

Max Brod, “Women and the New Objectivity” (1929)

Abstract

This essay by writer and critic Max Brod (1884-1968) was included in the publication *Die Frau von Morgen, wie wir sie wünschen* [*The Woman of the Future as We Wish Her to Be*] (1929), a collection of writings by exclusively male authors on the changing role and image of women. Today, Brod is perhaps best remembered as Franz Kafka’s literary executor and editor. In the excerpt below, Brod describes his conception of the role women should play in “The New Objectivity” movement; his text is broadly representative of contemporary male attitudes towards the “New Woman.”

Source

Women and the New Objectivity [*Neue Sachlichkeit*]

[...]

Recent literature has taken on an increasingly hard, cold, masculine tone. Exactly the same as modern music, which sounds anti-romantic, anti-sentimental. It is unacceptable either to sing or to speak of love. It is incompatible with “objectivity,” the supreme postulate of the present. This remarkable change of mind is a consequence of the following: since the beginning of the nineteenth century the times have assumed a hard and mechanical form, but writers have adopted a position of protest. Flaubert certainly recognized the mercilessly sober mechanical nature of our epoch, but his heroes (Bovary, like the sentimental Frédéric) grate against the time, for they cannot make themselves conform to the machine. This was in essence the fundamental posture of the writer for decades. He secretly remained the enemy of modern development, of Americanism. The problem arises: have the new writers submitted to it? Have they given up their struggle in the name of the spirit? Has the sober era triumphed once and for all over the last remaining protest?

Love, the desire for love, used to mean a glimpse into the deeper meaning of existence. The passion of a woman magically illuminated interactions that lifted them above the duller senses of simply egoistic relations among people. (What is said here of love applies to all noble passions of the heart, those that strive to surpass daily routine.) As a result of the war, the younger generation justifiably learned to mistrust everything that partook of passions of the heart. Behind so much of what appeared to be lofty passion, behind the beautiful colors of patriotism, *ver sacrum*, nationalist and erotic flights, lay nothing but phrases, lay vexation worse than phrases: the base interests of war profiteers, capitalists conducting politics! It is then understandable that a generation grows up to be disillusioned. Once one has seen with [Erich Maria] Remarque and [Ernst] Glaeser how everything can be reduced to the common denominator of mortal fear and roast goose, once one has experienced such need and the unforgettable degradation of the human creature, then one certainly has the right to regard everything as a swindle—with the single exception of the drive to secure humanity from such abominable fortune in the future.

In a situation so reduced to elemental defense, love and woman and heart and soul have in fact no place. Youth only defends itself; experiences of the heart were always raids of conquest into unknown territory—according to today’s writers then, these experiences were luxury, distraction from the essential goal.

The young writers see only the quotidian—the document, the photograph, the report—objectivity, beyond which there is nothing to conquer, behind which there is no meaning to be sought. Religious

interpretation of any kind appears to them an illusion. (Thus the clear distance between the New Objectivity and the older realism of, for example, Gerhart Hauptmann.) Modern authors fear nothing like they fear illusions. Through illusions we were dragged into war. To abstain from an affirmation of daily life, to see it in its utter hideousness, chaos, immorality—such a posture seems to carry the force of a law. From daily life, regarded as the only reality, behind which there is nothing more real, more benevolent, more loving (more womanly), one can seek distance only through humor and irony. Accordingly, irony becomes the single artistic tool of the youngest generation. In writing as in music.

[...]

Insofar as the content of the New Objectivity includes the destruction of false glorification, it should fulfill its function to the utmost. For from this perspective it is a new impetus and a true beginning, a justified protest of the young against the war-makers and despots who remain at the helm, the outcry and last hope of humanity. But if objectivity means Americanization, a refusal of the heart, of problems, of love, then it is not a protest against war but rather against its result, its continuation and, finally (see the recent German production of Maxwell Anderson's *What Price Glory?*), its approbation. It will be the task of the woman of tomorrow, full of instinct and cleverness, to distinguish the good components of the New Objectivity from the bad. In this task I see her significance, not simply for man and the masculine spirit (which, for the moment, is racing up a dead-end street with its masculine writing), but for the development of a genuine society, one no longer based on exploitation, but rather a true community of nations.

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