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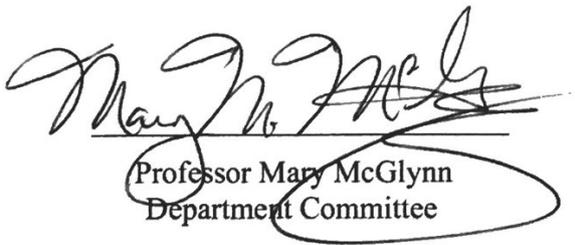
Perplexed Poetics: Romanticism and the Vortex of Ideologies

By Jaime Luque Lau

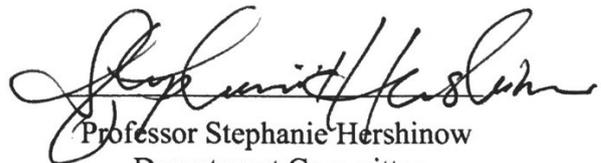
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Abstract

In three parts, this thesis explores the tension between the critical and emotional poetics in Romantic poetry, as well as the entanglement of individual will and politics. As a point of entrance, the first part focuses on the major and current trends of scholarly discourses about Romanticism. I will examine Jerome McGann's influential book of criticism on Romanticism, *Romantic Ideology*, in juxtaposition with Marc Redfield's *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism*. In particular, the discussion of the two books suggest the problems of aesthetic-political and historical discourses; specifically, I argue that McGann's critical examination of "Romantic ideology" reflects a symptomatic avoidance of individuality and subsequently the affective quality that Romantic poets infused in their poetry. The second part traces the problematic tradition of ideological critiques and ventures into the "perplexed poetics" of Romanticism—perplexed because Romanticism challenges our critical tendency to separate thought from emotional perplexity. In fact, the closer we get to the poetics of Romanticism, the more we realize that we are caught in the eye of a "vortex" wherein our familiar binaries of thought and emotion, and mind and body, become undone and coiled. By examining the Preface of William Wordsworth's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* and surveying its making, I argue that such a tension between the critical and emotional sides of Romantic poetry has existed since the early stages of Romanticism, dating back to the very pivotal figures—Wordsworth and Coleridge—their philosophical and critical conception of organic poetry, and their affectively charged poems. In doing so, I argue that, as Romanticism entails an inevitability of emotion as an inseparable part of its poetics, critics of Romanticism should allow an openness to a broader spectrum of literary discourses, especially those that take into consideration not only critique but also emotional disequilibrium, such that our reading

experiences of Romanticism become more comprehensive, humanistic, and universally connected by emotion. In the final part, by reading the obscure, sentimental, and therefore “difficult” Romantic poems—particularly of Lord Byron—I argue that, in addition to the traditional and critical academic reading wherein one aims to relate literature with politics, there also offers a vision of individualism that we cannot ignore.

Introduction

Perhaps the finest example of a word which means anything and everything according to the opposition in the mind of its user, is “Romanticism”

—T.S. Eliot (10 December 1928; 351)

In the history of English literature, Romanticism stands out quite distinctively with its peculiar nomenclature; it is the only literary movement whose name sounds without any epochal association. For some past decades, the scholarship of Romanticism has been in search for a definition that could quintessentially recapitulate the term, but the attempt has mostly been in vain. The difficulty could not be resolved by a simplified either-or schism between stylistic and thematic features based on the word “Romantic.” The reason is that the etymon “romance” itself is also an evolving idea too historically profound to be succinctly encapsulated, ranging from the medieval tradition of knightly quest-romance in general to Harold Bloom’s “the internalization of quest-romance” coined for Romanticism in particular.¹ Inevitably, the thought of Romanticism as a specific signifier has gradually become obsolescent so as to justify the multiple interpretations of the term. Various accounts to explain the phenomenon have since been surveyed and inclusively received on one hand.² On the other hand, the protean nature of Romanticism persists in contemporary criticism as different schools of theory and criticism find their conditions of possibility in reifying their perception of the “ism.”³

Amongst the characteristics of Romanticism, perhaps the most defining is its overt emotion. It is not unusual for both the general and sophisticated readers to feel immediately compelled and empathic to the palpably emotional poetry from the Romantic era. But such commonality becomes problematic, especially in a scholarly position, when one critically

analyzes or evaluates these poems since one must and is supposed to retain a high level of rationality in critique. Meanwhile, the rational credo of criticism becomes as problematic when critics engage with some abstract ideas such as the soul and try to associate their analyses with the discourses of imagination, philosophy, ideology and so on. Consequently, there is negligence, or even resistance,⁴ in understanding the emotional depth intended in these poems through ideological critiques.

The critical and the emotional, nonetheless, are not the only coiling dyad in Romanticism; similar tension exists among other dichotomies such as the individual and the collective, or the personal and the political. To explicate these perplexing phenomena, Lauren Berlant's idea of attachment offers keen insights. She argues that everyone has a fondness, intimacy, for a particular way of a life propelled by attachments, which "provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world" ("Cruel Optimism" 33). Gothic ideas in Romantic literature could be thought of in a similar way. The "elsewhere" of imagination provides a way to escape or turn to an alternative from the collective, thus rendering the external environments intimate, personal, and affective. Analogously, every ideological position is based on such intimacy as a result of attachments, even the so-called "critical" ideology. The tendency to personalize the political is represented by fantasies that detach individuals from the collective will and render their private life "real in contrast to collective life," as Berlant observes ("Intimacy" 283). Because critical ideologies are mostly associated with the collective, we rarely think of them in association with intimacy. Nonetheless, these critical/normative ideologies are profoundly sustained by their intimate attachments—the personal/subjective sides of the collective. The only distinction here is that the collective, the majority, is able to conjure a more unanimous environment that becomes a

kind of “public” sphere, where the advocates learn “their critical social function” (“Intimacy” 284) and develop their attachments to an ideology with which their lives converge.

