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Romantic Heresy and the Crisis of Identification in the Poetry of William Wordsworth and W. B. Yeats

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to illustrate the “truth function” of Romantic literature discerned as a cyclical predictable literature which expresses the author’s essential self and thoughts. In the context of romantic theorisation in the nineteenth century, however, critics like William Hazlitt take into consideration a number of years with extrapolated characteristic features to judge and classify writers and their works. Hazlitt in his portrait of Wordsworth, for example, went so far as to say that “Wordsworth’s genius is a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age...Had he lived in any other period of the world, he would never have been heard of” (Scott 2015). Hazlitt misrepresented the poet’s “egotistical sublime” and the “power of his imagination”. The argument is that in as much as Wordsworth and Yeats help us to understand the historical movement of Romanticism, they also transcended it considerably. The structuralist perspectives adopted for the analyses demonstrate how Romantic

literature goes beyond the literary historic tags to redeploy, through language, a culture and a system which influences other epochs. The paper reveals that the term Romanticism means so many different things and its often association with isolated attributes like nature, mysticism, and estrangement, can, in recent debates, be misleading.

Keywords: *Romanticism, Langue and Parole heresy, crisis, identification, Poetry, Periodisation.*

Introduction

This paper evinces the idea that the “Romantic experience” in the poetry of Wordsworth and Yeats takes into consideration ambivalent and aesthetic yearnings in the form of universality in artistic creation. The Romantic experience therefore, surmounts the purpose of *periodisation* which marginalises the Romantic period to a humanistic spirit that characterised the Century. In the opinion of influential Romantic critics like Frye, Bloom, and Abrams, Galperin (1986) states that “the distinguishing feature of the Romantic period remains its humanism, particularly the way the imagination seeks in various ways to displace God and simultaneously to fill the breach left by his ‘disappearance’”(54). The Romantics, according to Abrams (Galperin 1986),

set out, in various yet recognizably parallel ways, to reconstitute the grounds of hope and to announce the certainty, or at least the possibility, of a rebirth in which a renewed mankind will inhabit a renovated earth where he will find himself thoroughly at home. ... Whatever their religious creed or lack of creed, [they undertook] to save traditional concepts schemes and values which had been based on the relation of the Creator to his creature and creation, but to reformulate them within the prevailing two-term system of subject and object, ego and non-ego, the human mind or consciousness and its transactions with nature. (p.66)

However, the prevailing deconstructive and connective nature of the creative mind which renews the spiritual force in man is the romantic paradox these critics tend to ignore. Though the result is misappropriation or relegation as Galperin intimates, the fundamental problem constitutes the critical observation of Romantic heresy and the crisis of identification in Romantic criticism which in recent debates about Romanticism gear towards establishing a Romantic theory. The debates have not been without suspicions of misappropriation of the term in relations to writers, critics and criticisms.

Taking into consideration the assumption that periods in literary history may be distinguished by special (invariably new) features and sensibilities, this paper focuses on the new insight obtained from the vision that Romanticism is a continuum and the poetics of ambivalence is a concept that connects nineteenth century poetry to the twentieth century with the help of psycho-aesthetics as an analytical process. It should be noted that symbols of eternal verities reveal the poets' antithetical search for truth and beauty. It is on the basis of this investigation that the paper seeks to answer the following questions: does ambivalence as a post-modern discourse project the difficulties encountered by the poets in their enigmatic struggle for self-identification in attempts to provide solutions to humanity in a disordered civilization where constant change seems to shatter human experience? Does the psycho-aesthetic impacts resurgent in the poetry under study conform to the confusion that has hitherto led man to anomalies in favour of the antithetical quest for the pleasure-dome?

