

ROMANTICISM AND MODERN FICTION

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BELYING THEIR SEEMINGLY CHAOTIC diversity, all of modern fiction and modern criticism unite on at least one point: rejection of romanticism. The characteristic literature—and, indeed, art in general—of the twentieth century has been, broadly, either *naturalist* or *nonobjective*. Both schools were born in revolt against the romanticism of the nineteenth century. The aim of the naturalist, as of the historians of the school of Leopold von Ranke, is to “present life as it *really* is,” to do an honest and competent reporting job on the people and places that the novelist has seen and heard. The old style “hero” or “villain,” the dramatic plot, and the generally happy ending of the romantic novel here disappear, for, after all, there are precious few heroes among the people the novelist perceives, and precious little drama or climactic happiness in their daily lives. Instead, the novelist sets down, meticulously and minutely, the details of the world around him; and he writes in a characteristically deliberate, graceless, and plodding style, his pedestrian manner accurately matching the pedestrian theme and the drab characters. In the works of such writers as Theodore Dreiser and James T. Farrell, the straight naturalistic novel reached perhaps its apogee. Their technical and stylistic clumsiness was generally considered one of their strong points: for wasn’t the honesty of their naturalism underscored by their very style’s reflecting the clumsy groping of the characters?

The “symbolic” or nonobjective novel seems at first glance to be poles apart from the naturalistic, but, in reality, the two unite on fundamentals. While the naturalists reject romantic fiction as escapist sentimentality, the nonobjectivists and “higher critics”—in short, the *avant-garde*—reject it as hopelessly *simpliste* and unintelligent. While the naturalists reject drama, the *avant-garde*, in addition, spurn language and rational meaning. Instead of using the common language

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as an instrument of communication, the nonobjective writer tries to prove himself more intelligent than the common run of men by inventing or partially inventing a new language, replete with codes and “keys” to the “many levels of meaning” for the eager initiates. Both schools dismiss romanticism, contemptuously, as fit only for children and naïve adolescents, who, when they “grow up,” are expected to realize that they are hopelessly bumptious and Philistine, because (a) “in real life people don’t act that way,” and (b) without benefit of close textual exegesis by the New Criticism how can they possibly understand *Finnegan’s Wake*?

In recent years, by a kind of logical progression, the naturalist and nonobjective schools have tended more and more to fuse. Old-fashioned naturalism had purged all drama from literature, and boredom was rapidly setting in. As a result, the naturalists tended more and more to depict not just the “average man” or the “girl next door,” but the most grotesque and depraved of extant or conceivably extant characters. And this step seemed justified as the world noticed that, with the general breakdown in moral standards, more and more people were becoming depraved. With ever-greater intensity, novelists and playwrights have been cluttering their fiction with homosexuals, rapists, nymphomaniacs, narcotic addicts, etc., and proclaiming: this is the way people *really* are. Often, they will assert that this is the way people really are *down deep*, after the veneer of respectability has been stripped away. Freudian doctrine has been widely used to justify the claim that man, at the core, is a cesspool of iniquity, and that, therefore, these writers are being even more “realistic” about the world around them than were the Farrells and Dreisers of yesteryear.

And the grotesquerie of characterization has been matched by a growing obscurantism of language. Undoubtedly the apogee of this tendency was reached in the recent plays of Eugene Ionesco and of James Joyce’s disciple Samuel Beckett, who have gone beyond even the Faulkners and the Tennessee Williamses and the Kerouacs, to proclaim the meaninglessness of life by their absence of plot, depravity of *dramatis personae*, and virtual gibberish of their language.

Arriving in the midst of such a literary climate, it is no wonder that Ayn Rand’s new novel *Atlas Shrugged* has struck the world as a puzzling phenomenon. For apart from her controversial ethical and political philosophy, Miss Rand has bewildered the critics by presenting the first important novel in decades to recreate—and, as we shall see, to advance beyond—the romantic tradition, a tradition that had for so long been driven underground into dime novels and

costume dramas. In fact, one of *Atlas Shrugged's* unique virtues as a novel, is to make us aware once again of the romantic aesthetic.