In contrast to this form of collective attachment, Berlant suggests that there might be another form of attachment, less rational but more affectionate, that emphasizes the individual impact, rather than the promulgation, of ideologies, wherein some unconventional ways of living might turn out to be optimistic—what she calls “cruel optimism.” In association with Romantic poetry, we can argue that readers, through such attachment to the writers’ personal ideologies, find their preferable readings and ideological inspiration instead of the socially and politically doctrinal interpretation from critics. In other words, Romantic poetry with its modes of emotional perplexity (from the Latin word *perplexus*, meaning an “entangled” or “confused” state) is intended to inspire the readers to explore complex intimate attachments, rather than to serve as a mere vessel that carries and delivers specific axioms. If the readers must struggle to find meaning in reading these poems, they might be better off finding their own lessons, even though personal, while still being critical in the process. We ought to judge the individual impacts of our attachments to the ideologies in literature, rather than what we have learned about the present or the past society and our functions therein. Furthermore, because emotion plays a crucial role in the poetics of Romanticism, it would seem unreasonable for the writers to use the device of “intimacy” to falsify a sense of personality if they merely aimed to depict social phenomena. Simply, the depiction in their works would seem more subjective than critical. Perhaps, then, we can argue that, if the poets were indeed using such a personal device to achieve a public sphere to render their ideologies collective (or collectively supported), then emotion must have been an imperative in sustaining the individual’s attachment in the first place, before a collectivity is eventually formed. In other words, the collectivity must be contingent on the

likelihood that a majority of individuals arrives at a kindred outcome after exploring the emotion of the poems, instead of being told by the poets about what should be preferable. Therefore, the critical potential of reading Romantic poetry resides in the readers' processing of their emotional intake from the poems and their ability to actively produce critical output with respect to the different aspects of life, rather than their reactive thoughts, opinions, or analyses on the social phenomena conveyed. A reactive reading is always pre-constrained within a particular setting of discourse on "life" and consequently entails an underlying rejection of openness in reading.

Furthermore, while rational criticism is crucial to aid the understanding of literature, Romantic poetry ultimately solicit the readers' own emotion. In other words, there is a flaw when we rely heavily on rational criticism as a solution to understanding, namely a potential loss of emotional value in the poems and the ideologies therein. And yet, without a sort of guidance similar to that of rational criticism, there might be an emotional confusion for certain readers who contemplate these poems. Particularly, when overwhelmed by their affection for these texts, readers can easily be distracted from their logical paths of analysis. If they cannot spontaneously arrive at the emotional depth intended by the writers, the reading experience could be incomplete.

What is at stake here, however, is beyond the criticism of Romanticism. To recognize the perpetual tension between emotion and rationality, one must first recognize the origin of the symptom in Romantic poetry, wherein the emotional and the critical manifest as the trope of other dual themes or ideas.⁵ For instance, from one of the most compact accounts of Romanticism—"what he [Shelley] called 'the spirit of their age'" (Chandler and McLane 1), or esoterically *Zeitgeist* in respect to the profound German influence on English Romanticism—Romanticism represents two ideas: a specific time/history and the characters/people therein

(“age” and “spirit”). In turn, the study of Romanticism ought to provide the fertile ground for more humanistic and “spiritual” discourses besides the conventionally sociological and historical ones partially hinging on the “age”. However, aside from the historical and external phenomena, the ideological critics of Romanticism have not paid due attention, while pursuing critical significance, to the poets’ vision of individuality, including the human self, the human autonomy, and the timeless internalities that universally render us human.

In fact, the sentiments we have for Romantic poetry are undeniably on a personal level—they are more or less the affection and empathy we have for the poets themselves through their art. To faithfully and comprehensively treat the impacts of their art, then, requires the integrity of not only our critical faculties but also our emotional depth. The historical significance of the Romantic age ought not to overshadow the individual spirit and the ideological forces of the poets who differently voice the lives of people including themselves. Their individuality sheds light on a broader spectrum of universal human themes.

The Romantic era is limited, but Romanticism is transcendent and ubiquitous because of its affective quality. After all, emotion is as critical a medium for us to “make sense” of Romanticism and its ensuing ideologies. Having generally introduced the coiling tension between the emotional and the critical, in the succeeding chapters, I will examine such force in ideological critiques—what I call a “vortex” passed from the Romantics to their critics—as well as the “perplexed poetics” of the Romantic poets from which originated the vortex of ideologies.

I. The Vertiginous Legacy of Romanticism

It is the honourable characteristic of Poetry that its materials are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind. The evidence of this fact is to be sought, not in the writings of Critics, but in those of Poets themselves.

—William Wordsworth (Advertisement 7)

In the late twentieth century, Jerome McGann rose to prominence in the scholarship of Romanticism with his landmark study, *Romantic Ideology*. When McGann proposes a different paradigm of reading Romantic poetry in the introduction of his book, he claims that “the scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated by a Romantic Ideology” (1):

The Romantic tradition (or German Ideology, characterized originally by a powerful historicism and an orientation toward the past as the locus of the secrets of historical process) ... is practically a synthetic program *whose center has been shifted from rational inquiry to imaginative pursuit* [my italics]. (10)

McGann founds his observations on his reading of several Romantic critics that uncritically accede to the ideologies of the Romantic poets, to which these critics shape their critical methods accordingly instead of their own critical views. Amongst them, the seemingly moralistic critics would “propose a moral evaluation of the ‘message’ of ‘the great Romantic poems’ as well as a certain canonization of the phenomena” (26). Specifically, the lack of critical characteristic arises from the critics’ tendency to selectively study the major Romantic poets and their diverse subject matters. McGann offers a series of example:

[M. H.] Abrams's historical characterizations, then, are a function of a certain ideologue, and their persuasive force waxes and wanes to the degree that we can agree to accept that ideology. [Anne] Mellor secularizes the model by introducing the element of Romantic skepticism, but she does so only to the point where such skepticism does not "turn from celebration to desperation." No agonies are allowed into her Romantic world which is, like Abrams's, a good and happy place: a place of enthusiasm, creative process, celebration, and something evermore about to be. (26-27)

While he recognizes Abrams's fealty to historicity in his criticism, namely his discourse of "hope" and "despair" (26)—a significant set of themes associated with the French Revolution, a profound historic event to which Romanticism is said to be a reaction—McGann criticizes Abrams for failing to treat the dichotomy inclusively. Abrams's partiality to the theme of "hope" restrains the comprehensiveness of his criticism, especially with his preference for the more optimistic Romantic poems.⁶ This practice also exemplifies the problems in interpreting the three "high Romantic" poets of a later generation: Shelley, Keats, and Byron. In the historical chasm/conflict between the first generation (Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular) and the second generation, the more conservative former is often misrepresented as more decent and didactically adequate so as to serve the integrity of moralism, while the latter perseveres more radically in the pursuit of their ideologies. Evidently, the symptomatic preference of the moralistic critics imperils the canonical importance of each pivotal poet and the wholeness of Romanticism.

