

The Cost of Myth: Cyril Connolly and “Romanticism”

Jean-Christophe Murat
Université de Provence, Aix-Marseille

In a 1981 introduction to Cyril Connolly’s (only) novel *The Rock Pool*, his contemporary and life-long friend Peter Quennell (1905-1994) writes:

Cyril was a great romantic, and a romantic he remained until the end. True, he resented the label, and . . . his favourite authors, he declared, were Catullus, Tibullus, Juvenal, Petronius and, in English, Congreve, Rochester, Dryden and Pope, all of whom had been brought up on the classical tradition. Despite these influences, however, Cyril’s romanticism pervaded his life and helped to shape his work. . . . Regret and nostalgia were the emotions he appears to have felt most strongly and, in his books, expressed most vividly. (*Rock Pool* ix)

The purpose of this study is not so much to engage in a scholarly debate about the vexed relationship between “classicism” and “romanticism”, or-if one wishes to periodize that debate-between “the Augustan age” and “the Romantic age” as to emphasize why and how “romanticism” was at once a central issue and a point of contention during the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, and why the English writer and editor Cyril Connolly (1903-1974) may be regarded as a case in point. Since the outbreak of World War II, “romanticism” has been the subject of numerous controversies, largely because the tenets of this concept have been used in contradictory ways.¹ Various analysts on the left or on the right came to consider that the principles of romanticism were to be held responsible for the rise of European Fascism and Nazism. In May 1940, *Horizon*, Connolly’s review, published an article by Quennell, an authority on the Augustan age and Lord Byron, whose book-length version would be entitled *Byron in Italy* (1941). It was perhaps no coincidence that Quennell’s contribution bore the lugubrious title “The Romantic Catastrophe,” when less than a month later the Wehrmacht would be goose-stepping down the Champs-Élysées in the defeated French capital. Quennell’s contention is that, because they died either too early (Keats and Shelley) or too late (Wordsworth and Coleridge), the major English Romantics have become a source of frustration for readers of the mid-twentieth century: “[W]hile trying to analyse the genius of these four very different and all extraordinarily gifted writers, we find that we are perpetually dropping into the conditional tense” (Quennell 528). Each of these

canonical figures was incapacitated by some “constitutional” or “circumstantial” failure—Coleridge’s crippling *acedia*, or despondency; Wordsworth’s retreat into complacent conservatism, which makes him an “arch-renegade . . . unconscious of [his] own apostasy” (Quennell 540). The most negative influence, though, is kept for the end of the survey, which contains the pith of the author’s argument. Quennell has a score to settle with Lord Byron, of whom he says:

Few personalities have more than a pathological interest; and it is to Byron’s disastrous influence on modern literature that we owe the whole tribe of gifted exhibitionists, ranging in scope from Alfred de Musset to Dowson, who have attempted to “live” their poems as well as write them. . . . Had Byron’s daemonic example been somewhat less overwhelming, and Keats’s lonely voice more sustained and more powerful, how great might have been the benefit to modern poetry and how significant the results that it at length achieved! How different, perhaps, the whole face of contemporary Europe! Nationalism was essentially a romantic movement, and from nationalism springs the half-baked racial theorist with his romantic belief in the superiority of Aryan blood and his romantic distrust of the use of reason. (Quennell 542-43)

In strictly literary terms, the most significant contrast is between Byron’s theatrical, provocative persona, and Keats’s conception of the poet as it is propounded in his oft-quoted letter of October 1818: “A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for-and filling some other body. . . .” (Keats 119). But of course the main point here is that the cause-and-effect relationship between literary aesthetics and political contexts seems to be taken for granted. Quennell’s indictment of Byron amounts to saying that Byron is no less than a hysterical prototype of Adolf Hitler, who embodied a point of non-return in Fascist politics by honing his histrionic skills almost to perfection. “The Romantic Catastrophe” is not a seminal study, reviving as it does issues already raised in the previous decade, but its forte lies in the cogently polemical way it provides a synthesis on “romanticism” and its discontents.

The “Neo-Romantic” poetry that emerged at the beginning of the forties and remained fashionable throughout the decade is also, in large part, responsible for the unpleasant confusion between fascism, warfare, and the writer’s poetic agenda. In his post-war manifesto *How I See Apocalypse*, Henry Treece—one of the leaders of the New Apocalypse, or neo-romantic, movement—claims that “war, after all, is an Apocalyptic affair—an organic movement with all the madness and the sanity of a bowel movement, all the systematic anarchy and the ordered chaos of a lover’s dream”; he asserts just as earnestly that “we may yet live to thank God for Hitler, symptom of social disease, who has made us purge ourselves,

and, in overcoming his assaults, step forward to a cleaner, more equitable and saner way of life" (Treece 21, 12). With understandable anger, Adam Piette in *Imagination at War* (1995) savages Treece's high-flown statements:

Vulgar Freudian and Jungian ideas inherited from the surrealists inform Treece's vision of the war as an invigorating wet dream. This would all be very comic if it were not that the neo-romantics, with their hotchpotch of pseudo-Christianity, psychoanalysis, *Golden Bough* anthropology, loose anarchic individualism and high Gothic symbolism, messed up a lot of young minds as they went off to fight the war. (Piette 199)