Romantic Heresy and the Crisis of Identification

According to Kravitt (1992: 39) in *Romanticism Today*, the controversy about the term Romanticism can be resolved by a more recent definition which holds that the shift of focus to an expressive aesthetics, centred on the artist as creator, is the essence of romanticism. Therefore, instead of creating primarily to please a patron or public, the romantic artist in Kravitt's opinion,

created mainly for self-expression. Romantic art is extroversive, generated by a consciousness of self, stimulated by and embodying the artist's own perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Changes in social life in the nineteenth century—portentous for the artist—explain why the shift of focus took place. Bereft of patronage, the artist faced a public that was hostile—and met this crisis through alienation and isolation. (p.39)

Although the newer theory of Romanticism centres on the artist's estrangement as Kravitt rightly states, no allusion is made to any other concept that can reconcile the theory to intergenerational problems characteristic of romantic criticism today. Romanticism today requires other forms of theorisation. Therefore, if romantic art "is extroversive, generated by a consciousness of self, stimulated by and embodying the artist's own perception, thoughts, and feelings" then the *poetics of ambivalence* sound like the defining concept for this type of criticism in romantic discourse. Enough space is allocated for the discussion of this concept below, but the question is what is it in romantic discourse that seeks to identify an author irrespective of the period? Richardson, Osborne (1996) says,

The notion of a 'Romantic Period' artificially abstracts a certain number of years from the historical record, lending them a factitious unity (a 'spirit of the age') in the process; it encourages critics to extrapolate 'characteristic' features from the textual record and then, in circular fashion, to concentrate upon those writers and texts which seem most fully to embody them; it tends to marginalise writers who do not obviously fit into the 'period'.... (p. 3)

The characteristic features which Richardson avers in his conjectures, in recent years, have tended to marginalise writers who do not fit into the period. This historical extrapolation in other words, periodisation, according to McGann (2004) takes into account the canonical group of male writers who most often are associated with the term "Romantic". Those he lists are Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb, De Quincey, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, without either ignoring the differences among them or losing sight of those contemporaries who cannot be considered 'Romantic' (Osborne 1996).

Another critic, Frye identifies Romanticism as a historical centre of gravity which falls somewhere around the 1790-1830 period. His concern is on the fallacy characterisation. His idea of Myths and archetypes corroborate the romantic idea imaginative transcendence contained in wordsworth's poetry. According to Frye (Dubois 2012), myth makes use of fictional and thematic design, and is unaffected by canons of plausibility adopted to imitate the familiar. The mythical world contains infinite potential—desire and reality are one; myth is, in other words, anagogic. The Logos, because it contains everything, is identical to experience, and, as we have seen, Frye (Dubois p.10) prefers identity over similarity. Verisimilitude, on the other hand, is merely 'like' experience. Frye's critical approach disapproved of most other twentieth century literary criticisms, because they tended to destroy the autonomy of the imaginative order of the literary world by tying it to the meagre, experiential world, and, while destroying that autonomy, also destroyed what was, for Frye, the real function of literature—to minister to creative human desire, to transform, rather than simply transcribe, the world so that it, and the reader, might be elevated (Dubois 2012:10),

Like the romantics Frye's perception of art is not limited by social, moral or aesthetic values, which limit art by creating 'canons' of acceptable verisimilitude. Frye's anagogic view of criticism thus leads to what Dubois (2012) states as the "conception of literature as existing in its own universe, no longer a commentary on life and reality, but containing life and reality in a system of verbal relationships" (p.10). Therefore, the extrapolated characteristics which are tied to specific Romantic writers and to a specific period engenders endless debates. Whereas some critics like Abrams and Wilson think that characteristic features of Romanticism abound and could be observed in every work of art, because of the emotional or psycho aesthetic processes that spur the sublimation of such experience in artistic creation, others like Mathew Arnold, Bowra and Knight hold the opinion that Romanticism and its characteristic features are limited to a group of writers and a specific period.

However, if Romanticism is considered in the in the context of the "History of ideas" representing the 19th and the 20th century as revealed

in the poetry of Wordsworth and Yeats, period respectively, Frye (1968) indicates, we may be entrapped in the phrase itself. This is because an idea is independent of time and can be argued about, while an historical event is reminiscent of a particular period and is factual. Consequently, Romanticism accords value-judgements, which are rationalisations of an “agreement or disagreement with some belief of which Romantic poetry is supposed to form the objective correlative” (p. 3).