Moreover, we can infer from McGann's view that such moralistic ideology hinges on the "romance" of its readers for the good utopian life—a manifestation of the critics' ideology, the "self-representations" that McGann warns about (28). The readers' susceptibility is almost

inevitable because, to put it simply, who tends to think twice about a good moral? Thus, these critics' power of persuasion resides not in the thrust of their critical stance that provokes readers' reflection, but rather in the craft of their rhetoric that solicits compromise. Furthermore, the practice verges on quasi-religious instead of emphasizing the secular reasoning of humanity—"a Christian (Protestant) model" (26)—with a similar aphorism of goodness contingent on virtuous deeds. Suffice it to say, this is the Romantic ideology that McGann disapproves of, in which romance comes closest to the proper noun Romanticism but in distortion on one hand. On the other hand, ideologies are propagated in the ethos of a general society rather than of individual autonomy.

Reacting to this phenomenon, McGann offers a "socio-historical method pursued within the Critical tradition" (1) that is "analytic and rational in its procedures ... in that it takes history rather than ideas for its subject matter, and also because it is action-oriented" (10). The motif of his historical approach comes through in the following question:

What relevance can they [works of a past] have for us now; indeed, what authority can our own previous experience of them be allowed to exert? One cannot repudiate the past, but neither can one feed upon the dead. How do we negotiate between the authority of what has changed and the authority of what remains? (50)

In other words, McGann's approach insists that critics adopt a "double vantage" (50) inspired by his reading of German poet Heinrich Heine. Specifically, this "historical dialectic" (51) comprises two perspectives in a critical discourse: the past/historical in juxtaposition with the present/contemporary (analogous to a thesis and an antithesis in the Hegelian sense), wherein critics represent the consciousness of the present age and put themselves in conversation with the

consciousness of the past poets and their age through poetry. The necessity of a dialectic setup owes to the fact that, according to McGann,

[c]riticism is built upon a clear view of relevant differentials. Historical criticism is the completed form of criticism because it establishes the ground on which such differentials can be adequately and fully articulated. (56)

Thus, the conversation with history becomes critical in that critics allow their non-Romantic contemporaneity to be subjected to and challenged by the past poets and their Romantic expectations for the future from the standpoint of their time. Consequently, poetry itself possesses “self-critical powers” (54) with “a vision of the future, a sense of the imperatives which drive what is present toward what must come” (55) that counteract the critics’ voices. Let us illustrate McGann’s method with a poem by Wordsworth, “London, 1802”:

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
 England hath need of thee: she is a fen
 Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
 Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
 Have forfeited their ancient English dower
 Of inward happiness. We are selfish men; (1-6)

The poem is well-known particularly for the apostrophic plea to Milton in sonnet form, which is adequate to the subject and invokes Milton’s contribution to the poetic form and his insight to humanity in *Paradise Lost*. Wordsworth describes a tumultuous state of England and his hope for national salvation. These subjects precisely match McGann’s criteria of self-critical powers; Wordsworth concurrently explores his contemporaneous present and his expectation for the future. Abiding by McGann’s historical dialectic, we are expected to resolve our criticism with our present reading, particularly “in relation to the present needs and conditions” (51), against the poem’s self-critical powers in the form of a reading into the historicity that has catalyzed the poem: the aftermath of the French Revolution that plagued Europe for more than a decade,

wherein England was a significant participant in various conflicts and warfare. The hindsight of history, unequivocal and therefore “differential,” provides critics with additional contexts that renders the poem more comprehensive and holistic, especially when we further relate to the series of unpleasant historical events happened some years after 1802 when the Bourbons were restored to power.

After all, in the use of McGann’s critical tradition so as to seek the solutions for our contemporary problems, we have nonetheless lost Wordsworth himself in the grand scheme of the past, present, and future of nation and society. We cannot locate Wordsworth’s individuality in this chain of time and places except the traces of his existence in biographical history—a delimited history within history; and we will not be able to recognize that Wordsworth’s fear of monarchical tyranny was also restored, to which he was enthusiastically opposing under Godwin’s influence in his younger, pro-Revolution life.⁷ Therefore, as we can discern from our testing of McGann’s method here, the historic dialectic reflects a negligence to the poet own persona, even though we are able to address the expectation for social progress.

When McGann denounces the romantically-Romantic tradition with his historicism,⁸ he not only draws our attention to a critical paradigm, but also intends for it to achieve a connection with ideology similar to the moralists’ attempt at sermons. Surely, the reach of ideology is extremely broad in a spectrum and moralism is somewhere claimed within. One might wonder, then, what is the particular nature of the ideology (or ideologies) McGann holds for Romantic literature, which necessitates historicity as a recourse in his critical method? The answer is analogous to Wordsworth’s evident theme in “London, 1802”—politics. It is not at all surprising that English Romanticism had a profound entanglement with politics further inherited by the critics’ responses. Ultimately, the critical power of McGann’s socio-historical focus on the

progress of history converges with the ideology of politics, especially when he divulges his insight that “poetic response to the age’s severe political and social dislocations was to reach for the solution in the realm of ideas” (71). Social-historical concerns, after all, serve to fulfill the greater scheme of political agendas and must rely on the ultimate authority and capability of politics to achieve an impact.

McGann’s aspiration to socio-historical and political ideology thus leaves him in a rather paradoxical position against his grand thesis. Marc Redfield observes just this in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism*. In particular, the “self-representations” that McGann so attempts to depart from has always been ironically entrapping him as though a vortex, Redfield writes:

McGann’s comments do not deviate in any significant way from the main current of aesthetic-humanist thought. Somewhat against its own intention. *The Romantic Ideology* offers an exemplary demonstration of the persistence of the ideology it sets out to critique. (31)

Perhaps the concise interpretation of Redfield’s claim here is that McGann, in elevating his criticism to the ideological level, inevitably operates in a “remarkably ‘romantic’” (30) sense and therefore falls prey to what he himself sets out to criticize initially, despite having proposed a critical paradigm in response. In order to further understand the rationale behind Redfield’s insightful claim, it is necessary to delve in a more in-depth discussion about the implication of and the interrelation between “Romanticism” and “ideology,” as well as some other significant terms that complete the puzzle.

