Romanticism

Lecture 10:
Romanticism and Modern Culture

1) European and American Romanticisms

2) The Continuity of Romanticism in Modern Culture

3) Romanticism Today

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1) European and American Romanticisms

There is a movement which began in Germany in the seventeen-nineties – the only one which has an indisputable title to be called Romanticism, since it invented the term for its own use. There is another movement which began pretty definitely in England in the seventeen-fourties. There is a movement which began in France in 1801. There is another movement which began in France in the second decade of the [19th] century, is linked with the German movement, and took over the German name. There is the rich and incongruous collection of ideas to be found in Rousseau. There are numerous other things called Romanticism by various writers […] The fact that the same name has been given by scholars to all of these episodes is no evidence, and scarcely even establishes a presumption, that they are identical in essentials.

(Lovejoy [1924] 1955, 235f.)

All this variety need not worry us, if we reconceptualise European Romanticism as a *set of responses*, highly differentiated and at times downright contradictory, to a historically specific *challenge*: the challenge of the ever-accellerating modernization of European society.

(Bode 2005, 127)

[T]he apparent contradictions and seeming incompatiblilites within European Romanticism have common roots in that they form diverging responses to the same set of cultural challenges: the fascination of the past […] as well as dreams of utopia to come, the lure of the exotic as well as the cult of domesticity and the familiar, revolutionary cosmopolitanism as well as rampant nationalism, active political partisanship as well as cautious withdrawal from the political sphere – *they all form possible answers to a unique historical situation in which, it seems, nothing can be taken for granted any more and in which a reaching out for new (or old) securities is the order of the day.*

The ideology of childhood innocence as well as the attractions of sin and satanism; the belief in common sense and reason as well as the contrary belief in the superior reasonableness of the emotions and the heart; the acknowledgement of the sublime in nature or human consciousness as well as the thrills and threats of the irrational, the supernatural, the Gothic, and the grotesque; and lastly, the reversion to traditional established religion (the older the better) as well as the descent into existentialist despair – *all of these categories bespeak a juncture at which the individual becomes (falteringly or enthusiastically) aware of his or her own range of possiblities.*

Finally, […] the interest in folk tales and songs, fairy tales, legends, and myths coexisting with the propagation of a highly artificial and self-conscious 'language art', celebrating wit, satire, irony, the optimistic belief that it should be possible to revolutionize the world poetically alongside the pessimistic conviction that, since language can never express the absolute and the ideal, poetry can only draw attention to its inherent, unalterable insufficiencies: *all these can be regarded as first manifestations of the insight that the relationships between language and mind, between sign and meaning, between literature and life, are by no means secure and stable but rather precarious, dynamic and evolving – and therefore quintessential to man's changing place in the world, as an absolute opposition between subject and object can no longer be upheld.*

In that sense, Romanticism is an ongoing, undeniably European project, whose very diversity is, paradoxical as it may sound, the hallmark of its unity: between them, the various European Romanticisms play out both the potential and the vicissitudes of modernity.

(Bode 2005, 135f., added emphases: italics = synthesis, no italics = diversity)