In 1991, Stuart Sillars offered a totally different reading of the link between romanticism and World War II, arguing that romanticism's "deep concern with social realism" found its full expression in the cinematic, painterly and narrative imagination of the British people at war, as well as in the desire of many members of the ruling class to foster a more egalitarian social system (4). Even such a propaganda documentary as Humphrey Jennings' *Listen to Britain* (1942) contains "the most Romantic film image of the war years" in "showing a unity between the Romantic hero, the machine and the natural world that typifies this kind of Romantic realism" (Sillars 7);² similarly, John Lehmann's magazine *Penguin New Writing* is praised for living up to its democratic, reformist ideals by publishing, from January 1941 onwards, "a feature . . . in which each month a different worker, a soldier, or someone 'in the thick of it' [would] describe and discuss his (or her) recent experiences" (Sillars 71). Comforting as this view of "romanticism" may seem, its deficiencies are all-too obvious, especially in the three opening chapters: firstly, Sillars's rather hazy use of "romanticism" tends to read the concept as a mild form of "going-over"³-British society, guilty of ill-treating its working class for so long, sees in the war the sudden opportunity to make amends and to reconstruct the whole country along new, fairer, lines. Secondly, his definition rests almost entirely upon the canonical *Lyrical Ballads*, which may rightly be regarded as an important text, but whose "groundbreaking novelty" in aesthetic and thematic terms no romantic scholar believes in any longer.⁴

It is therefore within this context of conflicting interpretations that the "romanticism" with which Cyril Connolly has long been associated, should be examined.

Contre Connolly?

Over the last four or five decades the writer and editor Cyril Connolly has lent himself to a strikingly consistent critical discourse. All the biographers and reviewers not downright hostile to him on ideological grounds tend to raise the same points,⁵ the first of which can be summed up as follows: Connolly is a

“man of letters” whose “life and works” are intricately linked (Lewis 18, Boyd 4). Such a statement, besides smacking of the old-style criticism that Marcel Proust—much admired by Connolly—famously demolished in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (1908), arouses suspicion. To insist on the indissoluble link between the social life of *Horizon*’s editor and his literary creation or activity tends to suggest the amateurishness of his output as a critic and essayist, in a way which, by contrast, sacralizes the professionalism of his contemporaries F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, full-time, widely respected academics. A double-edged compliment of this kind is paid by the novelist John Wain in a short 1963 essay on the author:

Another reason why snide remarks about Mr Connolly come so easily to some people’s lips is that he is . . . popular and admired among people who are the enemies of genuine discrimination and hard thinking. Like Lord David Cecil, he is to some extent a victim of the sort of people who read him. It takes a certain amount of courage, in “serious” literary circles here in England, to admit to an admiration of Mr Connolly’s work, because to do so is to line oneself up with a vacuous and modish fringe of the literary world, obnoxious to any genuine reader or writer. (Wain 156-57)

In vindicating the victim, Wain also acknowledges that his work lends itself to superficiality, or—and this is a more serious charge—that its inbuilt shortcomings are the typical products of the more unpleasant aspects of a public-school education. At worst Connolly is condemned to remain a second- or even third-rate figure in literary history. This is precisely the second point most critics and biographers agree with, or at least point out:

[H]e remained, as he feared he would, a reviewer rather than a critic, an influential weekly commentator rather than a Leavis or an Eliot or an Empson or even an Edmund Wilson, all of whom changed the ways in which people thought about literature to an extent that Connolly may have aspired to but probably never attained. (Lewis 17)

As Wain himself reminds us, Connolly’s reputation seems borne out by the largely negative perception of his critical output, of which *Enemies of Promise* is a case in point. Although the reading public enjoyed the book, its reception was rather cool in intellectual and political circles. The increasingly influential academic critics on both sides of the Atlantic—the Leavises in Britain and the New Critics in the United States—did not quite relish Connolly’s provocative but plausible argument that, having failed as a poet and novelist, he “was, however, well-grounded enough to become a critic and drifted into it through unemployability” (*Enemies of Promise* 255).⁶ To make matters worse, publishing a book anchored in the

anxieties of an old Etonian bemoaning his dried-up inspiration at a time when the Spanish war was raging and a new world war brewing, was regarded by many as a frivolous and irresponsible enterprise.

Who still cares about Cyril Connolly then? This question is almost word for word the title of a very short monograph on the author by Jeremy Lewis, who was at the time of its publication in 1994 director of Chatto and Windus and deputy editor of the *London Magazine*. At their most generous, critics and biographers generally agree that Connolly will go down in history as a litterateur whose artistic achievements, sadly, fall short of his own brilliant personal myth (Fisher xiii). In a 1984 critical review of *The Selected Essays of Cyril Connolly*, published by Persea Books and edited by Peter Quennell, Hilton Kramer writes rather ruthlessly:

What Connolly conspicuously lacked . . . was not so much sincerity as self-knowledge. He seems to have gone through life actually believing himself to be some sort of artist . . . who, owing to an unhappy fate, had never produced the works of art that might have been expected of a writer of his gifts. About this he was surely wrong. He lacked the creative gift. (1)

Final as it seems, this view fails to disentangle the two intricate issues of value and myth, and above all seriously underestimates the origin, nature, and force of the underlying myth: romanticism.

I will therefore address the concept of romanticism as discussed, exposed, and dramatized in two texts written by Cyril Connolly over a period of time which almost coincides with the Second World War: *Enemies of Promise* (published in September 1938) and *The Unquiet Grave* (published in early 1945 under the pseudonym Palinurus). Whether as an implicit backdrop or as explicit argumentative framework, Connolly often gives "romanticism" pride of place when it comes to examining the intermingled predicaments of the modern self, of society, and of wartime or post-war Britain and Europe. Two major difficulties arise however: firstly, one is at pains to sort out the tenets of the "romantic" world-view Connolly is attacking and praising by turns. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the author shies away from a definition of romanticism that would proceed from the standpoint of its canonical figures, and in *Enemies of Promise* most markedly-concentrates instead on the terminal point of the movement, hardly venturing into the centre. *That* job he gladly leaves to some of *Horizon's* contributors.⁷ Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, one should try to analyse why and how the values of "romanticism" are still relevant to address the issues of the oncoming or ongoing world war.

