

The Romantic Critical Thinking: Theoretical Incoherence of a Unitary Movement

Petru Golban

Namık Kemal University
Email: pgolban@nku.edu.tr

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Abstract *The rise of the expressive theory of authorship in the literary movement that we call Romanticism radicalised the ideas that the artist is a genius and the work of art is autonomous from the actual reality as it results from an imaginary universe which is specific to a certain artist. Romantic emphasis on subjective experience and the disinterestedness of the creative act was also an aspect of its rejection of the principles of Enlightenment and Neoclassicism. Moreover, although time and place specific and emerging in connection to French Revolution and Industrial Revolution, the exponents of Romanticism were escapist rather than rebellious as to attempt the improvement of the social conditions. These are some of the reasons that have made critics regard Romanticism as an artistic not social movement and be reluctant to speak about a Romantic ideology in Marxist terms concerning the socio-historical position of literature, especially when referring to the great Romantic literary criticism expressed in Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Coleridge's Biographia Literaria, and Shelley's Defence of Poetry. These texts represent the main concern of the present study, in relation to which the aim of the study is twofold: first, to discern among the ideas and principles regarding the origin of poetry, its subject-matter and language, the role of the poet, and poetic imagination, and, second, to present the ways in which these ideas are materialised or not in literary practice, namely in Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey and Shelley's To a Skylark.*

Keywords: *Romanticism, literary theory and criticism, creative writing.*

1. Introduction

In its long developmental process before the twentieth century, the most spectacular if not important changes in literary theory occurred during the Romantic period. Romanticism as a movement consisting of both innovative literary theory and experimentation in literary practice broke at the end of the eighteenth century the linearity of the aesthetic attitude in the Western world dominated for centuries by the revived since Renaissance ancient tradition, rules of the classics, the ideas of *mimesis*, *catharsis* and *utile et dulce*. Since then, the critical tradition which is focused on both Romantic literary criticism and literary practice has continuously raised debates on, among other things, the social implications of the Romantic writing and the unity of Romanticism as creative experience and literary doctrine.

Coexisting with different reactionary political attitudes, the rise of nationalism, a political revolution in France – acclaimed by the Romantics, except the German ones, as providing the freedom of individual and abolition of authority – and an industrial one in Britain – rejected as a way to human regimentation – it “has been a fruitful approach in recent criticism” to speak about the politics or ideology of Romantic literature, to regard it as a social movement, to view the Romantic Hero as a political rebel, so as to set “Romanticism in the context of contemporary exchanges about them – and examining such exchanges for what their figures of speech, and sexual allusions, as well as political allusions, may reveal about how the literary work in question accords or conflicts with established discourses and interests” (Chase, 1993, p. 31). M. H. Abrams is more drastic and considers that the Romantic writers are to be viewed as “political and social poets”, that “to a degree without parallel, even among major Victorian poets, these writers [Romantics] were obsessed with the realities of their era”, and that it is “a peculiar injustice that Romanticism is often described as a mode of escapism, an evasion of the shocking changes, violence, and ugliness attending the emergence of the modern industrial and political world” (Abrams, 1970, p. 101).

However, there is also a strong reluctance to speak about a Romantic ideology in Marxist terms

concerning the socio-historical position of literature. For such critics Romanticism is first of all a cultural revolution and a unified movement, a strong literary tradition which gave birth within its system to a number of literary concerns themselves established as traditions because of the recurrence of certain thematic perspectives in the Romantic writings. Among them, dualism of existence, escapism and rebelliousness, the revival of the national culture, new feelings for nature, the emphasis on imagination and inspiration, the return to the experience of childhood, and especially the exploration of the complex range of emotional and psychological issues as to render the individuality as the most important aspect of human personality. In this respect comes to the mind the famous Rene Wellek's definition of the Romantic poets as authors who "see the implication of imagination, symbol, myth and organic nature, and see it as a part of the great endeavour to overcome the split between subject and object, the self and the world, the conscious and the unconscious" (Wellek, 1963, p. 220), which is the central creed of all the major Romantic writers.

It is then perhaps more proper to understand Romanticism "aesthetically, as a theory about the nature and origin of art" (Butler, 1981, p. 8) and to identify "literature with philosophy [which] appears in Romanticism not only in the emergence of German Romanticism in response to Kant, and in the Jena Romantics' conception of literature as containing its own criticism. It has been for Romantics and their readers a way of describing a kind of truth value or truth effect of poetry." (Chase, 1993, p. 15)

Concerning the second issue about the unity of Romanticism, and influenced by Arthur Oncken Lovejoy's *Essays in the History of Ideas* (1948), there are many critics who view Romanticism not as a "coherent movement or period in Western literature, thought and culture – it was too contradictory, with too many forms and tensions, to be known by one name" (Bahti, 2001, p. 32).