It is on the basis of this objective correlative that misappropriations and appropriations of value-judgements have been recorded in recent debates on Romantic criticism. The argument Frye raises is that the history of ideas, if we assume that around 1790 or earlier, some kind of thesis arose in history and embodied itself in the Romantic Movement, then such assumption would lead us to examining all the cultural products we call Romantic as allegories of that thesis. In Frye’s opinion,

Theses have a way of disagreeing with each other, and if we try to think of Romanticism as some kind of single “idea”, all we can do with it is what Lovejoy did: break it down into a number of contradictory ideas with nothing significant in common. In literature, and more particularly poetry, ideas are subordinated to imagery, to a language more ‘simple, sensuous, and passionate’ than the language of philosophy. Hence it may be possible for two poets to be related by common qualities of imagery even when they do not agree on a single thesis in religion, politics, or the theory of art itself. (p. 3)

The “qualities of imagery” which in this paper constitute a major aesthetic quality in the “poetics of ambivalence” is a discourse which in Romantic criticism has either been generalised or ignored completely. In the words of fictional Canadian poetess, it appears to be the arena where “the hand of man hath never trod” (Frye p.3), yet we seem to be led to it by controversial agreements in favour of a variety of identification crisis. Therefore, are the affinities given to Wordsworth and his contemporaries as Romantics, and Yeats as quasi-Romantic based on the framework of Romanticism as historical allegory or as history of ideas inadvertently modernist?

As a matter of fact, Romanticism as historical construct is an allegory of issues from which ideas were born. Without keeping modernism aside, the ideas that are borne in the Romantic period affect the human mind on the basis that the human mind in the poetry of Wordsworth and Yeats reveal contraries of the creative power of man which can no longer be tied down to a historical construct but to intergenerational experiences. Frye considers the intergenerational problem as a cycle of civilisation now at the centre of art. To him,

the basis of civilisation is now the creative power of man, its model in the human vision reveals in the arts. Second, this model, as well as the sources of creative power, is now located in the mind's internal heaven, the external world being seen as a mirror reflecting and making visible what is within. Thus the "outside world, most of which is "up there", yields importance and priority to the inner world, in fact derives its poetic significance at least from it. (p. 10)

Therefore, the immediate surrounding world which is considered the music of humanity in Wordsworth and the internal and external passions on which he and Yeats base their experience of poetic creativity lay bare the thesis that both poets transcend the limitations of *periodisation* in Romanticism as a historical allegory to emphasise on Romantic ideals as means of distancing man from the horrors of spiritual disintegration in a civilised and barbaric world. By establishing the uniformity of tone and mood, Wordsworth and Yeats like the best romantics, per se, introduce a poetic technique which to Frye is "Psychologically, akin to magic, which also aims at bringing spiritual forces into reality through concentration in a certain type of experience" (p. 11).

That notwithstanding, to carve out a consistent framework in Romantic discourse, it must be understood that in the ongoing debate in Romantic criticism, the *poetics of ambivalence* as a quality in the psycho-aesthetic process of the quest for the "pleasure-dome", constitute the uniformity of thoughts which cut across the "history of ideas" and give credence to creative ingenuity. Thus, as a part of a process, the Romantic poet is engaged with and united to a creative power greater than his own, because it includes his own. According to Frye, "This greater creative

power has a relation to him which we may call, adapting a term of Blake's, his *vehicular form*; the sense of identifying with a larger power of creative energy which meets us everywhere in Romantic culture" (p. 14).

So, if we agree with Frye that the sense of identifying with a larger power of a creative energy meets us everywhere in Romantic culture, then Yeats's striking mythopoeic features exhibited in his quasi-Romantic/Modern poetry qualify him a Romantic poet, meaning that he fits in the generational construct of "the history of ideas" that define Romanticism even though the historical allegory of the nineteenth century may not have affected him as much as it affected Wordsworth, who characterises the "spirit of the age".