Obituary of Myth, Obituary as Myth

All of Cyril Connolly's personal and artist friends remember him as a great wit and entertainer. For posterity however, his name has become a by-word for whin-

ing discontent and theatrical, self-pitying pessimism; this negative perception has no doubt been made worse by Barbara Skelton's hilarious but scathing account of her marriage with Connolly from 1950 to 1956 (B. Skelton 81-130). It seems, in fact, that such a reputation for pessimism was acquired not so much through Connolly's objective or dispassionate examination of his time as through the scrutiny of his time through the distorting glass of fantasy and myth-or its outcome, the myth about the end of myth(s). In the early months of 1944 the depressed editor of *Horizon* felt in the mood to write an obituary of "myth":

Three requisites for a work of art: validity of the myth, vigour of belief, intensity of vocation. Examples of valid myths: the Gods of Olympus in Ancient Greece; the City of Rome and afterwards the Roman Empire; Christianity; the myths of Romanticism and of Material Progress. . . . The belief in a myth whose validity is diminishing will not produce such great art as the belief in one which is valid, and none are valid today. Yet no myth is ever quite worthless as long as there remains one artist to honour it with his faith.
(*Unquiet Grave* 40)

Clear as myth's demise may have been in Connolly's mind, this obituary begs a great many questions today. To begin with, Connolly seems to lump together individual myths that one may associate with a particular era, and *mythologies*, which Northrop Frye defines as "an interconnected group of myths" which "help to create a cultural history" (Frye 33-34). Connolly's brief chronological survey seems to follow an implicit pattern of decline and fall-the religious *mythoi* of Greek antiquity were dismissed as mere tales in course of time by the Greeks themselves; the strong community shaped by the original city of Rome expanded itself to the point of disintegration; the demise of "Romanticism" itself is evoked, but unfortunately Connolly does not elaborate on this point; "Christianity" is being challenged by the ever-more complex symbols and narratives of modernity. It is unclear at this stage of the book whether he places himself and his text at the tail end of a cultural era (within an up-and-down pattern of ceaselessly superseded and recreated myths), or in the very last days of Western history, in which case he is of course indulging in yet another myth: the decline of the West, of collective values, and the desperate struggle of the lonely artist in a sinking world. One may wonder whether Connolly had read Oswald Spengler's famous *Decline of the West* (1916-1920, translated into English in 1922) at first hand or whether he even knew about that monumental work. Although neither *Enemies of Promise* nor *The Unquiet Grave* contains a single reference to the German philosopher, such passages as these are close to some of Spengler's theories:

The goal of every culture is to decay through over-civilization; luxury, scepticism, weariness and superstition-are constant. The civilization of one

epoch becomes the manure of the next. (*Unquiet Grave* 50)

The triple decadence: Decadence of the material; of the writer's language. The virgin snow where Shakespeare and Montaigne used to cut their deep furrows, is now but a slope flattened by innumerable tracks until it is unable to receive an impression. Decadence of the myth, for there is no longer a unifying belief (as in Christianity or in Renaissance Man) to permit a writer a sense of awe and of awe which he shares with the mass of humanity. And even the last myth of all, the myth of the artist's vocation, of "l'homme c'est rien, l'oeuvre c'est tout", is destroyed by the times, by the third decadence, that of society. . . . Science has done little to help the artist, beyond contributing radio, linotype and the cinema; inventions which enormously extend his scope, but which commit him more than ever to the policy of the State and the demands of the ignorant. (*Unquiet Grave* 54)

A twenty-first century reader might be tempted to dismiss such prose as a "hotch-potch" (to take up Adam Piette's judgement on the New Apocalypse poets)-once again *myth* and *mythology* are used indiscriminately-of reactionary views from a man who is half in earnest, half overacting the part of the old malcontent. Placed within the historical perspective of the 1940s though, these comments strangely echo Spengler's well-known post-World War I distinction between culture and civilization:

For every culture has its own civilization. In this work, for the first time the two words . . . are used in a *periodic* sense, to express a strict and necessary *organic succession*. The Civilization is the inevitable *destiny* of the Culture. . . . Civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable. They are a conclusion, the thing-become succeeding the thing-becoming, death following life, rigidity following expansion, intellectual age and the stone-built, petrifying world-city following mother-earth and the spiritual childhood of Doric and Gothic. (Spengler 24)

Although Spengler takes great pains to assert that his theory is to be viewed "not from this or that 'standpoint', but in a high, time-free perspective embracing whole millennia or historical world-forms" (27), his survey largely focuses on two key periods of history: "The transition from Culture to Civilization was accomplished

for the Classical world in the fourth, for the Western in the nineteenth century” (24). Industrialization, which coincides with the advent of the world-city, is described as “a great stride towards the inorganic, towards the end” (24). Spengler’s theory of growth (culture), expansion, and decay (civilization) is claimed to be set forth from a timeless (i.e. universal) perspective; the fact remains that the nineteenth century is designated as the moment when after the demise of Western *culture*, the new-born *civilization* “remoulds all the forms of the Culture that went before, . . . begets no more, but only reinterprets,” assuming that “the genuine act of creation has already occurred, and merely enters upon an inheritance of big actualities” (Spengler 415). Symptomatically, Spengler singles out the year 1800 to show that the conflict between modern heroic subjectivity and the demands of a rationalized industrial society led to tragic forms of individual and collective alienation:

Culture and Civilization—the living body of a soul and the mummy of it. For Western existence the distinction lies at about the year 1800—on the one side of that frontier life in fullness and sureness of itself, formed by growth from within, in one great uninterrupted evolution from Gothic childhood to Goethe and Napoleon, and on the other the autumnal, artificial, rootless life of our great cities, under forms fashioned by the intellect. (Spengler 415)

The *romanticizing* of decline, first in the attempt to fit “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” into an great endless cycle (Eliot 177), then in the insistence on placing this decline in a period of time concomitant with the “heyday” of European romanticism, has a strong appeal for Connolly, who sees in the rise of totalitarianism and the subsequent disaster of World War II an illustration of a millennial culture being destroyed by a state-controlled civilization:

Ile de Gavrinis over the green and violet ocean of the Morbihan. The dinghy grounds on white sand printed with the tails of lizards, the ancient lime avenue leads up to the lonely farm where a path winds among gorse and asphodel to the Presence of the Dead. There, in the Tumulus, lies the last Celtic prince, wrapped in his race’s age-long death-wish; his great vault-stone carved with indecipherable warnings. . . -O powerless to save! And that night in Vannes, the cave-wedding-*-Summoque ulularunt vertice Nymphae*. (The nymphs wailed from the top of the hill. An air-raid warning.) (*Unquiet Grave* 98, author’s own note)

Realities of our time.

History constructed out of global blocks.

The Decline of Europe.
 Anglo-American rivalry and imperialism.
 Russian Managerial imperialism. . . .
 The Great American Vacuum. (*Unquiet
 Grave* 100)

Although Connolly's Spenglerian "romanticism" is a key myth and a master narrative, it may not always be claimed as a model but as a pattern and a negative force that must be endured, and whose pressure drags you down instead of uplifting you.

Cyril and Lilies

Connolly had just turned thirty-five when he published *Enemies of Promise*, a hybrid text whose first two parts read like a survey of the literary situation of his time, and a set of reflections on the various difficulties of writing a masterpiece. In part III, which he defines as "an autobiography of ideas," "[r]omanticism is measured against a romantic education" (1948 introduction vii), i.e. his education at St. Wulfric's private school during the First World War, then at Eton.⁸ Examining the production of British letters since the eighteenth century, the author introduces a binary classification, whereby the literary history of the last two hundred years boils down to a contest between the "mandarin" and the "vernacular" styles. By "mandarin" style one is to understand a contrived, mannered mode of expression in which, at its worst, the verbal means often exceeds feeling or meaning; "vernacular" designates a plain, unadorned style close to language as it is spoken—at its worst, the unimaginative, all-too-readable prose of "present-day commercial writing" (74). For all its cut-and-dried simplicity, this classification is both interesting and puzzling. To begin with, it is reminiscent of the dichotomy fashionable in the early nineteenth century, when for example the rule-bound artificiality of Pope's poetry became the stock-in-trade of Romantic criticism as the criterion of "naturalness" was establishing itself as a norm.⁹ As a matter of fact Connolly perceives and stresses the historical connection:

[Pope] is one of the great poets of all time and the injury he did to English Verse consisted in setting it a standard to which it could not live up. . . . The first Romantics, Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge, therefore, set themselves to write simply, to entice poetry away from the notion of the Grand Style and the Proper Subject; their language was monosyllabic, plebeian, their subjects personal or everyday. They wore their own hair. (15-16)

On the other hand Connolly uses the word "romantic" in a rather loose way, or at least from a temporal point of view that does not match the historical canon (the writers whose works cover the years 1780-1830 approximately). Here is for instance his commentary of a short piece by Oscar Wilde:

On that little hill by the city of Florence, where the lovers of Giorgione are lying, it is always the solstice of noon, of noon made so languorous by summer suns that hardly can the slim naked girl dip into the marble tank. . . . In the eternal twilight they move, those frail diaphanous figures, whose tremulous white feet seem not to touch the dew-drenched grass they tread on.

Notice the amount of “romantic” words, now well-known hacks, “solstice, languorous, eternal, frail, diaphanous, tremulous”, which help to date the passage. . . (19-20)

If Wordsworth and his contemporaries “wore their own hair,” Wilde’s language looks like a badly fitting toupee to the reader of 1938—his prose is “dead, constructed out of false sentiment and faulty linguistic material” (20). The term “romantic” is admittedly not capitalized and appears between inverted commas, but there can be no doubt that its use becomes more and more deprecatory and that its centre of gravity shifts towards the late nineteenth century. In point of fact, part III sets what emerges as the true purpose of the author in *Enemies of Promise*: to settle a few old scores with “romanticism,” or more exactly with fin-de-siècle role models that both offered watered-down interpretations of romanticism and laid undue emphasis on death-wish and morbidity:

The Eton variety [of literature] was diluted with Pre-Raphaelitism. Watts’ “Sir Galahad” hung in College Chapel, Burne-Jones and William Morris had been Eton figures . . . Another field for the Pre-Raphaelite influence was in translating. Homer and Virgil were the pillars of an Eton education. . . . We read them with the help of two official cribs, Butcher and Lang for Homer, Mackail for Virgil. Lang believed that Homer must be translated into the nearest English equivalent which was an Anglo-Saxon prose reminiscent of the Sagas. He tried to manage on a Bronze-Age vocabulary, and the Mediterranean clarity of the *Odyssey* was blurred by a Wardour Street Nordic fog. Homer, in short, was slightly Wagnerized. Mackail, who had married Burne-Jones’ daughter, gave to his Virgil an eightyish air, the *lacrimae rerum* spilled over and his Christian attitude to paganism . . . infected everything which he translated with a morbid distress. (216-17)

One does not need to be a hard-line Marxist, any more than one requires the benefit of hindsight, to be aware of the shortcomings of *Enemies of Promise*. Connolly’s discussion of the literary “predicament” (his word) of his time through the notions of *mandarin* and *vernacular* is unquestionably

enlightening and thought-provoking, but his strictures of romanticism remain narrowly class-bound. The damaged generation that he calls self-pityingly "the civilisation of the lilies" is the upper class and wealthy upper middle class of the "old boys" with whom he will share his life-long grievances (225).