It may be true, but in relation to literary practice rather than to literary criticism. In Romanticism, more than in other periods and movements, the critics created an extraordinary unity of concerns, mainly centred on poetry and most of which related to the issue of author. Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*, among others, although different and often contradictory in conceptions and argumentation, focus on imagination, intuition, sensibility and emotions of the poet, his status and role, as well as on origin, language, and purpose of poetry, and on the 'organicity' of the work of literature, and on a number of dichotomies such as dream and reality, good and evil, childhood and maturity, and on other concepts of the Romantic critical theory. Among the unifying principles stands the reaction against the neoclassicism of Boileau, Pope, and others. The tone was given again by René Wellek: "we must recognize that we can speak of a general European Romantic movement only if we take a wide over-all view and consider simply the general rejection of the neoclassical creed as a common denominator" (Wellek, 1955, p. 2).

Speaking solely about literary criticism, undoubtedly the Romantics achieved the quantitative and first of all qualitative advancement of critical theory in Britain towards its contemporary standing. First, with Romanticism, the "ancient connection between poetry and rhetoric is finally broken with the result that poetry is now a mainly personal experience" (Day, 2008, p. 225). Before Romantic period, literature was critically and theoretically conceived as true to nature, as having a public role, as a promoter of values, a cultivator of taste, but now it has become a private matter. The task of criticism has diversified to cover the endeavour to connect this private aspect with the public arena, "to give the private experience a public resonance when the relation between them is in crisis" (Day, 2008, p. 226). It is this cultural reality and the fact that Romanticism on the whole was a new type of literature that in Romanticism the idea of criticism received a status of special importance, first by German contribution, closely followed by British poet-critics, especially Coleridge. The Romantic writer-critics marked "the transition from deduction to induction, which is from a normative and prescriptive aesthetics to the study of poetics, of the concrete laws and norms which the poet himself lays in front of him" (Urnov, 1979, p. 5). The result is a great number of theoretical assumptions about literature, of which some have current applicability and effectiveness, among which "the idea of 'organic form' and the inseparability of form and content, and the conception of good poetry as the fusion between thought and feeling" (Chase, 1993, p. 1).

2. The Unity of Concern and the Disunity of Approach in Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley

In Europe the eighteenth century was the period of Enlightenment and classical authority, and one of the most important unifying principles in Romanticism is the reaction against classical and neoclassical views. The reaction manifested in philosophy or critical thinking and in artistic practice, many of the great Romantics being artist-critics or writer-critics.

Romanticism had its origins in Germany and soon became a wide-ranging European movement that manifested in most countries, including Britain, whereas French Romanticism emerged late, since in France the influence of classicism lasted longer than in the rest of Europe. In Germany, the major source of the most important Romantic conceptions, the new philosophy and literary theory were produced "by poets like Goethe and Schiller, by journal-critics like Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel (especially in their journal, the *Athenaeum*), and by academic philosophers like Kant, Schelling, Schopenhauer and Hegel. The last group was especially significant, in that the advent of German idealist philosophy impacted very directly upon Romantic literary theory" (Harland, 1999, p. 61).

In Britain, the major exponents of Romantic criticism are William Wordsworth with his Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Samuel Taylor Coleridge with *Biographia Literaria* (1817), and Percy Bysshe Shelley with *A Defence of Poetry* (1821). These writers are also the main representatives of English Romantic literary practice, together with William Blake, George Gordon, Lord Byron, and John Keats.

Like in the rest of Europe, in Britain, apart from being a reaction against classical and neoclassical principles, the Romantic critical theory was yet a continuation of some classical views, as well as an attempt at critical and theoretical originality. And the term 'Romantic ideology', first coined and used by Jerome McGann in *The Romantic Ideology: a Critical Investigation* (1983), may be then applied to refer, as McGann does, to the Romantic literary theory and criticism containing a wide range of concerns, among which of primary importance stands the creative personality of the artist, and where "the scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated by a Romantic Ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations" (McGann, 1983, p. 1).

Romanticism means individualism and the literary practice focuses on the individual experience (emotional and psychological) and literary theory on the poet. In his celebrated book *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), M. H. Abrams shows that the Romantic period adds to the two existing since Antiquity critical theories on art – the mimetic and the pragmatic ones – a third one which is the expressive theory of authorship. The major critical concern is now the poet in that the producer of art has moved to the centre of critical attention, the true function of art being the communication and expression of the artist. In Romanticism, art "becomes subjective rather than objective, and intuitive rather than rationally planned", which is remarkably shown by Abrams when he considers that for Romantics the work of art resembles a lamp, "which throws out images originating not in the world but in the poet", whereas for the classicists it "resembles a mirror, which is passively mimetic or reproductive of existing reality" (Butler, 1981, p. 7). The emphasis is placed on human individuality and personality, on psychology, emotional states, inner world, and intimacy. The intimacy is "the consciousness of the Romantic period" which "became accustomed to the inner antagonism, simultaneous contrast of values, as well as to recurrence and redundancy" (Durand, 1998, p. 220).