⇨ English/German/French/Italian/Spanish/Russian/Polish/American Romanticism
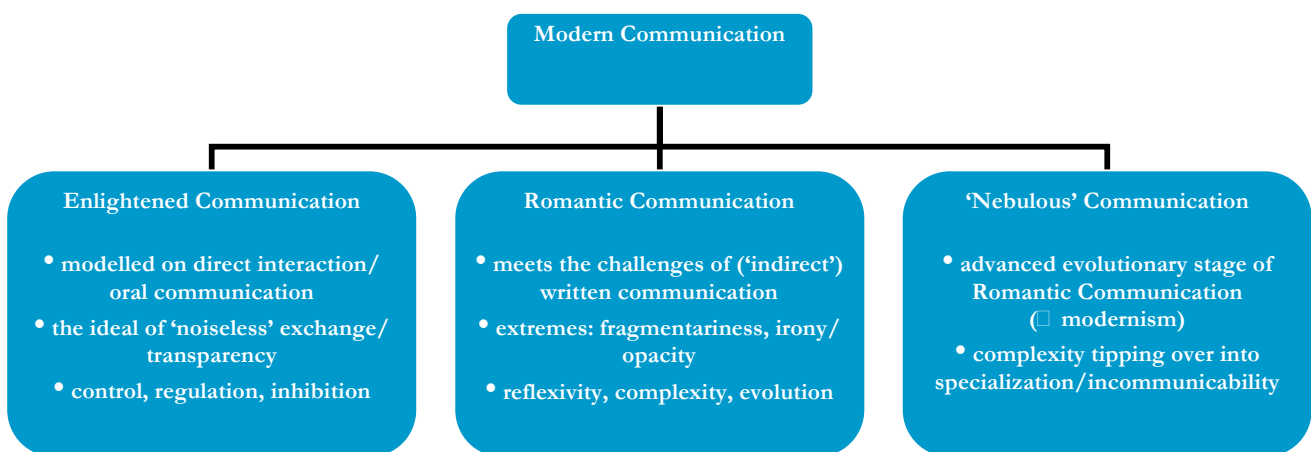
(cf. Reinfandt 2008, 177-182)

2) The Continuity of Romanticism in Modern Culture

a) Modes of Modern Communication

Enlightenment		Romanticism	
analytic		synthetic	
- reflexive		+ reflexive	

⇓   X   ⇓

technology	science	art / literature	popular culture
analytic	analytic	synthetic	synthetic
- reflexive	+ reflexive	+ reflexive	- reflexive

(cf. McGann 1983, 1-17, 10 and Reinfandt 2003, 27-52, 39)

Modern Communication

Enlightened Communication

• modelled on direct interaction/ oral communication

• the ideal of 'noiseless' exchange/ transparency

• control, regulation, inhibition

Romantic Communication

• meets the challenges of ('indirect') written communication

• extremes: fragmentariness, irony/ opacity

• reflexivity, complexity, evolution

'Nebulous' Communication

• advanced evolutionary stage of Romantic Communication (modernism)

• complexity tipping over into specialization/incommunicability

(cf. Fuchs 1993, 79-147)

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [1690]. Oxford: Clarendon 1894. ["On the Abuse of Words"]

Since wit and fancy find easier entertainment in the world than dry truth and real knowledge, figurative speeches and allusion in language will hardly be admitted as an imperfection or abuse of it. I confess, in discourses where we seek rather pleasure and delight than information and improvement, such ornaments as are borrowed from them can scarce pass for faults. But yet if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgement [...] and therefore, [...] they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform and instruct, wholly to be avoided ; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them. [...] I cannot but observe how little the preservation and improvement of truth and knowledge is the care and concern of mankind; since the arts of fallacy are endowed and preferred. [...] Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving, wherein men find pleasure to be deceived. (Vol. II, 146-7)

[Locke cont'd: "Of the Remedies of the Foregoing Imperfections and Abuses of Words"]

First, A man shall take care to use no word without a signification, no name without an idea for which he makes it stand. [...] Secondly, It is not enough a man uses his words as signs of some ideas : those [ideas] he annexes them to, if they be simple, must be clear and distinct ; if complex, must be determinate, i.e. the precise collection of simple ideas settled in the mind, with that sound annexed to it, as the sign of that precise determined collection, and no other. [...] Thirdly, it is not enough that men have ideas, determined ideas, for which they make these signs stand ; but they must also take care to apply their words as near as may be to such ideas as common use has annexed to them. [...] Fourthly, But, because common use has not so visibly annexed any signification of words, as to make men know always certainly what they precisely stand for : and because men, in the improvement of their knowledge, come to have ideas different from the vulgar and ordinary received ones [...]: therefore, [...] it is sometimes necessary, for the ascertaining the signification of words, to *declare their meaning* [...] Fifthly, [....] in all discourses wherein one man pretends to instruct or convince another, he should use the same word constantly in the same sense. (Vol. II, 148-164)

William Wordsworth, "Upon Epitaphs (III)" [1810]

Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with; they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thought. If words be not [...] an incarnation of the thought, but only a closing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift [...] Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate and dissolve.