By contrast, *The Unquiet Grave* places the debate within a much broader cultural perspective, and above all significantly revitalizes the concept of romanticism. The title of the book is borrowed from the story of Palinurus, Aeneas's helmsman in Virgil's *Aeneid*, thrown overboard during a storm, cast away on the coast of Sicily, murdered by the brutish inhabitants and left unburied so that his soul must wait for a hundred years on the banks of the Styx. Subtitled *A Word Cycle*, it consists of three parts and an epilogue. Except for the epilogue, which reads almost like an academic essay, the text is made up of seemingly unrelated and disjointed paragraphs, many of which are quotations in English and in French from Connolly's favourite authors.

Expostulation, Reply, and Impasse

At the height of the personal crisis caused by his failed marriage with Jean Bakewell (who had left him in the spring of 1939), as well as by his difficulty in handling the stress and drabness of wartime London, Connolly projects himself into a multitude of mythical literary selves and symptomatically refuses to discriminate between the "classical" and the "romantic" writers he identifies with:

Periods when I lived: the Augustan age in Rome, in Paris and London from 1660 to 1740, and lastly from 1770 to 1850. My friends in the first were Horace, Tibullus, Petronius and Virgil; in the second: Rochester, Congreve, La Fontaine, La Bruyère, . . . Pope, Swift, Racine, Hume, Voltaire; while in the last avatar I frequented Walpole and Gibbon; Byron, Fox, Beckford, and Stendhal, Tennyson, Baudelaire, Nerval and Flaubert. (9-10)

Knowingly or unknowingly, Connolly's views on romanticism tie in with a certain critical current that stresses (often disparagingly) the subjective idealism and the reality of inwardness of romantic thought. One may briefly mention Lascelles Abercrombie's 1926 study, *Romanticism*, in which the latter maintains that the "true antithesis" is not romanticism and classicism, but "romanticism and realism." Romanticism is "a tendency away from actuality" (Abercrombie 7, 33). This is almost word for word what Connolly writes in both *Enemies of Promise* and *The Unquiet Grave*-in a very negative way in the former, in a far more nostalgic and ambivalent manner in the latter:

It will be seen that the thread running through this autobiography is an analysis of romanticism, that romanticism in decline under whose shadow we

grew up. Romanticism I would call the refusal to face certain truths about the world and ourselves, and the consequences of that refusal. . . . [T]o be a romantic to-day, knowing what we know about the nature of man and his place in the universe, is the mark of a wilful astigmatism, a confession of cowardice and immaturity. (*Enemies of Promise* 168-69)

This is the familiar charge of escapism and irresponsibility that romanticism has had to face since the early twentieth century, whether the charge be directed at the “romantic”’s so-called solipsism or at his so-called dreamy utopianism.¹⁰

Cowardice in living: without health and courage we cannot face the present or the germ of the future in the present and take refuge in evasion. Evasion through comfort, society, through acquisitiveness, through the book-bed-bath defence system, above all through the flight to the romantic womb of history, into primitive myth-making. (*Unquiet Grave* 99)

At first glance this passage reads like a tiresome repetition of the grievances expressed in the earlier book, to the effect that a “romantic” world view can only face inwards, away from the disturbing realities of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. This lament, however, gives way to a more complex dialectic, which can be expressed in formal and historical terms. Here is how, in the 1950 introduction to *The Unquiet Grave*, Connolly thinks back to the book’s composition:

Working on the manuscript for another year, Palinurus began to see that there was a pattern to be brought out; in the diaries an art-form slumbered—an initiation, a descent into hell, a purification and cure. The various themes could be given symphonic structure and be made to lead into and suggest each other until every paragraph became fitted into an inevitable position in the pilot’s periplus (or intellectual voyage) from which it could not be moved. (xii)

Eager to make full sense of the poetics of his *word cycle*, Connolly is eager to “loop the loop”. One may wonder here whether, looking back on the book from the vantage point of the late 1940s and early 1950s, he is not self-consciously utilizing the concept of “spatial form” which, according to the American critic Joseph Frank, is the hallmark of high-modernist art and literature (3-62). Frank argues in 1945 that unlike the plastic arts, modern literature—as exemplified by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot for poetry and by James Joyce and Marcel Proust for the novel—is “composed of a succession of words proceeding through time,” but “asks its readers to suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity” (Frank 6, 13). Towards the end of the chapter, Frank elaborates on Wilhelm Worringer’s 1908 thesis *Abstraction*

and *Empathy*, and suggests that "spatial form" is not merely a concept that New Criticism (so fashionable in 1945 America) may use as a master key to open any twentieth-century text—it is also a historical problem:

Periods of naturalism have included the classical age of Greek art, the Italian Renaissance, and the art of Western Europe to the end of the nineteenth century. In these eras the artist strives to represent the objective, three-dimensional world of "natural" vision and to reproduce with loving accuracy the processes and forms of organic nature. . . . Periods of non-naturalism include most of primitive art, Egyptian monumental sculpture, Byzantine art, Romanesque sculpture, the dominant art styles of the twentieth century. In these eras the artist abandons the projection of space entirely and returns to the plane, reduces organic nature to linear-geometric forms, and frequently eliminates all traces of organicism in favor of pure lines, forms, and colors. . . . Naturalism, as Worringer points out, always has been created by cultures that have achieved an equilibrium between man and the cosmos. . . . On the other hand, when the relationship between man and the cosmos is one of disharmony and disequilibrium, we find that nonorganic, linear-geometric styles are always produced. . . . If there is one theme that dominates the history of modern culture since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it is precisely that of insecurity, instability, the feeling of loss of control over the meaning and purpose of life amidst the continuing triumphs of science and technics. (Frank 51-55)

Frank's implicit support for Worringer's views means that "romanticism" (organic, naturalistic) and "modernism" (non-organic, geometric) are now incompatible cultural modes. Yet while the 1950 introduction to *The Unquiet Grave* insists on the importance of "a pattern," i.e. a spatial form of the kind analysed at length by Frank, most of the entries of the text itself (written between 1942 and late 1944) construct a different dialectic:

Romantic surrealism and classical humanism, however antagonistic, are akin; they breed each other and the artist must contrive a synthesis. Blake and Pope . . . are complementary. The classical humanist is the parent, the surrealist the rebellious adolescent. (*Unquiet Grave* 96)

Note that the two concepts are by no means on an equal footing: romanticism seems to have lost none of its immaturity for all its revival since *Enemies of Promise*,

and classicism appears as the necessary tutor without whom the wayward brat is bound to get into mischief.

It is precisely at this point, in my view, that the two aesthetic and philosophical poles that Connolly declares to be one and the same part company in a theatrically irreconcilable way:

It is right proportion combined with simplicity of expression and seriousness of thought that enables a book to stand the test of time. (*Unquiet Grave* 94)

[Palinurus's literary models] contain the maximum of emotion compatible with a classical sense of form. Observe how they are written; many are short and compressed, fruit of reflective and contemplative natures, prose or poetry of great formal beauty and economy of phrase. (*Unquiet Grave* 3)

What makes the great writers of the past vivid to us is the extent of their misery; the despair of Pascal, the bitterness of La Rochefoucauld, the ennui of Flaubert, the "noia" of Leopardi, the "spleen" of Baudelaire, - none but the truths which have been extracted under mental torture appeal to us. (*Unquiet Grave* 41)

As I waddle along in thick black overcoat and dark suit with a leather brief-case under my arm, I smile to think how this costume officially disguises *the wild and storm-tossed figure of Palinurus*; who knows that a poet is masquerading here as a whey-faced bureaucrat? (*Unquiet Grave* 29, italics mine)

The first quotation reads ostentatiously like a piece of seventeenth-century neo-classicism, like a maxim by a French man of letters. The second one, placed in the opening pages, sets "Palinurus"'s declared objective: to be able to emulate the achievement of Pope's poems and Leopardi's *Canti*, of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* and Byron's *Don Juan*, while deploring that "all are more adult and less romantic than he." But because he is honest enough to admit that he is only willing to attain such admirable goals effortlessly and painlessly, one can only dismiss the objective as wishful thinking. By contrast, the next two quotations impart a very different atmosphere, and reveal what turns out to be the author's real fantasy: a desire to give free rein at last to the life-long "disease" he has been pretending to tend ever since he left college. The epilogue of *The Unquiet Grave*, as well as Connolly's last editorials in the *Horizon* issues for 1949, is suffused with a personal romanticism, which may be diagnosed as a "Palinurus syndrome".

The Palinurus Syndrome

If the conclusions of "A Georgian Boyhood," part three of *Enemies of Promise*, are to be trusted, the late "romanticism" the children of St. Wulfric's, then the adolescents of Eton, grew up with, has developed into a generational disease-the disease that turned the healthy world of the years 1770-1850 into "the civilisation of the lilies." The wartime context of *The Unquiet Grave* greatly complicates the issue for "Palinurus" however, as we shall now see. The epilogue ("Who Was Palinurus?") reminds the reader in great detail of Palinurus's tragic story in books three, five, and six of Virgil's *Aeneid*. The analysis is supported by long quotations from the epic text, mostly from John Dryden's 1697 English translation-in couplet rhymes and iambic pentameters. As we know, Palinurus, Aeneas's pilot, is one of the major sacrificial figures in *Aeneid*. When the Trojan hero's fleet is in danger of being wrecked by a terrible storm, Venus intercedes on behalf of Aeneas to spare him and his warriors. Neptune assents, but on the following condition: "Only one there shall be whom, lost in the flood, thou shalt seek in vain; one life shall be given for many" (130).¹¹ The whole issue now revolves around the value and interpretation of Palinurus's sacrifice to Neptune.