The emphasis on author in Romanticism gave rise to new manners of writing, such as the confession, which, as "the revelation of an authentic authorial voice, identity, or experience", becomes "one of the dominant models of literary production" (Bennett, 2006, p. 50). Concerning the audience of the Romantic authors, to whom they address their confession, it is human society, as for Shelley, or humanity in general, as for Friedrich Schlegel, who declares in his *Critical Fragments* (1797) that 'every honest author writes for nobody or everybody' and that the author who writes only for a particular group 'does not deserve to be read'. In this respect, regarding the role of the critic, the Romantic literary theory changes the perspective from the concern with the audience and the effects of literature on its receiver to the concern with the author and his

relation to the creative act. According to the Romantic theory, the literary work is autonomous and contains a hidden reality, the task of criticism being to reveal this reality. The relationship between the poet and text came thus to replace the relationship of the text to reader, and the critic was required to live in the spirit of the author, to become his servant and friend, to better disclose the literary values. This Romantic critical perspective of tracing the literary work back to its origins in the experience of the poet, as a part of the expressive theory of authorship, influenced much of the nineteenth century criticism and theory on poetry, as, for instance, the method of the French theorist Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, which is the biographical approach involving discussion of both the work and life of the author.

The Romantic poets confer, thus, major significations to individual consciousness, and in doing so they lay emphasis on imagination, considering it to be the noblest of human faculties. The Romantic writers and philosophers create a remarkable complexity of the conceptions about the author and poetic imagination, including them into a larger domain of debates on the subject-matter of poetry, language of poetry, origin and purpose of poetry, and act of artistic creation in general, as well as on nature and human spirit, reality and intuition, myth and religion, symbol and metaphor.

For Wordsworth, the subject-matter of poetry is a complex endeavour, consisting of 'incidents and situations from common life', 'ordinary things', 'humble and rustic life', 'the essential passions of the heart', 'our elementary feelings', 'the manners of rural life', 'rural occupations', 'passions of men', 'the beautiful and permanent forms of nature'. When he brings into discussion the language to be used in poetry, Wordsworth is likewise multifaceted in his discourse, speaking about 'a selection of language really used by men', 'a plainer and more emphatic language', 'feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions', 'a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language', 'a figure of speech occasionally prompted by passion', 'the language of a large portion of every good poem, (...) except with reference to the metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose, but likewise (...) the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written'. About imagination, it is necessary 'to throw over them [aspects of rural life] a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect'. The purpose of poetry, according to Wordsworth, is that 'the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified'; 'whatever passions he [poet] communicates to his Reader, those passions (...) should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure'. Finally, when defining and speaking about the origin of poetry, for Wordsworth 'poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity'.

Unlike for Wordsworth, for Coleridge the subject-matter of poetry represents 'the incidents and agents [that] were to be, in part at least, supernatural', 'persons and characters supernatural, or at least Romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith'. Concerning the language of poetry, Coleridge points to an 'artificial arrangement (...) by metre, or by rhyme, or by both conjointly', where 'a particular pleasure is found in anticipating the recurrence of sounds and quantities'. About imagination: 'It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead'; 'a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (...) fuses, each [part] into each', 'magical power (...), first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control, (...) reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant' qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative (...). Here emerges Coleridge's theory of Secondary or Poetic Imagination as opposite to Primary Imagination and Fancy. The purpose of poetry, claims Coleridge, is solely 'pleasure, not truth (...) from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part'. Consequently, the definition of poetry is that 'a poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not

truth; and from all other species – (having this object in common with it) – it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part'. Apart from his theory of imagination, Coleridge is acclaimed for the organic model applied to literary form which he borrows from August Wilhelm Schlegel and according to which the literary image, the literary work, and the whole literary activity of a writer are organic, subjects to organic rules, being born and growing like living organisms, particularly vegetation.

A total different consideration on the subject-matter of poetry comes from Shelley, for whom it is 'life expressed in its eternal truth', representing the 'unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator'; '[poetry] is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature'. Language of poetry is also an important concern: 'language, colour, form, and religious and civil habits of action, are all the instruments and materials of poetry'; 'poetry in a more restricted sense expresses those arrangements of language, and especially metrical language, which are created by that imperial faculty, whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man'; 'language is arbitrarily produced by the imagination, and has relation to thoughts alone'; 'the regular mode of the recurrence of harmony in the language of poetical minds, together with its relation to music, produced metre, or a certain system of traditional forms of harmony and language. Yet it is by no means essential that a poet should accommodate his language to this traditional form, so that the harmony, which is its spirit, be observed. (...) every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification'. For Shelley, imagination is at work when 'mind acting upon those thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity', and 'the great instrument of moral good is the imagination'. Like other Romantics, Shelley pays special attention to the purpose of poetry: 'poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight'; 'auditors (...) are moved and softened'; 'poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man'; 'poetry acts in (...) diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought'; 'poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents'; 'poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man'. In defining poetry, Shelley considers a poem to be 'the expression of the imagination', and that 'a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth'; 'a poem (...) is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator, which is itself the image of all other minds'; 'poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted'.

Although the three critical texts – Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* – belong to the representatives of one literary movement, they reveal differences in both content and form.

On the thematic level, the texts share common concerns – such as the subject matter of poetry, the language of poetry, the purpose of poetry, and others – of which the status of the poet is the new and the most discussed topic, especially the concern with the poet's imagination. However, the perspectives of approach to these concerns are different: the poet, for example, is discussed by Wordsworth on the premises of his emotional experience; Coleridge's perspective is philosophical as well as psychological; and Shelley discusses the poet from a neoclassical perspective, which is in universal terms and with strong moral considerations.