What, then, is the fundamental romantic attitude toward art in general and the novel in particular? In answer, we may first ask the question: what *is* art anyway? Why do we not call "art" a block of stone as it comes from a quarry; yet why do we call it art when reshaped by a sculptor? And why do we *not* call it art if it is reshaped to serve as a bench or as part of a building? There can be only one answer: because the sculptor communicates *meaning* to the beholder, meanings *beyond* the fact that it is a block of stone, or that it is now being used for some other consumers' object, such as a bench or a building. Since only aspects of objective reality can be meaningfully communicated, this means that art is the reshaping of reality by the artist and its subsequent communication to others.

We may, therefore, at once challenge the artistic credentials of the nonobjectivist, whether in painting, sculpture, or literature. For if art is necessarily *communication*, an objective medium is necessary in order to communicate. In literature, this medium is language. Hence, the importance in literature of precision and objectivity of language, and of clarity of style, for this *clarity* is the measure by which the artist is accurately and efficiently communicating his meaning.

Art is not only communication; it is necessarily also selection. No one, not even the von Ranke historian, can present *all* of reality as it really is. He *must* select some aspect of reality to communicate. But the moment this is conceded, it must also be granted that the artist or the historian can only select according to some *standard* of selection. And one of the functions of the critic is to judge that standard. The task of the historian or journalist is to capture the essence of the events of the day or of an age, and to select and present his facts accordingly. The standard is here set by the nature of the historical or journalistic discipline. But in fiction, or other art, there is no such evident standard; for in literature, the artist creates his *own* events. Since he is free to create his own events, the artist differs radically from the journalist, for if he tries to ape the journalist and record the events around him, we are free to ask: is this *art*? And if it is, may we not question the artist's purpose and standards of selection?

Any choice is necessarily determined by the *values* of the chooser. The artist's selection is therefore determined by his standards of value. We may now arrive at a definition of art as: the *reshaping of reality in accordance with the artist's values, and the communication of these values to the reader or beholder*. In short, art is the *objectification*, the bringing into tangible reality, of an artist's values. We may now proceed at one stroke to answer the questions: why should

the artist want to do what he does, and why should anyone else enjoy reading a novel or seeing a play or painting? Because the artist wishes to objectify his values in concrete reality, and the reader or onlooker enjoys seeing his own values objectified in reality. And the meanings and values can be communicated from one to the other by means of this objectification.

We all know that one of the prime characteristics of art is its ability to induce emotion in the beholder. This is particularly true of fiction, where the reader tends to identify with the central character. We are now in a position to explain this phenomenon. For emotions are *value-responses*, i.e., they are reactions determined by a person's values. If a man approves of something, he will feel a favorable emotion toward it; if he disapproves, he will experience an unfavorable reaction. The reader who likes and enjoys a novel so responds because he is seeing his own values objectified; the man who dislikes a novel is reacting to values which are opposed to his own. The process of communication between novelist and reader therefore operates as follows: the novelist selects and reshapes reality according to his values, and presents them in concrete form; the reader, experiencing the concrete forms, through them penetrates to an understanding of the writer's underlying values, and responds to the extent that he shares these values.

Since all art conveys values, all art is intimately bound up with morals. For values are either moral or immoral, good or bad. The novel, specifically, is also tied to morality in another way: it deals with the action of characters, and since men's actions are determined by their values, these actions can be judged as either moral or immoral.

Since the artist must choose, and therefore must choose according to his values, all artists are presenting reality not as it *is*, but as they believe it *ought* to be. Every novelist, whether he knows it or not, is a moral philosopher and teacher. The naturalist writers who *claim* to represent life as it really is, are misleading themselves; for when they present dreary human beings stumbling their way through meaningless lives, what they are telling their readers is: life is dreary, men cannot achieve their goals, they are playthings in the hands of Fate, or Society, or of their Id. In short, these writers are conveying their basic values and premises, their philosophy of life. And when the extremists among them portray a world of dope addicts, homicidal maniacs and other depraved persons, they are telling the world that *this* is the essence of life, that this is the true nature of man and all that man can attain.