Throughout the introduction of his book, Redfield devotes a considerable amount of time to explicating Romanticism in relation to other (historically) crucial concepts. Beginning with

aesthetics, he provides a brief account that traces the historical development of aesthetics in order to locate its specific role in Romanticism on one hand, and to distinguish it from the more contemporary sense of *l'art pour l'art* on the other:

[The aim of aesthetics] is rather to articulate sensory experience with supersensory harmony, form, or meaning. The conceptual metaphor [is] “taste,” ... aesthetic judgement claims simultaneously to produce and to discover the essential harmony of perceiving mind and perceived world, sensation and idea, phenomenality and cognition. In doing so, it inscribes the individual within the generality of human being. For the main point about taste is that all human beings have it. [Taste] tropes what Kant calls the *sensus communis* [common sense]. (11)

Despite the dense and at times metaphoric nature of the passage, what Redfield intends to explicate is threefold: human beings, through sensory experiences, construct connections through cognitive generation of meaning between oneself and the external world. Aesthetics, then, is a discourse in which one articulates one’s spontaneously perceived meaning from the cognitive relationship with external environments. The assertion that all human beings have “taste,” or common sense, is analogous to the belief that all human beings are capable of and susceptible to aesthetic discourse. All things considered, in order to explain McGann’s paradox in being simultaneously critical and romantic, we need to pursue two lines of inquiry based on Redfield’s discussion of aesthetics: aesthetics in association with ideology, and the adjective “aesthetic” as an interchangeable term with “romantic”.

Recall that the ideological pursuit of McGann, with his critical paradigm, is socio-historical and political. It is, thus, adequate to relate his politicism with Redfield’s confluence of politics and aesthetics:

The political casts of aesthetics become yet more obvious if we return to the paradox that taste is simultaneously natural and educable ... As aesthetics develops as a discourse, this paradox of taste becomes that of culture: all humanity is represented in and by aesthetic culture, though this culture actually achieves representation in and as an acculturated minority. Aesthetics thus unfold as a pedagogical, political, and historical mode....

[M]uch of the political force of aesthetics resides in its historicism. (12)

Immediately, “taste is educable” reminds the human susceptibility to aesthetic discourse (from the standpoint of an audience/reader) with the source of education being culture. Surely, literature is a record of time-specific culture, wherein all humanity is narrowly but altogether represented because of the definite nature of historical periodization. Meanwhile, literary criticism and theory are forms of cultural study as occasionally mentioned throughout McGann’s book. Suffice it to say, Redfield founds his deduction on the influential power of literacy, which becomes an aesthetic tool that propagates ideologies in the form of culture and cultural study. “The idea that poetry deals with universal and transcendent human themes and subjects is a culturally specific one” (71), McGann proclaims with a romantic undertone. Redfield’s passage here could then be paraphrased as: literary criticism and theory are vehicles of ideologies, oftentimes political. Through the historical experiences recorded by literature, literary criticism is used to culturally educate the audiences with the general, ideal, and representational connection between humanity, its externality, and the world. Being a portent of culture, ideology, as Redfield notes in relation to Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, “leads us inexorably toward the State because culture develops us toward our ‘best self’” (13). Here we can further summarize the information into the following idea: Education of ideology, after all, is an aesthetic discourse regardless of the critical paradigm in the procedure. It is a sense of

attachment that sustains the effect of such ideological education and compels potential advocates. For this reason, an empathic link is needed among humanity to render aesthetic discourse possible so as to propagate ideology.

With Redfield's discussion of aesthetics and politics, there is nearly enough information to explain McGann's paradox and his position in the vortex. In the pursuit of aesthetic-politics, McGann's critical paradigm cannot alter the fact that the discourse of ideology must rely on a bond beyond the critical faculty. It is the reason that he "sounds remarkably 'romantic,'" where "romantic" is equivalent to aesthetic because the bond that attaches ideology, especially in Romanticism, is the "romance." Similar to the historical topos of quest-romance in Romanticism amongst the Romantic poets, aesthetic-political discourse provides critics the sphere to pursue ideological romance, through which the romantic essence of Romanticism is revitalized, immortalized, and universalized into romanticism. Aesthetic-political-ideological discourse thus becomes itself romantic and, Redfield asserts, "[t]he relationship between romanticism and aesthetics is elastically pleonastic and can survive all sorts of conflicting historical tugs and jerks" (29). Consequently, despite the critical paradigm and the resistance to emotion, ideological critics nonetheless operate on a personal, emotional, and romantic level as they are compelled by a subjective sense of attachment to the Romantic poets' own ideologies.

Undeniably, *Romantic Ideology* is a thoughtful study of Romanticism well-deserved of all its academic glory. Although McGann strives to be critical, he nevertheless is caught in a similar position to the "ideological" critics whom he denounces, and his attempt to alter the way we connect with ideology only results in another (historical) branch of connection, less critical than anticipated. On the other hand, Redfield's insightful analysis helps us to examine some traditional problems and difficulties in Romantic criticism in relation to the eighteenth-century

idea of aesthetics and its further involvement with politics and cultural study, with which we demystify McGann's ideology. To eventually move towards recapitulation of the relationship between Romanticism and ideology, let us first juxtapose two short passages from the two books:

The works of Romantic art, like the works of any historical moment, "transcend" their particular socio-historical position only because they are completely incorporated to that position. (McGann 2)

It [Romanticism] is, after all, a movement destined to die young or end badly, bequeathing only its promise to us as our own utopian possibility. (Redfield 32)

The first passage from McGann is also quoted by Redfield, where Redfield describes McGann as "romantic" for the quoted word "transcend". Redfield's claim is that the mere act of quoting such an abstract word is itself a metaphysical disclosure, in that the struggle in eliminating irrationality profoundly manifests. To McGann, it is perhaps the ideological forces of Romanticism that has "transcended" and arrested his interest. Likewise, in Redfield's passage, Romanticism has passed on to us the possibility of ideology. It might sound exaggerated and romantic to even say that this "promise" is more than mere legacy—it is a curse to its poets and scholars alike, as Theodore Ziolkowski remarks:

Others [Heine and his contemporaries] who came to their literary maturity between romanticism and realism ... were all entranced, on one hand, by the allure of romanticism and yet, on the other, were unable to accept uncritically the very modes and moods that they had embraced so fully in their earliest works. ("The Uses and Abuses of Romanticism" 283)

The corollary is evident: ideology and Romanticism must operate at a somewhat less critical frontier we alienate ourselves from. In resisting our own romanticism we are merely repeating the inescapable critical errors of our precursors. McGann himself might be unaware but, besides his socio-historicism, there is also “his *own* ideology” that he “does not seem to realize how deeply he is ensnared in” (Ziolkowski 283): “‘to return poetry to a human form’—surely a romantic ambition if there was ever one” (Redfield 31). Thus we are caught, as we are always, in the vortex of ideologies.