Also, the critics differ in matters of originality of their ideas, in the different degrees of accepting or rejecting the established critical tradition of the classics that has been revived and institutionalized as neoclassical. In this respect, most of Wordsworth's critical ideas emerge as a strong reaction against the neoclassical ones, especially those on subject-matter of poetry, language of poetry, and definition and origin of poetry. Coleridge is rather original – in relation to neoclassicism but not to contemporary German philosophy and critical theory – in many of his critical ideas, in particular about subject matter of poetry,

imagination, the purpose of poetry, and definition and origin of poetry. Shelley the critic, unlike the rebellious and radical Shelley the poet, shows his alliance to the ancient and neoclassical aesthetic doctrine, namely through his ideas on subject-matter, definition, origin, and purpose of poetry.

Concerning the form, Wordsworth's Preface is acclaimed for its density of ideas, direct and plain style, and persuasive manner. However, the text, in many of its parts, seems rather disorganised and loose in the presentation of ideas which receive little argumentation, the critic often returning to the same concern and giving different if not contradictory ideas on the same matter. Such is the case about the language of poetry, or about the origin of poetry, where Wordsworth starts the discussion with the aim to reject some neoclassical principles only to return afterwards with explanations and additions as if understanding that the original view is wrong, naive, or lacks sufficient argumentation.

It is interesting to see that when returning to some previous ideas, Wordsworth either introduces neoclassical principles or develops original and valid theories. For instance, against the neoclassical principles of decorum and poetic diction, the language of poetry is first simple, plain, and close to that of prose, but, later in Wordsworth's text, it is also philosophical and open to different stylistic devices. Another example: poetry, as defined at the beginning of the Preface, is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, and a few pages later, returning to the idea, Wordsworth develops a highly original theory on the origin of poetry, stating that this is not enough, the emotions experienced earlier must be recollected in a special, poetic state of tranquillity, this theory being materialised in his poetic practice, as, for instance, it is expressed as a major theme in *Tintern Abbey*. It is interesting to notice that in the returning to his earlier stated ideas and in their further development or cancellation by contradictory statements stands Wordsworth's real merit as a literary critic.

Unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge's critical discourse is much better organized, more academic and methodological. It seems that with great range of learning and remarkable sense of critical detachment, Coleridge has realized the importance of literary criticism, its utility and necessity, and its rise as a distinct discipline. Conscious of the need for a methodological basis for such a discipline, the method is borrowed from philosophy, as Coleridge, himself a philosopher, influenced, in particular, by the contemporary German idealist philosophy, has truly conceived of philosophy as the mother of all disciplines and of the philosophical method as universally applicable, including in the field of literary theory and criticism.

Shelley, on the other hand, writes his essay in a poetic style with figures of speech and ornamentation of the phrases, in some of its parts the essay being a true poem in prose, where, for instance, the poet is 'a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician'.

In the Romantic period, literary criticism became more important and critics self-conscious of their task, because criticism was needed to prove the validity of Romanticism as a new type of literature which broke the linearity of the literary development dominated by the revived classical tradition. Romantic criticism was the promoter and representative of a new literary sensibility, and thus – like the criticism of Renaissance, Restoration, and neoclassicism – the voice of a movement, and as such subjective, prescriptive and defensive, perhaps to a higher degree than the previous periods, given the aim to develop and implement a whole new type of literature in a cultural background still sensible to neoclassical mentality. Truly, the great majority of the Romantic critical ideas originated as a reaction against neoclassical principles (in Wordsworth), although some neoclassical ideas prove their validity in the context of the new Romantic doctrine which rejects the previous one (in Shelley). However, there is also a strong tendency towards originality of approach while attempting at establishing methodologies of the critical discourse (in Coleridge).

Moreover, there is a strong tendency towards originality of concern, as Romantic aesthetic attitude has developed a number of new critical topics or subject-matters, the focus now being on imagination, inspiration, feeling, emotion, sensibility, and psychological insights into the poetic mind. All of them are reified through the concentration on particular literary texts, often combined with attempts at theoretical speculation (such as the theory of imagination) and development of new concepts (such as 'Secondary Imagination' by Coleridge,

'Negative Capability' by Keats, and 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' by Wordsworth).

And all of them point to the fact that the major critical concern is the poet, that the producer of art has moved to the centre of critical attention, the true function of art being now the expression of the artist's own subjective and psychological states. It is what made Abrams formulate the 'expressive theory' as a new critical theory of art coming into existence with Romanticism after the long dominance of the mimetic and pragmatic ones, which Victorian period would add to the existing typology a number of others, including the objective theory.

3. Materialising Theory: the Compatibility and Discrepancy between Romantic Critical Thinking and Literary Practice in Wordsworth and Shelley

In Romanticism, some of the writer-critics, like Shelley, and similar to earlier critics Sidney, Dryden, and Johnson, developed critical ideas based on a respectable classical tradition; others, like Coleridge, were more original and innovative in their critical theories. For some, like for Shelley, criticism was a means of defending the aesthetic value of literature; for others, criticism represented the instrument to be used in an attempt to introduce into the contemporary culture and to validate a whole new literary movement, as for Wordsworth and Coleridge.

