



**Mario Praz.** *The Romantic Agony*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1933. xxiv + 457 pp.

**Reviewed by** Janine C. Hartman

**Published on** H-Ideas (August, 2000)

[Note: This review is part of the H-Ideas Retrospective Reviews series. This series reviews books published during the twentieth century which have been deemed to be among the most important contributions to the field of intellectual history.]

In 1933 Praz produced this impressionistic and encyclopedic study of romantic or decadent responses to modernity, titled, in Italian, *La carne, la morte, e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*. The preface to the first English edition defines this as "a study of certain states of mind and peculiarities of behavior, which are given a definite direction by various types and themes that recur as insistently as myths engendered in the ferment of blood" (p. vii). This book traced patterns of consciousness in nineteenth century and Renaissance sensibilities. Praz codified the deviant bourgeois imagination in search of the frisson; sex, horror, the supernatural, in chapters with evocative formulations: "the beauty of the Medusa, metamorphoses of Satan, la belle dame sans merci, Byzantium, Swinburne and 'le vice anglais.'" But most importantly, this study of poetry, plays and novels falls under "the shadow of the divine marquis"-the marquis de Sade. Though deploring the infant Sade publishing industry, then under the aegis of French Surrealism, Praz accepts Sade as the myth-maker of the educated erotic sensibility, the imaginative grotesquerie, the advocate of pain for aesthetic appreciation of all experience.

Sade's fantasies of domination and extreme stimulation, set in isolated castles and peopled by masters, victims, and fatal women were the forbidden literature of the nineteenth century middle class, and, with Shakespeare, the chief inspiration for English and French romantic writers. These texts are windows upon writers' obsessions, maps to nightmare. The lineages of the artist's vision, sensation, isolation and suffering so beloved of writers like Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, Charles Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, Gustave Flaubert and many less known stretch back through this thematic sampler into the Gothic, Samuel Richardson's novels of the female menaced, and Irish translations of German ghost stories. Such "outsider" archetypes as the damned poet, vampire, and detective became familiar nineteenth century characters. They were given particular definition and exposure through the new mass market of serial novels in newspapers and magazines, as well as opera and program music. The preoccupation with intensity, concentrated knowledge or feeling, whether transcendence or damnation, is omnipresent. The Romantics invoke it with Hector Berlioz, Franz Liszt, Wagner, celebrate with hallucinatory language like Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*, lapidary diversions like Victor Hugo's *Les Orientales* or Theophile Gautier's *Emaux et Camees*.

Stylized, elegant alienation from life combined with artistic engagement to produce the solitary hero, the poet or dandy, the devouring

woman, the writer as anatomist. By the 1850's these roles existed as life stages for certain talented male (and occasionally) female bourgeois writers, who commoditized their imaginative explorations of bohemia, a dramatized Middle Ages, the Orient (real and embellished) and pharmaceutical alternative consciousness. The middle class that made the Industrial Revolution and new urban civilization also spawned its most earnest critics, and their reading public. Generations of new writers from Keats to Wilde to D'Annunzio lived, and wrote on the extremities of sensuality, drama, and the supernatural for the vicarious excitement of an increasingly trammled bourgeois public.

The overly refined, time-weary writer becomes a cliché by the time Anatole Baju founds "Le Decadent" and British sophomores treasure yellowbacked French novels as "Baedekers of vice." J.K. Huysmans' *A Rebours*, taken as a guide for aspiring aesthetes, is a series of catalogues on interiors, possessions, poses, for "off the shelf" originality. Walter Pater's *Marius The Epicurean* performs the same function for the English. In both cases, possessions signify personality and a nice deployment of language and surfaces substitutes for the examined life.

Praz's broad reading organized and analyzed most images, tropes and experiences defined as romantic or decadent by contemporary practitioners and their enemies. In particular the themes he harvested from literature had great currency in nineteenth century theater, and extraordinary play in painting, twentieth century cinema and popular culture. An historian seeking sources for Gustave Moreau's *Salome*, Irma Vepp, Hugo's *Esmeralda*, or Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* should begin here. Scholars of the horror or supernatural genre will find the basis for Poe's Roderick Usher and Anne Rice's *Vampire Lestat*, as well as every hopeful shock and upgraded Oscar Wildeism present on Gothic websites and television familiar to their undergraduates. This landscape also produced the basis for much of Hugh

Kenner's *Dublin's Joyce*, marrying the aesthetic to the Victorian heroic investigator, an adventurer into the paranormal most recently incarnated in *The X-Files*, according to the Paris daily "Le Monde". The individual confronts the world, life, sensation, and acts or rejects, he believes, always on his own terms. The reader, whether following Balzac's poets, or Don DeLillo's rock star in *Ten Jones Street*, is immersing himself in a print virtual reality and a zeitgeist peculiar to an alienated, leisured, urban class.

A cosmopolitan and increasingly self-conscious society bemused by technology driven change lost emotional certainty in political and religious forms. It expressed these anxieties through Romantic sensibility and a desire to measure and mirror political decadence in cultural mediums, and new rituals and religions; the cult of taste, religion as picaresque, the poet as legislator, transcendence solely as personal gratification. Praz pioneered this particular *geistgeschichte* taking up in 1933 where Gautier had left off. The appetite for intensity, its satisfaction, and purchase, continued into a twentieth and twenty first century.

Nineteenth century Europe's neurasthenia vanished in World War I. It returned in Weimar and Italy, with the literary generation depicted in Martin Green's *Children of the Sun*. Some excellent studies of romanticism mining Praz's critical vein include Jacques Barzun's *Classic, Romantic, Modern*; H. G. Schenk's *The Mind of the European Romantics*, M. H. Abrams' *The Milk of Paradise*, Althea Hayter's *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*, Ellen Moers' *The Dandy*, Morse Peckham's *The Triumph of Romanticism*, Paul Zweig's *The Heresy of Self-Love*, Roger L. Williams' *The Horror of Life*, and Walter Kendrick's *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*. The list could extend much further.

Reissued in the 1950s and 1970, Praz's book influenced important investigations into cultural despair, historical pessimism, Sade, gay and les-

bian studies, womens' studies, Orientalism, the Gothic, criminal and drug pathologies, music, the occult, symbolism, aesthetic Catholicism and suicide. Art historians, literary historians, social historians, and students of urban mentalite build upon Praz's watershed study whenever they attempt to chart the modern personality and its culture's homage to fear, passion, and beauty. Oxford University Press might consider reprinting it for the next generation of "Men in Black" just discovering "spleen, ideals, and sympathetic horror."

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-ideas>

**Citation:** Janine C. Hartman. Review of Praz, Mario. *The Romantic Agony*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. August, 2000.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4423>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.