The romanticist, on the other hand, realizes that he is presenting a world that ought to be, and by doing so he is saying that there *are* values and ideals that man can strive to achieve, and which would make a better world than exists at present. What, specifically, are the means employed by the romantic novelist in communicating these values? The most important one is *plot*, and it is therefore not a coincidence that absence of an exciting plot is the prime characteristic of modern, and especially "high-brow" modern, fiction. For the plot is the objectification within the novel of the values and personalities of the characters. The plot is a purposeful logical progression of events, and it is through this progression of action that the author's values, and the personalities of his characters, take on concrete form. The author who presents characters without plot is not writing a *novel*, but a psychological case-book, which may or may not have value as psychology. Plot is therefore the critical distinguishing attribute of the novel.

The importance of the plot for the romantic novel was anticipated by Aristotle, in his *Poetics*:

All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity. . . . Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions—what we do—that we are happy or the reverse. . . . So that it is the action in it, i.e., its Fable or Plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy.

A plot necessarily involves drama and conflict, and it is also a logical succession of events flowing out of the interplay of the novel's characters. A plot also implies that each individual has free will, that he is free to choose his values and to try purposefully to attain them. Since the romantic novelist is presenting a world that ought to be, his central character is a *hero*, i.e., a good man, a man with good and proper values, who struggles to achieve his values amid the conflict of the plot structure. The more intense this conflict, the more clearly will the hero's fight for his goals and values be emphasized and dramatized in action. And, if his struggle is with natural forces rather than with other men, much of the point of the story will be lost, for Nature has no free will and can adopt no values, and is therefore not really an adversary. If, therefore, the hero is engaged in conflict with other human beings, and is trying to attain good values, his antagonists will necessarily be *villains* who are opposing him in order to realize bad or evil values. Hence the romantic novel will be a battle of heroes and heroines against villains.

The climax of the plot is of enormous importance, since this is the final resolution of the conflict, the final lesson, the concluding

presentation of the author's implied philosophy of life, the ultimate impact on the reader. Hence the importance of the much-reviled "happy ending." For if the author is reshaping reality to objectify his values, then his good heroes will triumph over the villains, and thereby complete and crown the world he is presenting. Apart from the rare case where the author's specific purpose is to show the *spirit* of the hero remaining unbroken, even when defeated physically, an unhappy ending displays a profoundly pessimistic conclusion that has no place in the proper novel, where a better world is being created. For such an ending conveys and attempts to inculcate in the reader the view that the good, in life, must in the end be vanquished, either by evil people or by blind chance. When Oscar Wilde bitinglly lampooned the moral approach to fiction in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means," he writ more ironically than he knew. For what we have been saying is that Miss Prism was right.

It is, therefore, fallacious to criticize romantic novels for presenting neither events nor characters "as they occur in reality." The true romantic novelist does not try to set forth his characters as statistical averages or modal types of the people he sees around him; he molds them as *philosophical archetypes*, i.e., as concrete embodiments of certain sets of values, whether heroic, villainous, or definite mixtures of the two. The romantic therefore presents the *essence* of his characters, and wastes little time in accumulating detail. In presenting his characters as essences, he raises them from the particular to the status of the universal, and carries a message to all readers regardless of time and space. The naturalistic novel, on the other hand, accumulates endless detail down to, and even including, the brand names of clothes, thus diminishing the importance of the characters by rooting them ever deeper in particular concretes.

Now we can see the reason why issues and characters for the romantic novelist will be either "black" or "white," and why he will side strongly with the "whites." The more firmly a person holds values the more strongly and openly he will be devoted to them. It is no coincidence that just as modern America is marked by a decay of belief in moral principle, so has the serious romantic novel all but disappeared from the literary scene. Nothing about *Atlas Shrugged* has puzzled the critics more than its "blacks" and "whites," and small wonder: for the present age is a shifting inconstant sand of "middle-of-the-road" attitudes in all subjects: aesthetics, ethics, or politics—an age where the only firmly held moral principle is that no one may dare hold moral principles too strongly.