Because Romantic criticism offers the protean platform of seeking ideologies—our contemporary quest-romance—wherein we inevitably become less critical and more emotional, we find connection with poets on a personal, humane level such that we more or less embrace the ideologies we perceive in these poets. If we think of McGann as propagating “the spirit of the age,” then, before his historicism about the “age,” he must have first found his connection with Wordsworth’s “spirit” in political ideologies. In other words, it is the poet’s individuality that propels our quest of ideologies in a primitive stage, which is soon abandoned as we further internalize their ideologies and align them with our critical purposes; in paying too much attention to ourselves we do not pay enough attention to the poets. In the next chapter, we trace the formation of the ideological vortex in the early stage of Romanticism and through the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

II. Lyrical, Critical: The Forefathers' Tangle with Poesy

If I die, and the Booksellers will give you anything for my Life, be sure to say – “Wordsworth descended on him, like the *Γνωθι σεαυτόν* [Know Thyself] from Heaven; by shewing to him what true Poetry was, he made him know, that he himself was no Poet.”

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge (25 March 1801; *Collected Letters* II.714)

The year 1798 saw the cornerstone of English Romanticism with the first publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. At first, Wordsworth and Coleridge merely considered their collaboration as an experiment “to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure” (Advertisement 7). Little did they expect, the novelty of their poetry would draw such popular reception that a second volume with additional poems was supplied two years later in 1800. In this 1800 edition, the most intriguing and controversial piece of writing is not any of the poems; it is rather the unusually long Preface which replaced the succinct Advertisement wherein the original intent of experiment was made in 1798. Supposedly, it was a change much needed to explicate Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s poetic vision in response to the overwhelming public while, in fact, the complexity of the prose had instead caused further perplexity in the form of a defense, a theory, and even a manifesto that eventually marked the apotheosis of *Lyrical Ballads* in Romanticism.

Despite its recognition, the Preface is nonetheless an infamously contradictory and confusing piece of prose. The inefficacious attempt at a critical clarification mostly accounts for the sentiment involved in the explication of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s poetic vision. It is also profoundly revealing in an ironic sense that echoes the symptomatic ideological critiques and the

critics' entrapment of ideology (the vortex; as seen in the previous section). In other words, the Preface is more or less the cradle of the protean nature of Romanticism and therefore its value is beyond the theoretical frame about poetics. More significant is that Wordsworth, Coleridge, and their words foreground the forming flux of the critical and the emotional in the early stage of Romanticism.

Stated in the very beginning of the Preface, Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poetic vision for *Lyrical Ballads* is a sort of simplistic, organic versification, in which they fit "to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of man in a state of vivid sensation" (241). Three elements are evidently essential in their experiment: prosody; "real," as in plain and simple, language of the lower-class people; and sensory perception. Each of these elements entails the function of poetics, linguistics, and aesthetics respectively, which are all complex topics that necessitate a considerable length of discussion in the Preface. On the motive for explicating his poetic vision, Wordsworth initially divulges his conviction that

if the views, with which they [the poems] were composed, were indeed realized, a class of Poetry would be produced well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and not unimportant in the multiplicity and in the quality of its moral relation. (242)

The "class of Poetry" is what comes to be termed Romantic, while the emotional characteristic is foregrounded by its topos of "moral relation," which carries an ideological undertone and bears the most overt resonance with the aesthetic aspect of their experiment. In other words, since the early vision for Romantic poetry, Romanticism has profoundly revolved around ideological purposes which rely on an empathetic connection with the readers.

Compelled by the promising course, Wordsworth was "advised to prefix a systematic defense of the theory [in the Preface]" (242) so as to rationally explain the importance of his

poetry to his readers. Nonetheless, he did not at all favor such prosaic defense with “the selfish and foolish hope of *reasoning* him [the reader] into an approbation of these particular Poems” (242-243)—Wordsworth was reluctant to consider the idea of critical reasoning as crucial in aiding the reception of his poetry. For this reason, his conflicted undertaking of the task resulted in the confusing explication of his poetic ideas in the prose, which was supposed and expected to be as rational and clear as possible. In fact, while he believed that the power of delivery in prose and poetry can be identical (253), he was somehow speaking as a poet rather than a prose writer, rendering his defense more poetic and emotional than critical and rational. Such peculiarity is best illustrated in his most renowned view on poetry from the Preface that

[p]oetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility gradually disappears, and *an emotion* [my italics], similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. (266)

Inevitably, to see critically the implication behind such a poetically complex vision is to stumble repeatedly on the failure to specifically locate certain abstract ideas. Perhaps the clearest idea we can discern here is that, to Wordsworth, poetry is a product of feelings; but such “feelings” are evoked not only by emotion but also contingent on a tranquil state. The implication of tranquility here associates with the state of reasoning in composure: to reconcile with the chaotic emotion, to process emotion into critical outputs, and to eventually settle with clarity of thoughts; hence the oxymoronic sound of “the emotion is contemplated.”

More peculiar here is Wordsworth’s idea that the tranquil state should disappear through an unnamable reaction while being a vital condition in the process of contemplation in the first

place. A return to emotion immediately follows, which, after all the process of tranquil contemplation, is merely “similar” to that before contemplation. Meanwhile, the specific use of “an emotion” with the singular article particularly refers to a specificity in emotion but entails yet another unnameability. Altogether, Wordsworth’s reasoning is as convoluted and circular as a logical fallacy; in reaching the truth of his claim he merely returns to his premise. Furthermore, while the problem of unnameability should speak volume in Wordsworth’s reluctance to deploy systematic prose for his poetic ideas, more revealing is the irony that he nonetheless divulges the necessity of a critical process of contemplating in addition to the emotional faculty in poetry. Such consideration reflects that the ideological purpose in Wordsworth’s poetry is grounded on the function of both emotion and rationality, although he seems more inclined to the former as where the resolution eventually rests. From here, let us digress for a moment and relate the making of the Preface to our previous discussion about ideologies: When such a vertiginous legacy of Romanticism passes on to the scholarship, critics become as trapped in the same vortex while perpetuating the pursuit of ideology by the doctrines predated to Wordsworth.

