Werther and the Rise of Romantic Melancholia

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The possible influence of Goethe's classic epistolary novel "The Sorrows of the Young Werther" on the evolution of Romanticism, and specifically Romantic melancholy or weltschmerz (world pain).

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Most students of world literature would surely agree that Goetheâ s famous epistolary novel, â The Sorrows of the Young Wertherâ has exerted a quite incalculable influence on the evolution of the Western mind from the date of its publication in 1774. And that it did so principally through Romanticism, that great movement in the arts of which it was a prime antecedent, would be disputed by few.

And while the notion that melancholy is a feature of sensitive and creative youth was not new at the height of Romanticism, it attained a credence within it that was possibly unprecedented, at least in its intensity. The name mal du siècle becoming attached to it, although some may refer to it as weltschmerz, which literally means world pain.

Such a development can be at least partly attributed to â Wertherâ , whose forlorn hero has served as the forefather of succeeding generations of melancholy youth.

And then there are the countless scions of Romanticism within the Decadent and Symbolist Movements, Expressionism and Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism and the Beat and Rock Generations, who by pursuing tragic, tormented existences and dying while yet young and preferably beautiful, have become the favoured artists of the Modern Age.

Surely, all who remain unconvinced by the romantic and avant-garde persuasions will view this development as not just tragic but horrifying. For while old age is all too often a source of deep regret for follies past, youth, precious youth, provides a person with almost unlimited opportunities for the eradication of this outcome.

Which is not to mitigate genuine depression, of which there are sufferers in all age brackets, and to which youth can be singularly susceptible. For to do so would be not just cruel but dangerous.

But most people in the privileged West, no matter how exorbitantly romantic in youth, yet survive into late middle age. And all that remains for them to do is find a place for themselves in the world, but without the advantages of youth and beauty and endless reserves of time.

So, what precisely was it that possessed Goethe to write a novel that at least partially caused an entire movement in the arts to be birthed in his wake. And what was it about the work that was so inflammatory?

In order to answer this question, itâ s necessary to examine certain events from Goetheâ s own young manhood.

For in 1770, at the tender age of 20, Goethe found himself in Strasbourg in order to complete a law degree heâ d previously abandoned while at Leipzig. And while there, became a close friend of future fellow polymath Johann Gottfried von Herder, who introduced him to Shakespeare, then allegedly barely known in the German speaking world.

And by the following year, he was working as a licensee in Frankfurt, although he soon lost his position, at which point he set about attempting to make his living as a writer for the first time, publishing the drama, â Goetz von Berlichingenâ in 1773.

By so doing, heâ d provided the first classic of the Storm and Stress movement which also included his one-time mentor Herder, as well as an example, in the shape of the dramaâ s hero, of what is known in German as â das Dämonischeâ . Which is to say a type of genius of overpowering will and energy who could to some degree be said to be a precursor of the Byronic Hero.

And in this, he was powerfully influenced by Shakespeare, whose age he evidently saw as being in marked contrast to late 18th Century Germany in all its sedate respectability.

In 1772, he resumed his legal career in Wetzlar on the river Lahn, and it was in that city state that he met the woman who would inspire him to write what remains his most famous work apart from â Faustâ .

The woman in question was Charlotte Buff, who by rejecting Goethe in favour of the civil servant Johan Christian Kestner provided the model for Lotte in Goetheâ s famous novel. Yet while he suffered from her repeated rejections of his love, his friendship with Charlotte was far less intense than â Wertherâ suggested. While the titular hero himself was based not just on the youthful Goethe, but the German-Jewish philosopher Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem, who committed suicide following an unhappy love affair.

â Wertherâ perfectly captured a nascent restlessness and passionate extremism among the youth of Europe in the later years of the Enlightenment that would ultimately culminate in the Romantic revolution. In fact so much so that in some quarters its depiction of suicidal despair was condemned for flouting the traditionally Christian view of the sanctity of all life.

Although to be fair, it was hardly new, having played its part in tragic literature since time immemorial. And there is no hard and fast evidence for the existence of copy cat suicides, which have come to be known as the Werther Effect, in the wake of the novelâ s publication.

But the fact remains that â Wertherâ helped to develop the notion of the hero as rebel against all constraints.

And Wertherâ s rebellion even extends to his dress, which is to say the famous blue coat and yellow breeches, which were inappropriately proleterian for the bourgeois society of the day. And which serve to make him a remarkably contemporary figure, for in the days leading up to the sartorial revolution of the â 60s, male clothing had been of a near-universal drabness for several decades.

While at the height of the Swinging Sixties, hordes of educated young people on both sides of the Atlantic elected to grow their hair and sport dandified outfits like the Rock acts and artists who were seen as vulgar and low class by many from among their parentsâ generation.