According to Hazlitt, Abrams (1968) says he identifies Wordsworth in the whole "Lake school of poetry" whose poetry took its shape from the form and pressure of the revolution and reaction (p.26). Wordsworth's "genius" Hazlitt declares, "is a pure emanation of the spirit of the Age". Hence, the poetry of Wordsworth in the period of *Lyrical Ballads* was "one of the innovations of the time" (p.27). For Hazlitt

It [the poetry of Wordsworth] partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments. His Muse (it cannot be denied, and without this we cannot explain its character at all) is a levelling one. (Abrams p.27)

Hence, the mythopoeic nature of Romantic poetry is what identifies the human with the nonhuman world if we take into consideration Lévis Strauss's opinion about *mythemes*, an identification which is also one of the major functions of poetry itself. Coleridge in Frye's (1968) words identifies two of these unities in the creative power of man as the "primary and secondary imagination", where "identifying the percipient and the perceived" he says "This I call I" (p.15). Such poetic attitudes in Wordsworth are identified as huge and mighty forms, and in Yeats, they are mythopoeic symbols, which are the vehicle for his visionary gleam. In Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, the creative processes are thoughts that haunt him; he says:

But thought can with difficulty visit the intricate and winding chambers which it inhabits. It is like a river whose rapid and perpetual stream flows outwards... The caverns of the mind are obscure, and shadowy, or pervaded with a lustre, beautifully bright indeed, but shining not beyond their portals. (Frye p.17)

Romanticism as a pre-Romantic construct considers heaven as the order of grace and grace as Frye tells us is normally thought of as descending from above into the soul. But, in the Romantic construct, there is a centre where inward and outward manifestations of a common motion and spirit are unified, where the ego is identified as itself, because it is also identified with something which is not itself. In Blake, Frye says this world is at the deep centre in Jerusalem, the "city of God" that mankind, or "Albion" has sought all through history without success, because he has been looking in the wrong direction, outside (p.17).

The identification of these creative processes in some identified Romantic poets as discussed in the preceding lines simply reveal that the world of the deep interior in Romantic poetry is morally ambivalent and penetrate modern man's sensibilities as a psycho-aesthetic process in the quest for the pleasure-dome. Abrams (1968) says "Romanticism is no one thing [; it] is many very individual poets, who wrote poems manifesting a greater diversity of qualities than those of any preceding age" (p.30). He further states that some prominent qualities a number of these poets share, and certain of these shared qualities conversely form a distinctive complex which may, with a high degree of probability, be related to the events and ideas of the cataclysmic coming-into-being of the world to which we are now becoming fairly accustomed (p.30).

To meet the challenges of the cataclysmic world, the Romantics identified themselves as a prophet-priests concerned with the contemporary historical and intellectual situation of their epoch. They were bound by the quest to evade the shocking changes, violence and ugliness attending the emergence of the modern industrial and political world. Their politics, as Abrams (ibid) says, was "the politics of vision" (p. 44) as it was a means for them to assert inspiration and revelation by a power beyond

themselves. Blake and Shelley for instance repeatedly claimed that the great poets of his age are “the priest of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of gigantic shadows which cast upon the present” (Abrams p. 44). On a similar note, Wordsworth called himself “A youthful Druid taught... Primeval mysteries, a Bard elect...a chosen Son”, and Coleridge characterised *The Prelude* as “More than historic, that prophetic Lay”, “An Orphic song” uttered by a “great Bard”. (Abrams p. 44)

Whatever forms the Romantics identified and claimed for their sources of inspiration, the Romantic Bard (Yeats inclusive) in the words of Abrams is one “whose present, past and future sees” (p. 45). By this token, in dealing with current affairs his procedure is often panoramic, his stage cosmic, his agents quasi-mythological, and his logic of events apocalyptic. Abrams ascertains that:

Typically this mode of Romantic vision fuses history, politics, philosophy, and religion into one grand design, by asserting Providence – or some form of natural teleology – to operate in the seeming chaos of human history so as to effect from present evil a greater good; and through the mid – 1790s, the French Revolution functions as the symptom or early stage of the abrupt culmination of this design, from which will emerge a new man on a new earth which is a restored Paradise. (p.46)

The restitution of paradise constitutes both poets’ poetic faith as Romantic questers. Wordsworth considers that man’s infinite hopes can never be matched by the world as it is and man as he is, for these exhibit a discrepancy no less than that between his “hopes that pointed to the clouds” (Abrams p. 56). But in the magnitude of disappointment lies its consolation; for the flash of vision also reveals that infinite longings are inherent in the human spirit, and that the gap between the inordinacy of his hope and the limits of possibility is the measure of man’s dignity and greatness:

Our destiny, our being’s heart and home,
Is with infinitude, and only these;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,

Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be. (Davies 1975: 65)

Wordsworth here evokes from the unbounded and impossible hopes in the French revolution a central Romantic doctrine;

One which reverses the cardinal neoclassic ideal of setting only accessible goals, by converting what had been man's tragic – error – the inordinacy of his 'pride' that persists in setting infinite aims for finite man – into his specific glory and his triumph. (Abrams p. 57)

These antithetical assessments in Romantic criticism are the basis for poetic experiment and have in this paper been identified as the *poetics of ambivalence*. Wellek's (1994) survey of Romanticism as a concept elaborates critics' opinion about the crisis of identification in Romantic poetry. To him, what makes Romanticism a universal concept with historic enclosures is its psycho-aesthetic exaltation akin to imagination. He quotes Beguin in his *L'Âme romantique et le rêve* (1939), who thinks that, the greatness of Romanticism resides for him in "its having recognised and affirmed the profound resemblance of poetic states and the revelation of a religious order" (p. 120). Beguin (Wellek 1994) further states that:

Romanticism is to him a myth: man invents myths in order to overcome solitude and to reintegrate himself into the whole. He invents myths in a double sense: he finds them in the treasure-home of history and discovers them in dreams and the unconscious. (p. 121)

However, Beguin goes further to distinguish three Romantic myths: those of the soul, of the unconscious and of poetry. Poetry to him is the only answer to the elemental anguish of the creature enclosed in man's temporal existence. In effect, the analogical concept is assumed here in terms of the structure of our mind and our total being and its spontaneous rhythms are identical with the structure and the great rhythms of the universe (p. 121).

Poulet (Wellek 1994) in his opinion considers Romanticism as "a consciousness of the fundamentally subjective nature of the mind, as a

withdrawal from [outer life] to the centre of the self, which serves as starting point for a return to nature". The general tendency in Beguin and in Poulet's definitions is the exclusion of the period as principle of identification in Romantic discourse. According to Poulet, each author lives in his particular world construed by his own "consciousness". Hence, the task of the critic is to enter this individual consciousness which is unifying and in Romantic discourse, it transcends the circumference of *periodisation* where the misappropriation of thoughts/ideals beclouds poetic yearnings. Hartman, however, concludes that "to explore the transition from self-consciousness to imagination, and achieve that transition while exploring it is the most crucial Romantic concern (Wellek p. 131). In Wellek's opinion, notwithstanding, these critics surveyed in his criticism of *Romanticism Reconsidered* have reached an agreement:

They all see the implication of imagination, symbol, myth, and organic nature, and see it as part of the great endeavour to overcome the split between subject and object, the self and world, the conscious and the unconscious. This [to him] is the central creed of the great Romantic poets in England, Germany, and France. It is a closely coherent body of thought and feeling. (p. 132)

By and large, the unifying principle in Romantic heresy in relation to the general opinions that cut across this criticism is critics' unconscious exhibition of the unconscious *poetics of ambivalence* not as a concept but as differing moods characterising Romanticism as an allegorical construct. However, Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Yeats demonstrated that though nature, imagination, myth and symbolism may often be regarded as traditionally defining Romanticism, their self-expressive, extroversive and generated consciousness of self, permit them to expose inter-generational crisis of identification in favour of the quest for an aesthetic realm of ideal reality. The quest manifested as a psycho-aesthetic process in artistic creation. Yeats may not have witnessed the French Revolution but his modernist experience created a sense of dialectics and despondency in him just as it did for the Romantics in the late 1790s. His poetry foreshadows foreboding anguish and like Wordsworth, only

recourse to traditional pieties and transcendental realities could instil hope in the new dispensation marred by catastrophes and spiritual disintegration. Therefore, the quest for transcendental realities is the quest for immortality which can only be explained by our understanding of the spiritual force and aesthetic values in control of the human mind.

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