These were also those writer-critics who used, or rather materialised, their own literary theories in their literary texts, such as Wordsworth reifying his theory of the origin of poetry from the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in his poem *Tintern Abbey*, or Shelley exemplifying by his literary practice some of his theories. According to McGann, the works of the Romantic poets are deeply involved with and affected by the ideologies of Romanticism, and they have even been used by the writers to perpetuate these ideologies (i.e. Romantic critical thinking), where "Romantic poetry incorporates Romantic Ideology as a drama of the contradictions which are inherent to that ideology" (McGann, 1983, p. 2).

Indeed, more than in other periods and movements, in Romanticism literary criticism gave the impression of being greatly dependent on literary practice, each Romantic author being involved in a kind of 'co-authorship' as writer and critic. Rather than being concerned with evaluation of particular literary works, the Romantic critics rejected most of the classical ideas, yet revived some of them, while also developing new and fundamental ideas on art and literature. However, like in Shelley, the new ideas were presented excessively in general terms, going beyond the limits of the act of literary creation. Coleridge, introducing the highly important concept of 'organicity', also showed that this idea is difficult to apply into practice when approaching particular literary texts. Wordsworth, in his celebrated Preface, speculates on the nature of poetry and shows the ways in which poetry may possibly be produced. This aspect is remarkably shown in his literary practice, namely in *Tintern Abbey*, a poem that reveals or deconstructs its own process of composition.

First, Wordsworth's literary practice, in particular *The Prelude* and its shorter version *Tintern Abbey*, comes to show the fact that the only major theme of his poetry is his own subjectivity, his individual emotional experience and states of mind. More exactly with reference to these two poems, the theme is the growth of the poet's/poetic mind, the development of imagination, his experiences of sense, feeling and thought, following Locke's theories, and, expressing a Romantic attitude, the growth of mind and imagination is in close interaction with nature and countryside, as for most critics, but also, as for Paul de Man in *Time and History in Wordsworth*, in the relationship to personal and historical time (De Man, 1993, pp. 55-77). In a kind of autobiographical proto-Bildungsroman, Wordsworth expresses a common Romantic experience of disclosing the development of the poet's own consciousness, raising it to the level of universality and making it seem representative for the entire human condition. The emotion is extremely important in the formation of personality as it is crucial to the poem: it gives significance to the action and setting, and, if powerful enough, it would reveal with religious force the workings of the human heart. Again, one may notice here the contradictory exposition of his critical ideas, in that the sudden overflow of powerful feelings is not enough for

poetic composition, since emotions, experienced earlier, must be later recollected in a state of tranquillity and pass into the mind as 'elevated thoughts', which is expressed in *Tintern Abbey* and other Wordsworth's poems.

Many of Wordsworth's critical ideas emerge as a rejection of the neoclassical principles, and, since there are no other theories to apply instead, many of them lack a systemic or logical coherence of reasoning. Bringing into discussion the subject-matter of poetry, against the neoclassical concern with 'human nature', Wordsworth identifies countryside, nature, and feelings as the three distinct aspects of the thematic concern: first, 'incidents and situations from common life', 'humble and rustic life', 'rural life'; second, 'the beautiful and permanent forms of nature'; third, 'essential passions of the heart', 'elementary feelings', and 'passions of men'. These three thematic concerns do not exist separately one from another, but represent a unity of interrelated and interdependent aspects, where elementary feelings, unaltered by 'social vanity', stand as the dominant and the most important of all the elements of the subject-matter of poetry, their source being the rustic life and their highest expression and embodiment being the natural objects.

Wordsworth's literary practice materialises his conception, where in *Tintern Abbey* nature and rural life are symbiotically united – 'these pastoral farms,/Green to the very door' – and represent the source of poet's emotions, a necessary state prior to poetic composition:

These beautiful forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration: – feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure

In most parts, however, there is little consensus between Wordsworth's literary theory and literary practice, and Wordsworth's best poetry is that which departs as far as possible from his own theories of what poetry should be, in particular concerning the subject-matter and the language of poetry. *Tintern Abbey*, his long autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, and most of his other poems also clearly show that the main thematic concern of his poetry is the poet's own subjective experience, his feelings and states of mind, rather than nature and countryside. Wordsworth constantly writes himself into his poetry and his apprehension of the universe is purely personal. Wordsworth's best poetry renders the growth of the poet's own consciousness, the interrelated theme being the nature's and countryside's role in this growth of individual mind.

Wordsworth's ideas on the subject-matter of poetry merge in the Preface with those on the language of poetry, which should be also found in the 'humble and rustic life', in which people speak 'a plainer and a more emphatic language'. Against the neoclassical decorum and poetic diction, it is necessary, insists Wordsworth, 'to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men'. Also, in Wordsworth's opinion, the language of poetry allows no sharp differences from the language of prose: 'the language of a large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose, but likewise that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written.'