William Wordsworth, "Essay Supplementary to the Preface" [1815]

Remember, also, that the medium through which, in Poetry, the heart is to be affected – is language; a thing subject to endless fluctuations and arbitrary associations. The genius of the poet melts these down for his purpose; but they retain their shape and quality to him who is not capable of exerting, within his own mind, a corresponding energy.
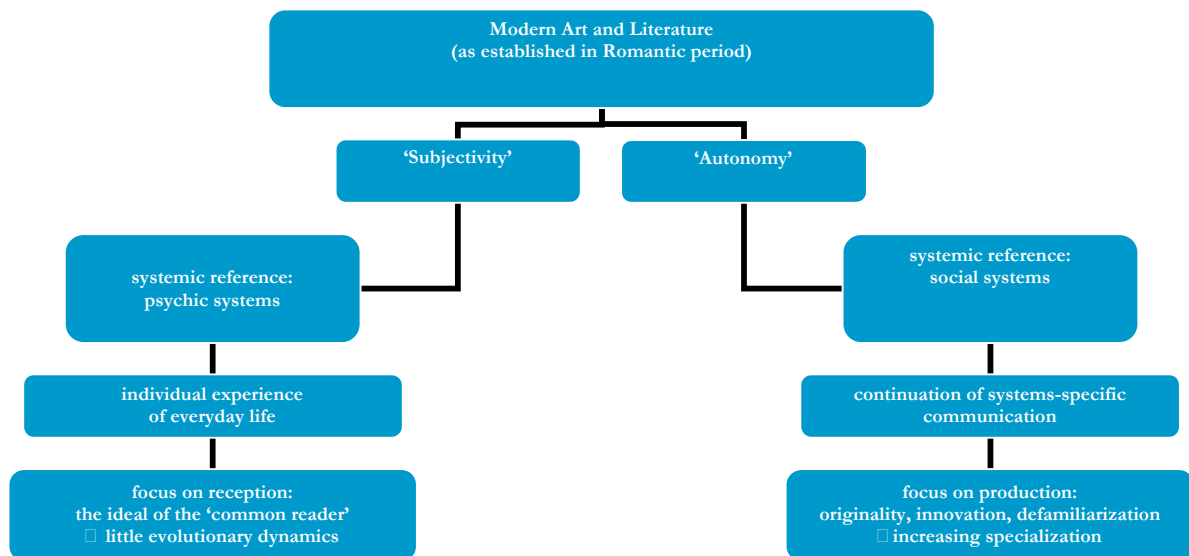
Prose	**vs.**	**Poetry**
transparency, referentiality		intransparency, reflexivity
propositionality		performativity
objectivity		subjectivity
logic		rhetoric
→ scientific communication		→ literary communication

(cf. Reinfandt 2003, 232)

b) Functional Differentiation and Re-Integration

	Science	Literature	Moral
Asymmetry?	-	+	-
Writing?	+	+	-
Subj. Exp.?	-	+	+

(cf. Reinfandt 2003, 263)

(cf. Reinfandt 2003, 81)

c) Aestheticization

'Die Erlebnisgesellschaft' (Schulze 1992)
'Erlebnis'   =   experience + event

A Tableau of Current Processes of Aestheticization:

1) Surfaces: the Beautification of Reality
   a) animation, experience, event
   b) hedonism as a new cultural matrix
   c) economic strategies

2) 'Beneath' the Surface: Technology/Simulation/Production
   a) the new priority of aesthetics in material production
   b) the constitution of reality by the media

3) The Styling of Subjects (*Homo aestheticus*)

                                   (cf. Welsch 1996, 9-21, see also Welsch 1997)

►   **the aesthetic beyond art and literature**
        (beauty ↔ reflexivity ↔ authenticity?)