Whether he deliberately tried to abandon Aeneas, whether he was the innocent victim of divine vengeance or a melancholy and resentful character who felt his special nautical gift was soon to become unwanted cannot be deduced from the evidence. . . . As a myth, however, and particularly as a myth with a valuable psychological interpretation, Palinurus clearly stands for a certain will-to-failure or repugnance-to-success, a desire to give up at the last moment, an urge towards loneliness, isolation and obscurity. (*Unquiet Grave* 137)

The (late?-)romantic stance of the victimized loner is unmistakable here. All-too romantic is also the final, *non serviam* gesture of defiance which Connolly chooses to read into the pilot's plight. In a "spatial-form" sort of way, the myth now connects with the Coleridgean and Baudelairean animal figure glimpsed in part one,¹² meeting its death at the hands of cruel human beings:

The harbour of Cassis on a bright winter morning; a gull is floating a few yards from the quay, unable to rise because its wings are fouled with oil. The fisher-children pelt it with stones. I drive them off; laughing they run across to the farther side and begin again, the stones falling around the dying bird as it bobs on the water like a painted decoy. (42-43)

Although only a bystander, or at best a perfunctory and inefficient saviour, "Palinurus" is evidently identifying with the seagull and romanticizing the bird into a sacrificial figure-but a sacrificial figure of *what*, precisely? A way of pursuing

the medical metaphor is to ask oneself whether the “romanticism” of Palinurus is also a generational disease, as in *Enemies of Promise*, or an orphan disease. This question is certainly not an idle rhetorical debate when one remembers what position Cyril Connolly occupied in the society of wartime Britain. It is common knowledge that from the end of 1941 onwards most of the adult population of the country—including women—found itself conscripted, either into the army or into the A.F.S. (Auxiliary Fire Service) and A.R.P. (Air Raid Precaution) services, or again into the war industry on a basis of voluntary work. As for journalists, writers and artists, many of them had to find an unsatisfactory occupation at the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire, or at the BBC, where they felt either neglected by the bureaucracy or torn apart by the contradictory demands of official propaganda and work ethics.¹³ But what exactly did Connolly himself do all this time? As editor of *Horizon*, whose contribution to the war effort was regarded as positive by the government, he enjoyed a “reserved” position, which meant that he could not be called up or conscripted for voluntary work. For those of his fellow-writers who had to go through months of hack-work in various ministries, or code-breaking for the GCCS, the dominant feeling was boredom. For Connolly, a non-combatant in a “reserved” position, it was downright *guilt*. In “Letter from a Civilian” (1944), he praises the military feats of a friend in Egypt and the Middle East, while he is going on with his humdrum life in London:

Don't think I am unaware of all this fighting, it is just that which churns the guilt round and round till it curdles into a kind of rancorous despair. You are always fighting for me, in the favoured places of the world, and writing me your friendly unpatronizing letters which I have to answer. Oh, why can't I fight for myself? . . . I could have slapped so many people's face and I never have. That's why I am a civilian. (4-5)

Read in this particular context, the “storm-tossed figure” of Palinurus comes over as a kind of compensatory myth. Aware of his inability to slap people's faces—his personal detractors', but perhaps also the faces of Britain's enemies—Connolly seems to find refuge in a character who, if not slapped in the face, is pushed overboard by the god of sleep, according to Neptune's scheme:

When the soft God of Sleep, with easy flight,
Descends, and draws behind a trail of light,
Thou, Palinurus, art his destin'd prey;
To thee alone he takes his fatal way.
Dire dreams to thee, and iron sleep, he bears;
And, lighting on thy prow, the form of Phorbas wears.¹⁴

.....
The god, insulting with superior strength,
Fell heavy on him, plung'd him in the sea,

And, with the stern, the rudder tore away. (Dryden V, 838-60) Although Connolly himself never offers or even remotely suggests any such interpretation in the epilogue, one may see in the sacrifice the helmsman must endure against his will the inverted image of the sacrifice the "heroes" of the RAF pilots have *volunteered* for. Connolly's free rendition of Virgil's text ("one life shall be given for many"), when he remains faithful to Dryden's translation in the rest of the epilogue, calls to mind one of Winston Churchill's most famous rhetorical flourishes, broadcast more than four years before: "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few" (1940). As a matter of fact, Connolly ultimately decides to transform Palinurus's undeserved death into a *chosen* fate ("Palinurus clearly stands for . . . a desire to give up at the last moment").

This apparently successful dialectical process eventually leads the text towards an even more insolvable dilemma, as Connolly is struggling so hard to maintain a two-directional stance—one nurturing the proud aloofness of "disengagement" and morbidly prophesying "solitude and despair";¹⁵ the other, more subliminal, using that same "neo-romantic" posture for a compensatory purpose. The jumping-off place is also for Palinurus the decisive juncture when his demise means that the whole fleet will survive.

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Mythical tales of tragic sacrifice or miraculous rescue abound in the writing of the 1940s in Britain. As the "New Apocalypse" poet J. F. Hendry wrote at the beginning of the decade:

[T]he poet shall discover and reveal to the world, by reasoning as well as by intuition, by story as well as by image, those fundamental, organic myths which underlie all human endeavour and aspiration, and from the recognition of whose universal application will come a reintegration of the personality with society. (R. Skelton 24)

Some of those mythical tales, using ancient epics or the Bible as subtexts, focus on the "romantic" construct of the individual plunged in a hostile environment, in retribution for his reluctance to commit himself wholeheartedly to the collective fight against the German attackers. Jonah and Palinurus are outstanding figures of the vexed relationship between "the drowned and the saved"—to borrow Primo Levi's famous phrase. Jonah is explicitly present in one of George Orwell's best-known essays, "Inside the Whale" (1940), in which he analyses the degree of detachment and irresponsibility of most writers—even the most ostentatiously committed, like Auden—in the 1920s and 1930s. Connolly is of course no exception in Orwell's view, and as one might expect *Enemies of Promise* is blamed for its upper-middle class indifference to the *real* problems of its time (Orwell 38). It is now (in 1940) too late to advocate progressive (or reactionary) poems, novels and plays—literature is no longer part of the wartime world picture. Orwell does not mean that the writer should stay out of the conflict; what he means is that if he involves himself at all

it should *not* be as a writer (Orwell 48). Jonah is thrown overboard by his own sailors when they learn that the huge fish that nearly capsized their ship was sent by God to punish their captain for refusing to accomplish his mission—to go to Nineveh and preach against the evil Assyrians. Jonah complies with God’s demand and is finally saved, whereas Palinurus is left to die at the hands of brutish Sicilians. Interestingly though, Connolly blends the two myths when he suggests that Palinurus was perhaps not an innocent victim of fate (*Unquiet Grave* 137), but may have felt both too frail and too proud for the task he had been entrusted with—to lead Aeneas’s fleet safely to “the Latian shore.” The denouement of his story is recalled to the reader in a footnote to one of the text’s epigraphs:

Soon the Oracle gave this answer to the Lucanians, who were suffering from an epidemic: ‘The shade of Palinurus must be appeased!’ Whereupon they dedicated to him not far from Velia, a Cenotaph and a Sacred Grove. (ix)

This to me contains the true nature of the “romantic” revival at work in the 1940s, as expounded by Stuart Sillars:

[The] Romantic confrontations of circumambient reality and threat . . . are all held together by two principles. First, there is the acceptance of the individual, regardless of origin, condition or status, as something of unparalleled importance, seen in the constant stress on the uniqueness and equality of individual experience, whatever the kind. Secondly, there is the stress on the curative, revivifying and sustaining qualities of the natural world, either in literal terms or as a powerful metaphor of spiritual renewal and very often in some combination of these two. (Sillars 184)

Palinurus’s long-delayed burial can only take place once Aeneas has plucked, from a certain tree near the Sibyl’s cave, the “golden bough” that alone will open the doors to the abode of the dead where he will meet Palinurus’s wandering soul (*Aeneid* VI, 125-55, 337-83). The natural world presides over the reinstatement of an ostracized individual, whose posthumous celebration is necessary to the welfare of the community.

The ambition of this article was not to dedicate a cenotaph to Cyril Connolly in some bucolic Père-Lachaise cemetery for literary geniuses. This is all the more true as his many obvious deficiencies leave us in doubt as to whether his elegiac temperament made his life and work anachronistic from the outset, or whether they still haunt our post-“romantic” present. In the final analysis, one may probably agree with Hilton Kramer’s statement:

They [*Enemies of Promise* and *The Unquiet Grave*] remain vivid documents of the literary life in England

in the '30s and early '40s--documents that have much to tell us about what went wrong with the life of literature in that period. In this respect, the tendency to sloth in Connolly is at times almost as revealing as his flights of sensibility. (Kramer 3)

Subverting the publisher's commentary of Barbara Skelton's *Tears Before Bedtime*, I conclude that "Connolly emerges, notwithstanding his restlessness and vagaries of temperament, as the centre, if not the hero," of literary life in the 1940s.

Notes

1. The words "romantic" and "romanticism" will appear between inverted commas whenever they are used in a problematic or polemical way.
2. The film shows a Spitfire shooting over a field of ripened corn which waves in its slipstream.
3. I am using the phrase "going over" in the same sense as Valentine Cunningham in chapter 7 of *British Writers of the Thirties*: "Going Over is the key metaphor here. It's an intimate part of the widespread feeling among '30s authors of being travellers, on the road, making some literal or metaphorical journey (or both), of being involved in a pilgrimage to socialism and Moscow, it might be, or to Christ and the Church" (211).
4. See for example Aidan Day's unpretentious and very convincing *Romanticism*, chapter 1 especially.
5. Raymond Williams's antagonism towards Connolly, especially in the late 1940s, when he edited the Marxist review *Politics and Letters* concurrently with Connolly's bourgeois *Horizon*, is rehearsed at length by Williams in *Politics and Letters. Interviews with New Left Review* (72-73).
6. Connolly actually wrote a novel in 1936, as I mention in my introduction. Entitled *The Rock Pool*, it was published in Paris (by the Obelisk Press) after being refused by several English publishers on grounds of obscenity. It turned out to be his one and only novel.
7. Besides P. Quennell's "The Romantic Catastrophe," see Geoffrey Grigson's "Samuel Palmer: The Politics of an Artist" and J. P. Hodin's in-depth article on the heritage of Goethe, "Goethe's Succession."
8. George Orwell was a fellow boarder of Connolly's at St. Wulfric's. The school is famously satirized in his 1947 essay "Such, Such Were the Joys" (published by *Partisan Review* in September-October 1952).
9. See Seamus Perry, "Romantic Literary Criticism" 373-74.
10. For a period survey of all the (inconsistent) charges against "romanticism" in academic circles during the first half of the twentieth century--and a vindication of romanticism--see Jacques Barzun, *Classic, Romantic and Modern*.
11. This passage is a paraphrase of, rather than a quotation from, Dryden's English text. Here are Dryden's exact words: "Your fleet shall safely gain the

Latian shore; / Their lives are giv'n; one destin'd head alone / Shall perish, and for multitudes atone" (*Aeneid* V 813-15).

12. "With my cross-bow / I shot the albatross" (Coleridge 7). « Souvent, pour s'amuser, les hommes d'équipage / Prennent des albatros, vastes oiseaux des mers, / Qui suivent, indolents compagnons de voyage, / Le navire glissant sur les gouffres amers » (Baudelaire 20).

13. For more information, see Robert Hewison and Adam Piette, chapter 5.

14. Phorbas is a Thessalian who freed the people of Rhodes from a multitude of snakes that had invaded their city. In return they revered him as a god.

15. Here is Connolly's final lyrical outcry in the very last number of *Horizon* (Dec. 1949): "[I]t is closing time in the gardens of the West and from now on an artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude or the quality of his despair" ("Hail and Farewell – II" 219).

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