totalize.” Besides, the notions of subjectivity, the “self”, and knowledge’s relation to power will be touched upon. The postmodernist idea of *Enduring Love* is that no kind of knowledge has a privileged access to reality and its explanation. That is to say, postmodernism’s central values are multiplicity and difference. Therefore the ethical subsoil of post-modernity takes into account the need for tolerance of heterogeneity. The present paper will consider the main protagonist Joe Rose’s approach to this postmodern “obligation.” Does he value diversity entirely? Rose’s treatment of the “other” will be outlined. Postmodernism’s distrust of the modernity’s project of rationality becomes the leitmotif of *Enduring Love*.

This would attend to the “schizophrenia” of *Enduring Love*’s narration. The narrating character Rose will be considered ambivalent, hence “unreliable.” The aim is to suggest inconsistencies in Rose’s thinking and the consequent subversion in the narration. The narrator’s purposeful telling in retrospect bears importance. The



simultaneous prominence of contradictory discourses pervades Enduring Love. Nevertheless, the disunity of Rose's train of thought throughout the text initiates the character's ethical confusion. That is to say, with the coming of post modernity, the former idea of morality is altered. Rose's mind is used to the comforts of the "totalities" of modernism, in which the supposition of objectivity freed individuals of ethical responsibility. However, he is not released from the feeling of guilt he experiences with mere scientific explanation.

## CONCLUSION

Post-modernistic "theology" the romantic is treated as quaint & boorish for having, you guessed it, values. The romantic has a set of values; love, honor, courage, sacrifice, etc. that should be recognized in reality. The postmodernist by definition questions the validity of any perception of reality, and thus particularly dislikes an impassioned romantic perception. To the postmodernism, such a perception must be misguided, for it will not take as its guide cynicism. In practice a romantic may be cynical towards any number of things; yet the romantic usually does not treat his core values cynically because they form the foundation of whom and what he is. This is obscene to the postmodernism, and must be disassembled, for the moral absolutism of the romantic is the single biggest threat to the postmodernist's world-view.

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