3) Romanticism Today

a) Romanticism and Postmodernism

Narrative

Paul Auster's *National Story Project* (1999/2000):

The spirit of the project was entirely democratic. [...] People would be exploring their own lives and experiences, but at the same time they would be part of a collective effort, something bigger than just themselves. With their help, I said, I was hoping to put together an archive of facts, a museum of American reality.

(Auster 2001, xvi)

We all have inner lives. We all feel that we are part of the world and yet exiled from it. We all burn with the fires of our own existence. Words are needed to express what is in us [...] [I]t was the rare adult who took advantage of the occasion to brag about his accomplishments. Hilarious blunders, wrenching coincidences, brushes with death, miraculous encounters, improbable ironies, premonitions, sorrows, pains, dreams – these were the subjects the contributors chose to write about. I learned that I am not alone in my belief that the more we understand of the world, the more elusive and confounding the world becomes. [...] If you aren't certain about things, if your mind is still open enough to question what you are seeing, you tend to look at the world with great care, and out of that watchfulness comes the possibility of seeing something that no one else has seen before. You have to be willing to admit that you don't have all the answers. If you think you do, you will never have anything important to say.

(Auster 2001, xvii-xviii)

[T]he ephemeral nature of the broadcasts (a lone, disembodied voice floating across American airwaves for eighteen or twenty minutes every month) made me want to collect the most memorable [stories] and present them in written form. Radio is a powerful tool, and N[ational] P[ublic] R[adio] reaches in almost every corner of the country, but you can't hold the words in your hands. A book is tangible, and once you put it down, you can return to the place where you left it and pick it up again.

(Auster 2001, xix)

But difference is what this book is all about. [...] Only a small portion of it resembles anything that could qualify as 'literature'. It is something else, something raw and close to the bone, and whatever skills these authors might lack, most of their stories are unforgettable. [...] If I had to define what these stories were, I would call them dispatches, reports from the front lines of personal experience.

(Auster 2001, xx)

Poetry

Mueller-Zettelmann 2002:

[O]ne of the few ways for poetry to entirely eradicate the traditional lyric *persona* and with it the traditional, logocentric subject is to produce *radical non-sense.*

(83)

