ROMANTICISM AND THE MODERNIST MYTH: Keith Patrick

Clement Greenberg wrote that "the essence of Modernism lies in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself." In considering some of the major figures of this century I am frequently struck by how little they conform to this Modernist premise. But, if International Modernism fails to adequately describe the pluralism of art in our century, we must then ask whether the Modernist view is in fact only one of a number of possible critical perspectives. In answering that question I will be looking particularly towards the survival of Romantic traditions and challenging the belief that art, in its objectives, is International.

Time allows only a few, brief examples, which I hope will stimulate further thought. I will look later at three alternative national traditions, but I begin by first examaning the relationship between Modernism and the School of Paris. The French Revolution was both the fulfilment of pre-Romantic idealism and the wind on which the political and philosophical seeds of Romanticism spread throughout Europe. Although the myth was rapidly to sour, the drama of the pre-Napoleonic years placed the events in France on centre stage. Essentially an internal affair, the struggle of the French people became the concern of liberals throughout Europe. In this sense, the elevation of certain French artists identified with the revolutionary cause, marked the beginnings of Internationalism.

I am sure we are all familiar with the development of French art in the 19th century. E.H.Gombrich has referred to the period as the Revolution in Permanence, for, over several generations, a die was cast that imbued French painting with that particular strand of Romanticism that was bounded by social, political and intellectual concerns. The later progression through Impressionism and Cezanne to Cubism was increasingly one of intellectual formalism. Gleizes and Metzinger pre-empt Greenberg by 40 years, when they wrote in 1912 "The picture bears its pretext, the reason for its existence, within it."

The significance of the School of Paris drew artists from all over Europe. But, if the ingredients thrown into this melting pot were cosmopolitan, the academies and various infrastructures for support and criticism, were wholy French. The precepts of French art, its standards and measures, came to dominate the beginnings of International Modernism. When the seat of Modernism moved to the neutral soil of New York in the 40s, the myth of Internationalism seemed unimpeachable. Inhereting the end-game of an essentially provincial European tradition, the American dealers, museums and critics were well placed to sell the latest developments as a new package. The importance of other provincial traditions, though real enough, became denegrated as reactionary, irrelevant, or were simply overlooked. Modernism and its critics opperated a monopoly, to which we have all contributed to a greater or lesser extent.

In contrast, let us now look briefly at three national traditions

which International Modernism attempts to deny. In Spain, Black humour in literature anticipated Goya by over a century. Consider the later works, and the so-called Black Paintings, which brought together the grotesque, the demons and witches of folk-lore, with an observation of social injustice and the carnage of war. His undisputed skill as an artist transformed this personal vision into one of universal dimensions and one which I will now demonstrate had lasting significance for Spanish art.

The principal heir to Goya's legacy of Black Romanticism is Picasso. Despite his place in the School of Paris, after Cubism, he remained curiously removed from the developments of the Modernist tradition. Picasso was not a colourist, often returning to a palette that was either monochrome or sombre with the earth hues. Nor was his art rooted in formal innovation, for there always remained a deep felt commitment to his subject. The formal innovations were invariably subservient to the narrative, as if prompted by seeking the most dramatic or effectual means of expressing his theme. The expressive distortions of human anatomy evoke a clear comparison with Goya's own use of caricature and both stray from naturalism only to make the natural world more immediate.

Within the nature of that vision, the comparisons become even more striking. From the portrayal of poverty in the Blue Period, the horrors of war expressed in Guernica, the anguish in the portraits of Dora Maar, the satyrs, minotaurs and mythological references of middle life, to the grotesque realization of womanhood in the late years, Picasso followed in the path of Goya and Black Humour. The images of both artists sprang from a common soul, the origins of which lie within a Spanish tradition.

If time permitted, a comparison with Miro and Dali, and the film-maker Bunuel, would afford similar insights. So too would a look at the present generation, with artists such as Miguel Barcelo and Frederic Amat. But let us move on to look now at the German tradition. In the period we are considering, German philosophy was clearly indebted to the principles of freedom and individuality. In the visual arts, Casper David Friedrich developed theories of landscape and nature that proposed a cosmic view of the universe. In Friedrich's own words "The painter must not paint only what he sees in front of him, but also what he sees within himself...". In Friedrich we see the solitary vision of the individual proclaiming his independence and freedom. His landscapes touch upon the mystical, embracing the metaphysical and transcendent value of nature. The subject is invariably a place of seclusion, a refuge whose elements are carefully selected and ordered for its spiritual meaning.

Out of this period, Germany developed a strong sense of nationhood and a political mysticism based on the emotive bond between individual and country. That these tendencies were misappropriated by fascist ideology in our own century is beyond dispute, but it should be emphasised that the central Romantic ideals of freedom and individuality could not be further removed from the political consequences. It is possible to draw strong links between the

Romanticism of Friedrich, the spiritualism of Franz Marc and the Blau Reiter, the Expressionism of Die Brucke, or the late sea-scapes of Emil Nolde. The confrontation between these so-called degenerate artists and the prevailing political climate can only emphasise the threat posed to Fascist ideology by the Romantic ideals of freedom, and of the continuing relevance of such Romantic ideals in our century.

In the post-war years this lineage is taken even further by Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer. In Beuys we see an attempt to reconcile the personal and the universal. On the one hand there are the mystical shrines to individual survival. Then again, there is the involvement with nature through the politics of ecology. In both Beuys and Kiefer we see a complex relationship to German history and culture, the evocation of a German mythology which alternates between acceptance and denial. There is both that Romantic yearning for what is Germanic and a denial of its ultimate consequences. And in Kiefer, the very model for this expression of political mysticism is drawn from the desolate spirituality of Friedrich's landscapes.

For my final example of national tradition I must consider my own country, for it was particularly in response to recent developments in Britain that these theories have evolved. By the late 18th century, Britain was well in the grip of the Industrial Revolution. This slow, relentless upheaval was no less radical than the French Revolution, making changes fundamental to the whole nation. But the Industrial Revolution was the direct antithesis of the Romantic ideal, and left the British Romantic, not in the vanguard, but fighting a rearguard stand. British art therefore assumed a radically different form to that evolving across the Channel, and one which was never able to reconcile itself to what was later to become the foundations of Modernism.

Time prevents us from examining this tradition in detail, but it can simply be stated that Blake, Palmer, Constable and Turner between them established a philosophy in which the landscape became the essential metaphor for a greater spiritual searching. Nor did the lineage stop there, but can be traced in an unbroken line through the Pre-Raphaelites, William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement, Nash and Bomberg in the 20s, the Neo-Romantics in the 30s and 40s, the St.Ives School and British Abstraction in the 50s, to its survival at the present time. Among the contemporary followers of this tradition, those which might be familiar to an International audience would include Alan Davie, John Walker, Christopher Le Brun and Therese Oulton, but there are many more which the prevailing philosophy of International Modernism has not made room for.

The importance of Internationalism has decreased with the demise of Modernism in the 1980s. What I am putting forward here is a case for reevaluating, not just this decade, but a major part of this century and for recognising the slender grounds on which Modernism was founded. What I believe will emerge is the realisation that art exists primarily within distinct national boundaries and is expressed through a series of identifiable and essentially Romantic traditions.

These traditions have not only survived the monopoly of Modernism, but afford the clearest view of where art may be going in the next century. As to their relevance, I will only add that now, more than ever, we need an art that addresses the problems of the real, material world, and does not abdicate its responsibilities in favour of elitist intellectual games. I would argue that national tradition is the very life-blood that provides an essential interplay within and between cultures, allowing us to both respect and appreciate the differences that are inherent.

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