Despite the inefficacious critical elaboration, the value of Wordsworth’s vision is hardly depreciated; it is still well encapsulated if we read his rhetoric in a poetic and affective sense. To Wordsworth, his poetic vision is also related to the clearer idea that “our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement” (247). In other words, let us suppose the “state of excitement” is a moment evoked simultaneously by feelings (a trope for emotion) and ideas (a trope for rationality); then in this very moment there is a crucial interaction between the two that catalyzes the production of poetry—the “spots of time” in the Wordsworthian sense,⁹ wherein tranquility eventually flees and the rationally-processed emotion resolves into an creative excitement/impulse, “an emotion” cultivatable for poetry that has always been existing

primitively in the mind, awaiting for its poetic activity and purpose. The mechanism, however, is not at all systematically explainable or universally applicable to every poet, which means the idea is personal to Wordsworth himself. For this reason, his more poetic utterance, the “spontaneous overflow,” is intended to counterintuitively aid his explication in a more effective way that metaphorically renders his vision more comprehensible by a broader spectrum of audience, despite the arguable result.

One might wonder, then, if being poetic was a more persuasive medium for Wordsworth, why a lengthy prose piece in defense of his poetry was needed, especially when one considers that he had a “deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind” (249) that could have received his poetic creed just fine? More or less, Wordsworth was also propagating his ideology; he must generally “educate” his readers in a range of topics, namely taste, poetics, linguistics, and aesthetics, which he did in the most accessible way of prose, although this genre was not his strongest suit. But of course, there was a much more qualified candidate for the task: the more theoretical, critical, and philosophical Coleridge. He was in fact that particular “Friend” who compelled Wordsworth into writing the Preface when “it was at first intended, that the Preface should be written by me [Coleridge]” (18 July 1802; *Collected Letters* II.811). Without digression into biographical anecdotes,¹⁰ this proved to be a missed opportunity. However, in other ways, Coleridge embellished critical colors to Romanticism. A related example will be his partial disownment of the Preface and his subsequent criticism thereof in the later years by referring to it as “his [Wordsworth’s] preface” (II.812) against his initial claim of “joint opinions on Poetry” (30 September 1800; I.627).

Unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge’s genius in literature resided in his mastery of prose, especially in criticism. In fact, his prosaic contribution to Romanticism became as prominent, if

not more so, as his poetry from his early poetic vocation. Where Wordsworth had not fulfilled the exposition of his poetic genius critically, Coleridge took upon himself the mission in his *Biographia Literaria*. He intended his criticism to supplement Wordsworth's "masterly sketch of the branches with their *poetic* fruitage" with "the trunk, and even the roots as far as they lift themselves above ground, and are visible to the naked eye of our common consciousness" (ch. 4; I.88). In other words, Coleridge himself can be considered as an ideological critic of Wordsworth, using criticism to sustain Wordsworth's poetic cause as though a tree to the fruit.

Regarding their collaboration and "Wordsworth's Preface," Coleridge confidently restores the misguided linguistic propriety in Wordsworth's idea of "the real language of man." Specifically, in a dedicated chapter in *Biographia Literaria* about this linguistic matter, while he acknowledges the motive and effort in Wordsworth's denouncement of the ornamental language used by their predecessors, Coleridge discerns that the description of "real" is not at all critically founded but mostly subjective in an ironic manner that also contradicts the principle purpose in Wordsworth's usage. He first refers back to a passage from the Preface wherein Wordsworth explains that he has chosen the language from "low and rustic life"

because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil, in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; ... because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; ... and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (Preface 245)

Similar to the passage on "spontaneous overflow," Wordsworth's explanation here requires poetic and rhetorical reading much more so than critical reasoning as discerned in phrases such as "passions of the heart find a better soil." The most significant characteristic in the idea of

“real,” to Wordsworth, is that such language from lower-class people can be “empathetic.” In other words, he intended the principle purpose in his usage to be an emotional and passionate expression, comprehended amongst his readers without linguistic hindrance since he assumes that such language is equivalent to a state of “less restraint,” “plainer,” “elementary,” and “permanent forms of nature”—indiscriminate in meaning, general, and common in a way that all people are universally capable of realizing its totality.

Nonetheless, as Coleridge argues, that the act of verification is itself a contradiction to the faithful retainment of the original language, especially with further involvement of grammatical reconstruction so as to achieve general comprehensibility rather than remaining provincial/dialectical. In fact, because of the constraint in meter, language must be altered, however slightly:

[A] rustic’s language, purified from all provincialism and grossness, and so far re-constructed as to be made consistent with the rules of grammar (which are in essence no other than the laws of universal logic, applied to Psychological materials) will not differ from the language of any other man of common-sense, however learned or refined he may be, except as far as the notions, which the rustic has to convey, are fewer and more indiscriminate. This will become still clearer, if we add the consideration (equally important though less obvious) that the rustic, from the more imperfect development of his faculties, and from the lower state of their cultivation, aims almost solely to convey *insulated facts*, either those of his scanty experience or his traditional belief; while the educated man chiefly seeks to discover and express those *connections* of things, or those relative *bearings* of fact to fact, from which some more or less general law is deducible.

(ch. 17; II.52-53)

From Coleridge's juxtaposition between the linguistics of two classes of educated people and rustic people, we can discern his observation that both usages of language from the two different classes aim to achieve the communication of facts in varied degrees, hence an indifference between the two in terms of purposes. But, of course, as some critics like Eliot point out Coleridge's occasional subjectivity in *Biographia*, Coleridge's argument might bear an undertone of bias because of his elite advocacy,¹¹ which will render him an outsider to make such claim of indifference between the educated and the uneducated. Still, the fact remains that Coleridge's deduction here contradicts Wordsworth's subjective inclination to the lower-class language for Wordsworth's simple but misguided reason that it communicates facts more realistically while in fact only more efficiently. Furthermore, because of the grammatic modification of the rustic language intended to elevate its comprehensibility, Wordsworth's supposed retention of the "real" language only turns out to be an opposition of the "real" with an artificial and dramatic device similar to his predecessors' adorned diction. One conveys explicitly "*insulated facts*" while the other implicitly the "*connections*" or "*bearings*" of facts. Therefore, to restore the subjective and sentimental explication in Wordsworth's idea of "real" language, Coleridge proposes that "[f]or 'real' therefore, we must substitute *ordinary*, or *lingua communis* [common language]" (ch.17; II.56)—a critical view that nonetheless contains Wordsworth's poetic merits of empathy propelled by a sincere, instinctive, and "naïve" consideration of commonality and his consequential linguistic imitation which has long been perceived as his poetic "beauty and defect," from Coleridge to Byron,¹² yet not originated "in deficiency of poetic genius" (ch. 22; II.158).