As one of its typical generic features, poetry evinces a marked predisposition towards flaunting its a-referential (typographic, suprasegmental, phonetic) strata. Because of this long established tendency towards freeing the *significant*, a radicalisation of auto-referentiality within the frame of postmodern aesthetics is not perceived as a major breach of generic norms and thus loses much of the defamiliarizing effect associated with violent deviation.
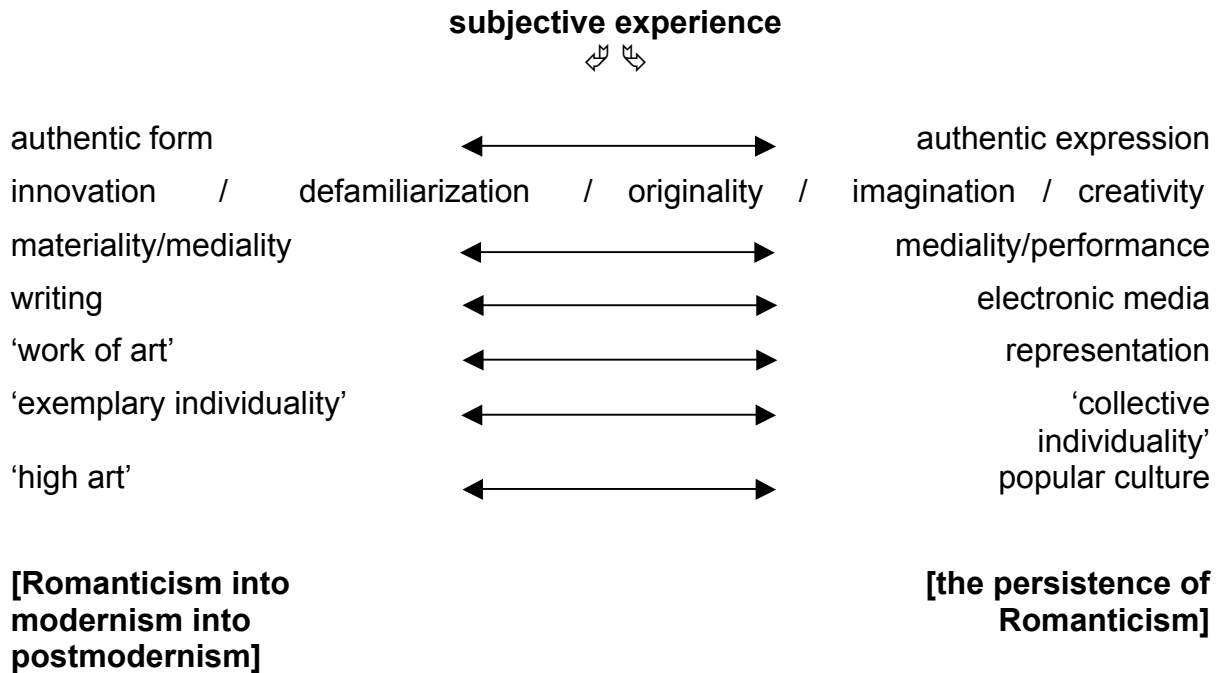
(84)

[P]oetry due to its generic brevity and its tendency to turn the auto-referential into the logocentric must resort to more dramatic and ultimately less attractive methods to bring about a post-modern destabilisation of the self. The complete denial of meaning and world-construction and the cerebral, academic task of exhibiting and illustrating postmodern thought cause a considerable loss in sensuality which significantly reduces a poem's appeal to author and reader alike.

(85)

An ever-growing number of poets [...] inhabit a marginalized position in society because of their race, culture, class, gender or sexual orientation. [...] Rather than further decentring thepolitically marginalized subject, such 'poetry with a cause' naturally seeks to assume a coherent stance against hegemonic society and attempts to speak from a firm position by constructing a stable, self-identical 'I'.

(85)

Today, poetry's most serious competitor is a trendy subgenre which is as ubiquitious as it is commercially successfull: pop-songs, which in many ways have superseded the traditional short lyric text, attain a level of popularity and distribution quite unknown to 'serious' poetry. they may be short-lived, but during their heyday (and often long afterwards) pop-songs and their lyrics will be familiar to large sections of the population otherwise divided in their predilections through social, ethnic, religious and economic factors. [...] In order for 'serious' poetry to keep pace with its trivial but booming contestant, it has to espouse at least some of its appealing characteristics.

(85f.)

Intelligibility, the possibility of reader-identification with a central autonomous and coherent agent, the mimetic reference to situations and problems familiar to the reader, the arousal of emotion and empathy, all these traditional logocentric elements are a far cry from the elitist aspirations of radical postmodern theory.

(86)

b) Popular Culture

subjective experience
⤸ ⤵

authentic form   ◄──────────►   authentic expression

innovation / defamiliarization / originality / imagination / creativity

materiality/mediality   ◄────────►   mediality/performance

writing   ◄────────►   electronic media

'work of art'   ◄────────►   representation

'exemplary individuality' ◄────────►   'collective
                                               individuality'

'high art'   ◄────────►   popular culture

[Romanticism into   **[the persistence of**
modernism into   **Romanticism]**
postmodernism]

(cf. Reinfandt 2003, 273-294)