One may point here to a contradictory expression of ideas about the language of poetry, in that the language 'really used by men', 'a plainer and a more emphatic' one, a language that would not differ from the language of prose, is actually required to be 'a more permanent and a far more philosophical language' and even made complex, 'dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures', or, at least, 'a figure of

speech occasionally prompted by passion, and I have made use of them [figures of speech] as such; but have endeavoured utterly to reject them as a mechanical device of style, or as a family language which Writers in metre seem to lay claim to by prescription.'

In Romanticism, as a reaction against the neoclassical emphasis on reason and common sense, poets gave value to imagination as the most important human faculty, the primary and the actual creative principle in poetic activity. Likewise, Wordsworth regards imagination as the creative principle which, when used by the poets, would modify the simple and common aspects of life, chosen as the subject matter, where 'ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature.'

As it is expressed in the Preface, the purpose of poetry is to teach, purify the soul, and improve morally the human being: 'the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified'. To this, Wordsworth also adds the principle of pleasure: 'whatever passions he [the poet] communicates to his Reader, those passions, if his Reader's mind be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure'.

Bringing into discussion the nature of the poet, Wordsworth offers one of the most famous definitions of poetry and a very interesting conception about its origin, claiming that all good poetry is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', to which later in the Preface he adds the idea that the emotion, experienced earlier, should be 'recollected in tranquillity':

Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind and in whatever degree, from various causes is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will upon the whole be in a state of enjoyment.

This theory of origin of poetry is also materialised in his own poetry, the poem *Tintern Abbey*, from one interpretative perspective, apart from its themes of nature, memory, and the growing poetic mind, clearly revealing, or rather representing in itself, the poetic activity in progress, a poem about writing a poem, a poem disclosing, or deconstructing, its own process of composition.

Five years ago, the poet visited for the first time the beautiful place near Tintern Abbey, where he experienced that 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' because he was in his youth in which everything was to him 'an appetite; a feeling and a love'. Now, revisiting the place five years later, which is the moment of the composition of the poem, the poet is in his maturity in which he has lost the ability to experience powerful feelings but has acquired another one, 'of aspect more sublime', which is that of 'elevated thoughts' and rationalizing.

At the present moment, governed by mind not heart, and being offered by nature and countryside that special poetic mood based on tranquillity, the poet's 'picture of the mind revives again' and consequently the emotion experienced five years ago is now 'recollected', remembered, re-experienced, leading to the act of poetic creation, that is, to the actual composition of the poem entitled *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour. July 13, 1798*.

Wordsworth's critical text shows that his ideas on poetry define the major characteristics of the Romantic poetry in general, and that they originate mainly as a rejection of the key neoclassical principles while demonstrating the validity of the new, Romantic type of literature.

Unlike Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, in his essay entitled *A Defence of Poetry*, relies heavily on the classical heritage. A non-conformist in real life, a rebel and radical in literary practice, the creator of *Prometheus Unbound* shows himself to be a traditionalist in critical thinking. This is justified by the fact that Shelley came to write his essay as a reply to the article entitled *The Four Ages of Poetry*, in which his friend

Thomas Love Peacock argues that poetry has become useless, and that the modern mind must turn instead to scientific and technological concerns. Shelley conceived his essay as an answer to this article, which offered him the opportunity to express his own ideas on imagination, poet, language and purpose of poetry.

The purpose of poetry is, actually, the main critical concern, since Shelley attempts to defend the value of poetry and of imaginative literature, in general, against the rising industrial culture. The purpose of poetry, as attributed by Shelley, considers a wide spectrum of social and moral implications, already expressed and argued about in the traditional background of classical literature since Horace's *utile et dulce*. Likewise, throughout his essay, Shelley associates poetry with social freedom and defends its status as a moral benefactor for the community, insisting on the social function of poetry, on one hand, through imagination, 'to produce the moral improvement of man', and, on the other hand, to award learning and pleasure, as it offers to reader 'the wisdom which is mingled with its delight'. Also, poetry acts in 'diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents.'

Shelley's text reveals the continuation of some neoclassical views, such as the purpose of poetry to teach, delight, and strengthen the ethical values, or the subject-matter of poetry being 'the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator', or the definition of poetry: 'A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth'. Apart from that, Shelley embraces many of the new Romantic ideas and even develops original critical opinions.

As a Romantic writer, Shelley expands together with Wordsworth and Coleridge the expressive theory of authorship and emphasises the importance of imagination; poetry, the way Shelley conceived of it, is the expression of imagination. Like for other Romantic critics, imagination is for Shelley the most important human power and the main artistic principle for the poet, the most resourcefully creative, unifying, and ordering principle in the act of creation, but Shelley's approach to imagination reveals also a neoclassical perspective with clear social and moral implications regarding, first of all, its function to improve the man, for imagination is 'the great instrument of moral good':

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thought of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void for ever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb.