As a critic, Coleridge managed to assist the clarification and realization of Wordsworth's poetic ideology, to which he palpably felt a personal connection. He occasionally divulged such

admiration for Wordsworth's poetic genius in his criticism while still retaining the fair critical stance expected in a critic. Although his view may seem in contrast with Wordsworth's more affective position, Coleridge as a poet nonetheless shares the Romantic traits of emotion, regardless he appears to distinguish his own poetic creed from that of Wordsworth as he considers poetry as a portent of philosophical truth:

The poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, controul (*laxis effertur habenis*) 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; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry. (ch. 14; II.15-17)

To Coleridge, poetry is as though a metaphysically harmonious stage for his early pursuit of philosophical truth about humanity and the natural world—seeking rationality of the utmost laws and orders amidst the manifestation of chaotic emotion. It is such “perplexed poetics” and immensely critical ideology of unity that distinguish Coleridge's idea of poetry from

Wordsworth's more empathetic ideology. Nonetheless, with a profound inclination to critical thinking, Coleridge has gradually become somehow doubtful and mostly arrives at a "limbo" of temporary compromise in his poetry, whereas, with the instinct in following his emotion, Wordsworth is able to arrive firmly at a resolution prone to emotion after the "tranquil cleansing." After all, poetry is itself a treacherous genre for Coleridge's vocation as a sophisticated thinker, just as prose is to Wordsworth, because of the emotion involved in poetic creation. Coleridge mostly assumes in his theory that, besides the technical aspect of forms and meters, the process of versification is grounded on the capability merely of imagination and thus he becomes theoretically stubborn with the mind being a faculty of creativity while, in fact, it is emotion stemmed from the mind that ultimately enables poetry besides the power of imagination. What has palpably moved Coleridge in Wordsworth and his poetry, perhaps, is not so much the genius of poesy, the magical touch of harmony. It is the infusion of empathic emotion which sustained Wordsworth's gift of imagination.

Eventually, Coleridge abandoned poetry altogether as the medium for his pursuit of the philosophy of unity because, more or less, of his unfulfilled attempt to reconcile the conflict between his rational thinking and emotional outpouring into a unity or equipoise. Poetry, simply put, was just not the place for his salvation. Still, Coleridge's seminal contribution to the perplexed poetics of Romanticism during his career as a poet is in debt to this futile fulfillment, which is especially evident in eight of his poems coined as the "conversation poems" that mirror his soulful meditation. Amongst them, "The Eolian Harp" manifests most representatively the philosophical notion of reconciliation and unity:

O! the one Life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere—

Methinks, it should have been impossible
 Not to love all things in a world so filled;
 Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
 Is Music slumbering on her instrument. (26-33)

Before its culmination to such exclamation of unity here, Coleridge's meditation depicted in the poem begins first personally and affectively about matrimonial relationship (1-12); then the focal point gradually expands outwards and becomes naturalistic, earthly, and philosophically critical. In the excerpt, the "one Life" explicitly resonates with Coleridge's idea of unity in life. Moreover, Coleridge's depiction about the "one Life" is particular from line 26 to 29: It first "meets with all motion" where the word "all," also repeated multiple times in these connected lines, implicitly manifest totality and therefore unity almost in excess. Then we discern that the "one Life" itself becomes "its soul" where the word "soul" is generally considered an unlimited, "tremendous" entity that echoes the sense of totality conveyed by the word "all." Then in line 28, on one hand, Coleridge uses chiasmus to rearrange the word "light" and "sound", rendering either one of them specifically defined by a singular article while the other itself an undefined mass noun. Consequently, he simultaneously unfetters the extreme between "one" (single; as implied by the article "a") and "all" while exploiting the double meaning in "one" (unity) to evoke a harmonized sense of unity with "all". On the other hand, with the unchanged preposition "in" which surreally conjures inter-fusion between the two intangible matters, Coleridge's idea of unity mostly takes emblematic shapes through his poetic conceit which metaphysically associates his perception with the rationale of his philosophy. Altogether, we can think of these lines as though a manifestation of the phrase "body and soul" which signifies a completeness in humanity—a unity that completes Coleridge's idea of life.

Nonetheless, due to the nature of such poetic conceit, the materiality of the world is depicted as though a detached imagination, especially when we also consider Coleridge's

frequent use of apostrophe, simile, and personification of nature. In fact, his philosophical notion remains mostly indiscernible in the earlier depiction of his admiration for his wife and nature in the preceding stanzas, where readers can hardly discern any critical revelation but chiefly the emotional and lyrical quality before arriving halfway through the poem to the excerpt above. Therefore, some critics such as William Scheuerle are more interested in investigating the metaphysical experiences about Coleridge's concept of "one Life" in the poem. In his essay "A Reexamination of Coleridge's 'The Eolian Harp,'" Scheurele turns to other "conversation poems" of Coleridge and some biographical anecdotes in order to explicate his reading of "The Eolian Harp" and the origin of Coleridge's idea. While his reading is somehow intimate in that Coleridge's life is involved, Scheurele nonetheless does not relate the significance of such philosophy to Coleridge himself, especially Coleridge's persona in the poem. Thus, having similarly interpreted the metaphysical association in the poem, let us further our reading of the metaphysics in relation to Coleridge based on other textual details.

Despite the seeming association of life with material externality, the circumstances that facilitate Coleridge's meditation are not as "concrete" as they appear on the surface—they are somewhat internal and personal, transposed later onto external nature. This becomes more evident when we further trace the flow of the poem as a parallel of Coleridge's thought process, as he eventually arrives at a spiritual speculation in the penultimate stanza:

And what if all of animated nature
 Be but organic Harps diversely framed,
 That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
 Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
 At once the Soul of each, and God of all? (44-48)

The image of aeolian harps (a musical instrument "played" not by humans but the motion of wind) represents Coleridge's attempt to consolidate and substantiate his abstract philosophy of

unity—a reconciliation between subjectivity and objectivity; between the emotional and the critical. The instrument’s aerodynamic reception and the sequential creation of music encapsulate the human mind in relation to its imaginative capability, and in here Coleridge’s own mind in relation to his philosophical speculation. Similar to his poetic creed, Coleridge speculates that unity comes from the power of imagination that processes “vast” and “plastic” (as in flexible) information from perception into harmonious thoughts of philosophical truth, logic of law and order, and the understanding of *logos*—the words of God. In line 48, we discern again similar wording of unity to the light and sound example. Here we see a single, definite, and animated “the Soul” in genitive case with the word “each” which also have a double sense of “one” and “all,” while “God” (in the panentheistic sense based on Coleridge’s Christianity) in genitive case with “all”, which renders the phrase an unorthodox tone about pantheistic ideas.