Rock Music

Modernist authenticity to be found in	*Romantic authenticity to be found in*
experimentation and progress	tradition and continuity with the past
avant gardes	roots
status of artist	sense of community
elitism	populism
openness regarding rock sounds	belief in a core or essential rock sound
classical, art music, soul, pop styles	folk, blues, country, rock'n'roll styles
radical or sudden stylistic change	gradual stylistic change
irony, sarcasm, obliqueness	sincerity, directness
'recordedness'	'liveness'
'shocking' sounds	'natural' sounds
celebrating technology	hiding musical technology

(cf. Keightley 2001, 137)

The aesthetics of 'authenticity' dominates mainstream rock vocalism: 'real experience', expressed with 'sincerity', is regarded as the indispensible basis for good (that is, 'honest') singing. The tendency to autobiography (or illusion of autobiography) towards which this pushes performers is illustrated at its most extreme in the work of 'confessional' singer-songwriters, from Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen down to Tracy Chapman and P.J. Harvey. [...] What happens here is that two distinct semiotic levels – that of the 'text' and that of the 'utterance' – are conflated; thus the subject of the song's lyric [...] is identified with that of the performance act [...]. When Janis Joplin sings about 'me and Bobby McGee' in her famous recording of the Kris Kristofferson song with that title, most listeners probably identify the me as Joplin, and similarly, when Elvis Presley sings 'that's all right mama, that's all right with me', the 'me' is heard as being Elvis.

(Middleton 2000, 29)

"What Light" (Jeff Tweedy)
(from Wilco, *Sky Blue Sky*, 2007)

If you feel like singing a song
And you want other people to sing along
Just sing what you feel
Don't let anyone say it's wrong

And if you're trying to paint a picture
But you're not sure which colors belong
Just paint what you see
Don't let anyone say it's wrong

And if you're strung out like a kite
Or stung awake in the night
It's alright to be frightened

When there's a light (what light)
There's a light (one light)
There's a light (white light)
Inside of you

If you think you might need somebody
To pick you up when you drag
Don't loose sight of yourself
Don't let anyone change your bag

And if the whole world's singing your songs
And all of your paintings have been hung
Just remember what was yours
Is everyone's from now on

And that's not wrong or right
But you can struggle with it all you like
You'll only get uptight

Because there's a light (what light)
There's a light (one light)
There's a light (white light)
[etc.]
Inside of you

"Thunderbolt" (Björk)
(from Björk, *Biophilia*, 2011)

Stirring at water's edge, cold froth on my twig
My mind in whirls wanders around desire
May I, can I, or have I too often? Craving miracles…
May I, can I, or have I too often now?
Craving miracles… Craving miracles…

No one imagines the light shock I need
And I'll never know
From who's hands, deeply humble
Dangerous gifts as such to mine come
May I, should I, or have I too often? Craving miracles…
May I, can I, or have I too often?
Craving miracles… Craving miracles…

My romantic gene is dominant and it hungers for union
Universal intimacy, all embracing
May I, should I or have I too often, craved miracles?
May I, can I or have I too often, craved miracles?
Craved…

Waves irregularly striking, wind stern in my face
Thunderstorm, come, scrape those barnacles of me!
May I, may I or should I too often crave miracles?
May I or should I or have I too often

All my body parts are one as lightning hits my spine
Sparkling, prime runs through me
Revive my wish inviolable
May I, can I, or have I too often?
May I, can I, should I, or have I too often?
I'm craving miracles…

"Free" (Trey Anastasio/Tom Marshall)
(from Phish, *Billy Breathes*, 1996)

I'm floating in the blimp a lot
I feel the feeling I forgot
Of swimming weightless in the womb
Or bouncing gently 'round the room
In a minute I'll be free
And you'll be splashing in the sea

I feel no curiosity
I see the path ahead of me
In a minute I'll be free
And you'll be splashing in the sea
We'll hear a tiny cry
As the ship goes sliding by

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