Other facets of Wertherâ s rebellious uniqueness include his emotionalism, seen at the time as ill-befitting an educated male, but which went on to become an important part of the artistic armoury in a brave new aeon in which the Artist served as High Priest. Or to paraphrase Shelley, the unacknowledged legislator of the world.

And a certain wandering quality which results in his accepting a mission to go in search of a family legacy, and then feel no overwhelming desire to either return home or seek a job in the rural region to which he has been sent. An idleness in other wordsâ ¦possibly born of a rebellious distaste for the puritan work ethic that has long been one of the key foundations of European bourgeois society.

A distaste which has persisted since among Bohemian artists, but which is usually transcended beyond a certain age, as in the case of Goethe, who mutated into the most industrious of men. But Werther never matures beyond a state of infantile dependence, and for a time is content to do little other than socialise with the local peasant folk, or read Homer beneath the linden trees.

And when he does finally find himself in work, his employerâ s fastidiousness drive him to distraction, and he quits in disgust, only to drift to the nearby town of Wahlheim in search of a local girl by the name of Charlotte, with whom heâ d earlier become infatuated.

This despite the fact that Lotte is as good as engaged to be married to an older man called Albert, who befriends the lad, so that a kind of love triangle comes into being. And it could be said that Lotte is tempted by Werther, as the essence of proto-Romantic Bohemianism.

However, Werther ultimately leaves Walheim to find work, only to return after quitting his job; while Albert and Lotte have since married and settled into domestic contentment. Yet Werther is warmly welcomed by the couple in his new capacity as a family friend.

But he becomes increasingly de trop until Lotte is forced to become firm with him and tell him to stay away until Christmas Eve at which point, he reveals his true feelings to her. Not that sheâ d ever been in doubt about these. But of course, she rejects him, and the following day Werther kills himself by shooting himself through the head.

And soâ ¦après lui, le délugeâ ¦which is to say of the Romantic Revolution, although it would be unjust to suggest that Goethe was its only forefather. For Goethe himself was responding to revolutionary ideas that were already very much in existence, such as those of Rousseau for example. And it would be equally unjust to over-emphasize the movementâ s negative aspects.

For it could be said that Romanticism was a reaction to the stultifying rationalism of the Enlightenment, and thence in some respects a step in the right direction in terms of renewing interest in the spiritual side of life. But at the same time, it ushered in this notion of the artist as set apart from the common run, and inclined to all manner of excess in terms of intuition and sensibility, of seditiousness and eccentricity, of mental and emotional instability, which is surely absurd. Or rather should be seen as such by anyone of a responsible cast of mind.

For in its wake there arose a series of artistic movements or avant-gardes which fostered the most aberrant behaviour on the part of some of its participants. And presumably they acted as they did because they felt they had the right to as artists.

And yet it could be said they were more inclined to do so than previous generations by virtue of the tenor of the times. Which is to say an age in which the Judaeo-Christian values on which the West had ever relied on for its foundations had already begun to decline in the wake of the Enlightnment, and so given birth to a spirit which has come to be known as Modernism.

But it would be altogether wrong to suggest that Werther is responsible not just for Romanticism but its protracted decadenceâ ¦which could with some justification be said to still be in operation.

For there were were many Romantic precursors, and in comparison to some of these, Goetheâ s breakthrough novel was the soul of innocence. And whatâ s more, in the wake of its phenomenal success, its author distanced himself from the nascent Romantic movement which caught fire first in Germany and then in Britain.

And he did so for the sake of a form of Neoclassicism which has become known as Weimar Classicism, whose minute number of participants included, in addition to Goethe himself, his close friends Schiller and Herder, as well as the poet and novelist Christoph Martin Wieland.

Yet, some half century after the publication of the book that made him world famous, Germany's greatest poet, and the equal as such of his one-time idol Shakespeare looked back on the time of Wertherâ s sensational impact on a restless, passionate generation of youth. And he described it as â a spring, when everything was budding and shooting, when more than one tree was yet bare, while others were already full of leaves. All that in the year 1775!â

One can't help thinking there are many of the so-called Baby Boomer generation who view such totemic years as 1965, or '67, or perhaps even '77, in much the same way as Goethe when he was inspired to write these lines about his own wild youth. But then is that not the way for all generations of youth now grown old?

Of course...but then perhaps it's especially true for the generation who didn't so much invent the madness of youth, as incarnate it as never before within living memory.

And for my part, without sacrificing a tithe of what I've learned and achieved up to this point, I'd dearly love to make a return to a time when life seemed like some kind of eternal spring when everything was possible, nothing too much trouble. And this time around, youth would not be wasted on me, no not one delicious drop of it.

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