An example of original critical thought, which also goes against the classical view of art as *mimesis*, would be Shelley's ideas on the language of poetry, which, in his opinion, 'is arbitrarily produced by imagination and has relations to thoughts alone', that is, the word has no equivalent, or referent in reality, and represents the textual expression of the poet's thoughts and feelings, or any of the poet's ideas that are produced and exist only in his mind without being reflections of reality. Moreover, against the classical tradition emphasising the rules of poetic composition, the poet is free to deviate from tradition and innovate it, especially in matters of harmony and musicality of the verse:

An observation of the regular mode of the recurrence of harmony in the language of poetical minds, together with its relation to music, produced metre, or a certain system of traditional forms of harmony and language. Yet it is by no means essential that a poet should accommodate his language to this traditional form, so that the harmony, which is its spirit, be observed. The practice is indeed convenient and popular, and to be preferred, especially in such composition as includes much action: but every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification.

The idea about the harmony and the music of the verse is materialised by Shelley in his own poetic practice, as in the musicality of *To a Skylark*, in which the poet defines poetry as 'harmonious madness'. Like Wordsworth materialising his theory of the origin of poetry in *Tintern Abbey*, Shelley expresses his views of poetic language in *To a Skylark*. In this poem, the bird is 'blithe Spirit! Bird thou never wert'. The skylark neither exists in reality to be 'imitated' in the art of poetry nor is described as a material presence in the text. It is the creation of the poet's mind, the poet imagining such a creature somewhere above him in the sky and being able only to hear its music, its song representing 'profuse strains of unpremeditated art'.

This experience allows Shelley to engage into the complex Romantic representation of nature ranging from its expression as pure spirit, perfect beauty and superior form of art to its consideration as the ultimate source of inspiration and even as divinity, 'from Heaven, or near it', in the tradition of Romantic Pantheism.

Moreover, Shelley's opinion that the language of poetry 'is arbitrarily produced by imagination and has relations to thoughts alone' allows him to conceive of the skylark and its song as the substance of the realm of non-reality which stands above the reality of the human world, which is the world of the 'mortals', inferior to the supreme world of the skylark's music. Both reality and non-reality, both human, mortal world and the spiritual world of nature are the two distinct parts of the Romantic 'dualism of existence'. In its framework, the poet assumes through his lyrical I a place between the worlds, an intermediary position between reality of the humans and the non-reality of the skylark. In this position, the poet is at once an inspired bard, when the skylark is viewed as an artist of superior status, and a prophet, when the skylark is ranked to divinity:

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
The world should listen then – as I am listening now.

Be they bound to classical tradition, or expressing Romanticism, or being original, Shelley's critical ideas have one particular task and are directed to one end – to demonstrate the utility of poetry and defend its aesthetic validity as well as social and moral function – which make Shelley's criticism to be one of the most 'defensive' texts in English critical thinking.

Other English Romantic writer-critics also materialise their theories in their own literary practice, as for instance Coleridge with his organic principle in literature. An 'organicist' in literary criticism, Coleridge speaks about the developing itself from within, by an internal energy, like a growing plant, 'organic form' of the literary work. For Coleridge, the mode of operation of imagination – whose 'shaping and modifying power' is different from the associative power of fancy – is compared to the biological (organic) growth, and a poem expresses its organic form which results from the immediate employment of secondary imagination, and which is illustrated by the poetic techniques involving, in particular, special use of language. In Coleridge's literary practice, an example would be the introduction of the ample cadence of the anapaest among the iambs in *Christabel*. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge also discusses the importance and role of meter and rhyme in a poem, mentioning that nothing 'can permanently please which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise'. Coleridge theories of the organic form, growth and the interrelatedness of parts and the whole in literature influenced much of contemporary and later critical theory, as to mention just Poe, Henry James, and the New Critics who especially emphasised 'organicism' and extended it from literary form to philosophical context.

4. Conclusion

The Romantic critical theory has a threefold perspective of development, emerging from an attempt at critical and theoretical originality, or as a reaction against classical and neoclassical principles, or as a continuation

of some classical views (at least their reinterpretation).

William Wordsworth, first in the line of the great Romantic critics, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* defends the literary validity of a new type of poetry and attempts its implementation in the contemporary cultural background against the neoclassical doctrine. Like Fielding before and Woolf after him, Wordsworth uses criticism to justify his own literary practice and implicitly the general type of imaginative writing the writer-critic belongs to. Most of Wordsworth's critical ideas emerge as a reaction against neoclassicism, namely the Augustan emphasis on reason, rules, imitation, and decorum. They can be summarised as follows: the object of poetry is to 'choose incidents and situations from common life', written in a 'selection of language really used by men', where there is 'no essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition', the poet being a 'man speaking to men' and poetry 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' originating in 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' and having the purpose to enlighten 'the understanding of the reader' and to strengthen and purify his/her 'affections'.

Disturbing the balance of *utile* and *dulce* in favour of the latter is the less subjective and defensive Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* with its more philosophical, 'scientific' and methodological attempts to define literature. Coleridge is to the present acclaimed for his theory of 'Secondary' or poetic imagination in contrast to 'Primary Imagination' and fancy, and for his theory of the 'organicity' of literature.

Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* focuses on the nature and role of poetry and imagination, mainly with regards to their 'effects upon society' and 'the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man'. In spite of its subjective and defensive tone, and its lyrical and ornamented style, Shelley's text represents a major development in critical writing, in particular due to its theories of language and its aesthetic effect, the idea of 'defamiliarisation' and that of 'impersonality', the relationship between conscious, unconscious, language, and reality. The main critical concern of these authors is the literary field, even though they also delivered "political and social commentary in the form of prose-pamphlets, essays, speeches, editorials, or sermons; and all exhibit an explicit or submerged concern with the contemporary historical and intellectual situation in the greater part of their verses, narrative, dramatic, and lyric, long and short" (Abrams, 1970, p. 102).

As writer-critics, the Romantics focus primarily on literature and, among the literary issues, the inner experience of the poet is an essential concern in Romanticism, everything written on literature evolving implicitly around the idea of authorship. As Coleridge made it clear in *Biographia Literaria*, and what became a major critical principle, the evaluation of the literary work must be performed in the same way in which the author creates it. It is one of those new critical horizons opened by Romanticism which led to the rise of the expressive theory of authorship. A modern invention having its origin in the Romantic view on art and literature, according to Michel Foucault (in *What Is an Author?*, 1969), this idea postulates that the author is an all-powerful creator of the text, and for this reason the text should be explained by investigating the life and thinking of the author. Romantics reject thus the classical critical perspective, which considers the relation between the work and the audience, and emphasise instead the relation between the work and the poet. The real meaning of the text, Romantic critics argue, results not from its relation to the receiver but from the attentive study of its relation to the author, the real creator of the meaning. For the Romantic writer-critics, the author is a person apart, an individual whose imagination and sensibility make him different from the others, and the text expresses the author, his inside, subjectivity and self-consciousness.

Moreover, focusing now on aesthetic criteria, the Romantic writer-critics debated on literature in relation to literature, searching for and adding to literary practice a number of theoretical considerations as well as prescriptions concerning the aims and possibilities of literature, among which those that literature did not possess yet. Coleridge, in particular, like Schlegel brothers, realised that "literary criticism is impossible without 'theory' and 'principles'", just like "literary history is impossible without applying certain 'foreign comparisons'" (Marino, 1998, p. 14). True writer-critics, the Romantics emphasised the text in itself but also the relation of the text to the poet and in consequence developed the expressive theory of authorship, considering the work to be the expression of the author's own emotional and psychological states. However,

although to a lesser degree, the classical, Aristotelian views of the work's effects upon reader were also not forgotten, since Wordsworth's ideas about poetry as teaching and delighting and his "view of poetry as 'heightened sensation' or Coleridge's dictum of the 'suspension of disbelief' both appeal to the relation of reader and text, rather than to features of text in isolation" (Cook, 1995, p. 174).

The importance of Romanticism in the development of literary criticism results from the fact that the Romantic aesthetic doctrine conferred to criticism a more scientific and theoretical nature, developed new critical concerns, searched and established methodology. Although many Romantic critical ideas have been rejected by the next generations of critics, the Romantic Movement in Europe has been the primary source for many twentieth century critical concepts and principles. To mention just Coleridge's view of the 'organic form' of poetry, which becomes an important concept in New Criticism, and his speculation about the poetic form which consists of the whole and the parts, which prefigures the Formalist approach.

Romantic criticism developed into a literary doctrine consisting of a complex range of theoretical and practical ideas and principles reifying the concerns, especially, with the status and role of the poet, as well as the definition and origin of poetry, subject matter of poetry, relationship of poetry to nature and mind, language of poetry, imagination and inspiration, and the purpose and function of poetry.

The differences of approach to these concerns which are common to most Romantic critics are the result of the fact that some Romantic ideas on art emerge as a rejection of the classical and neoclassical ones, but some of them remain to be neoclassical, whereas others are original. These differences correspond also to the distinct conceptions of individual writer-critics and apply to contradictory, even hardly adequate, definitions about one and the same critical concern. The function of art, for instance, is conceived in the classical way as *utile et dulce*; nevertheless, the Romantic "criterion of pleasure or expressive emotion leads to some kind of art for art's sake formula, or to the sentimentalism which Mill still shared and which marks the shift in sensibility from Neoclassic to Romantic" (Hartman, 1993, p. 47). It is one of the reasons for the statement that Romanticism gave aestheticism, symbolism and impressionism which further developed into modernism.

As Romanticism represents the invention of modern poetry, the Romantics are truly writer-critics prefiguring the modern approach by conceiving of the critical act as the judgement of value, and thus including criticism into a larger and more comprehensive axiology. Also, by institutionalising the individuality of the artist, imagination, emotions, and the artistic practice in itself as legitimate critical concerns, the Romantics broadened the scope of literary scholarship and laid an important part of foundation for modern theory and criticism. It is then justified to adhere to the affirmation of M. H. Abrams from the beginning of his celebrated *The Mirror and the Lamp*, saying that the "development of literary theory in the lifetime of Coleridge was to a surprising extent the making of the modern critical mind" (Abrams, 1953, p. vii), and to claim that the "romantic ideas remain relevant and, what's more, more sensitive to a strange, shape-shifting culture than the Enlightenment's rationalist legacy. Romanticism compensates for rationality's proven limitations, even as it anticipates much of the best of what postmodern thought has provided, and all without losing historical continuity or resorting to nostalgic inertia" (Black, 2002, p. 8).

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