Romantic fiction has been denounced as “escapism,” meaning that the housewife or the Tired Business Man is trying to escape from his daily cares into a world of enjoyment. But far from being the Philistinism it is usually portrayed, we have seen that such “escape”—the experiencing of a world where one’s values have come true—is precisely the noblest function of fiction. And since *Atlas Shrugged* is our day’s most striking example of important romantic fiction, we may say that just as Ayn Rand’s explicit moral, political, and economic philosophy redeems the Tired Business Man from the weight of guilt he has long suffered for his productiveness and profit-seeking, so her aesthetic principles redeem him from his “sin” of seeking in literature for values in action that he can admire and applaud—including noble heroes who vanquish villains and achieve their goals. In short, Miss Rand, by the construct of her novel, is saying that the modern intellectuals are just as wrong in condemning the Tired Business Man’s “Philistinism” as they are in attacking his method of livelihood.

Atlas Shrugged partakes of all the aspects of the romantic novel treated above. It has been accurately termed a “melodrama” by the reviewers, melodrama being defined by Webster’s as a “romantic and sensational drama, typically with a happy ending,” in which “sensational” means “suited or intended to excite great interest or emotion.” How does *Atlas* advance beyond the romantic tradition? In two main ways. One: it not only presents values in action, but portrays them as capable of being applied and achieved in daily life. For the trouble with most romantic fiction has been that the authors have not believed their values to be applicable in the real world. They have therefore fled into such remote worlds as historical costume dramas or science fiction. *This* was their *illegitimate* form of “escapism.” *Atlas* on the contrary presents very clearly a world that not only *ought* to be, but *can* be, and its concrete relation to our world is evident. Hence, Miss Rand’s own label for her aesthetics of “romantic realism,” or perhaps, “realistic romanticism.”

The second, and perhaps most important, departure of Miss Rand’s is her creation of a new form of Novel of Ideas. A novel dealing explicitly with philosophical ideas is such a rarity in modern America that most reviewers dismissed *Atlas* as scarcely a novel because it carries an explicit philosophical message. It has thereby violated a seemingly deep-seated American prejudice: what Irving Howe has called “the notion that abstract ideas invariably contaminate a work of art and should be kept at a safe distance from it.” But *Atlas* has done far more. For previous novels of ideas have been essentially plotless and static. They have been books in

which characters simply sit and discuss philosophy. A typical modern example is Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, where the device of a tubercular sanitarium is used to legitimize the virtual dissolving of action into a series of philosophical conversations among the patients. Another is Simone de Beauvoir's *The Mandarins*, where the plot is essentially reduced to a series of parlor discussions on the principles and applications of existentialist philosophy. Miss Rand, on the other hand, not only presents explicitly a far-ranging, comprehensive, and to a remarkable extent original, philosophical world-view, but also dramatizes that philosophy implicitly through her characters and her plot. In short, she fuses the novel of ideas with the best romantic form of the novel: a thoroughly exciting melodrama. Her characters are not only romantic archetypes; they are archetypes expressing her own explicit philosophical system. And since this system covers and integrates all aspects of human action: metaphysics, ethics, politics, economics, psychology, and sex, the breadth and scope of the work is enormous. For her characters are developed as philosophical archetypes in every aspect of their actions; and just as Miss Rand's philosophy is thoroughly integrated and interconnected, so are all of its concrete manifestations in the novel interconnected. Every theme, every character, every incident, every line of this 1168-page novel has its function and purpose as part of the whole.

Setting aside, then, the specific content of Miss Rand's philosophy, the hostile and uncomprehending reaction to the aesthetics of *Atlas Shrugged* is a measure of the poverty and aridity of our literary and artistic scene. The disappearance of the serious romantic form is a measure of the extent to which we have lost our concern for values, which we all require as a guide to our actions; the absence of a Novel of Ideas is the measure of the sterility of our current intellectual endeavors, of our lack of concern for ideas themselves. It has been truly said that we are living in an Alexandrian Age, an era not of original and profound thought but of taxonomic classifying, of living on the borrowed-capital of the ideas of our predecessors. Perhaps the striking originality, in method and in content, of *Atlas Shrugged*, will serve as a beacon light for new and fresh literary and intellectual directions.