Nonetheless, why the sudden turn to the philosophical speculation amidst a prevalent setting of a lyric poem? The penultimate stanza stands out distinctively as the shortest and self-concluded stanza, rendering Coleridge’s turn to philosophy almost an occasional phenomenon suddenly emerging amidst his perceptual, aesthetical experience. Perhaps, what Coleridge intends to reconcile is beyond the critical relationship between his philosophy of unity and the rationale he hypothesizes on his perception of nature, which is a question unanswered after all. It seems that the more urgent reconciliation involves matters more personal, and hence the abrupt suspension of his philosophical speculation, returning Coleridge to the depiction of his wife in the last stanza:

But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
Darts, O beloved Woman! nor such thoughts
Dim and unhallowed dost thou not reject,
And biddest me walk humbly with my God.
Meek Daughter in the family of Christ! (49-53)

In the end, Coleridge is drawn back from his meditation by his wife; and the affection for his Christian wife dispels his almost pantheistic unorthodoxy of “God of all” as though a personal salvation. If we take the ending as a resolution to his meditation, it is conspicuous that Coleridge suppresses his inclination to the critical in favor of his sentiment. But then, of course, the whole poem would have been more purely emotional and lyrical without the striking penultimate stanza about his philosophical wonder¹³—going from “That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!” (43) to the final stanza quoted above, instead of “At once the Soul of each, and God of all?” (48) which evokes perplexity by Coleridge speculation rather than affirmation by deduction. Subsequently, the very fact that Coleridge composes the penultimate stanza can be seen as a practical endeavor to achieve unity. It is poetically representative of the human mind in general, that our thoughts are at times entangled with our feelings; and that our desire for resolution is oftentimes suspended by a tendency to either one extreme. In other words, the mere inclusion of the stanza is already a merit of harmonious unity.

Furthermore, because of Coleridge’s unanswered philosophical speculation in the poem, which differs from his otherwise compulsory pursuit of answers in his career as a critic, Coleridge retains an openness between the two conflicting forces of rationality and emotion in the poem. With his temporary but not absolute compromise in the end, he is at once blessed with solace and yet rueful with futility:

The Incomprehensible! save when with awe
I praise him, and with Faith that inly *feels*;
Who with his saving mercies healèd me,
A sinful and most miserable man,
Wildered and dark, and gave me to possess
Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honored Maid! (59-64)

The conflicted situation can be further associated with the lines “Methinks, it should have been impossible / Not to love all things in a world so filled;” (30-31), where Coleridge uses

subjunctive mood to counteract the already ambivalent litotes in the phrase “impossible / Not to” so as to disguise the reality that he indeed seems inwardly incapable, in contrast with an outward possibility assumed on himself, of loving something or even someone—perhaps himself as we discern from his self-depreciation towards the end of the last stanza. Moreover, this reading will contradict Scheurele’s reading that “the reader is able to agree with Coleridge that it would have been impossible not to love all things in the world that are so filled with this breeze; as indeed, it is impossible [not to love all things] if all things are in ‘joyance’” (599) because Coleridge does seem to have underlying doubt about “joyance everywhere” in the poem. All in all, “The Eolian Harp” illustrates the perplexed poetics of Romanticism—in fact, Coleridge himself is the Eolian harp that creates captivating music through a vortex effect.¹⁴ The more we approach the conflicting tension in the poem, the more comprehensively we understand Coleridge as a poet, his individuality, and his ideology. Such perplexed poetics will be further investigated in the next chapter through the works of Byron and Shelley.

Even though Coleridge himself consistently deprecated his own poetic genius against Wordsworth’s, his poetry is hardly inferior. Long before Wordsworth’s magnum opus, *The Prelude*, was finally published, it was initially named “The Poem to Coleridge” as a dedication to Coleridge’s influence on Wordsworth’s poetics:

[T]he voice of *The Prelude* is, in part, Coleridge’s creation, since its blank verse and theme of imagination’s growth through memory originated in Coleridge’s earlier “Conversation” poems ... What Coleridge heard in December 1806 was Wordsworth’s individual voice, yet that voice was an echo of his own. (Magnuson 43)

After all, the growing halo that Coleridge saw in Wordsworth was a harmonious fusion with his effusion of philosophical and critical characteristic; all the while his own poetic genius remains an evanescent meteor strike—burning through its troubling self to illuminate greatness.

III. "I am the fool of passion"

Such is this maddening fascination grown—

So strong thy Magic—or so weak am I.

—Lord Byron ("Last Words on Greece" 9-10)¹⁵

When the French Revolution broke out, Wordsworth and Coleridge were still in their youth. It began as a revolutionary hope for the two poets—a promise of liberty and freedom. But soon as the series of events unfolded, hope rapidly became disillusionment that thoroughly traumatized the two rebellious young poets with terror. Having matured into adulthood, Wordsworth and Coleridge gradually became prone to conservatism and developed a sense of duty, which eventually led Wordsworth to the post of poet laureate. The connection to nature in their poetry can be thought as a redemptive journey to soul-search a less complicated and miserable life amidst the unpleasant social reality. In particular, Wordsworth had come up with the idea of producing an epic poem, *The Recluse*, since his youth, to which *The Prelude* was intended as the prologue. Although he never finished the project, we can still envision Wordsworth's lifelong disposition towards internality and solitude based on the title and the autobiographical theme of *The Prelude*—"growth of a poet's mind."

Unlike Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron from the later generation retained their radical characteristic amidst the tumultuous aftermaths of the French Revolution. Despite his admiration for Wordsworth's poetry, with whom he happened to share similar influence from his father-in-law Godwin, Shelley greatly lamented Wordsworth's abandonment of revolution, even openly in his bitter sonnet "To Wordsworth", which I quote here in its entirety:

Poet of Nature, thou hast wept to know
 That things depart which never may return:
 Childhood and youth, friendship and love's first glow,
 Have fled like sweet dreams, leaving thee to mourn.
 These common woes I feel. One loss is mine
 Which thou too feel'st, yet I alone deplore.
 Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine
 On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar:
 Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood
 Above the blind and battling multitude:
 In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
 Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,—
 Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
 Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be. (1-14)

We should notice that the poem's eulogistic tone aims at a still-living Wordsworth, whose growing conservatism and tendency to solitude has become a disappointment to Shelley. Evidently, the "common woes" that Shelley points out from the irrecoverable loss of "Childhood and youth, friendship and love's first glow" are the prevalent themes recurring in Wordsworth's oeuvre. Universal as they are to all human beings, the particular "One loss" to Shelley is nonetheless the loss of Wordsworth's revolutionary persona, which Wordsworth used to inspirationally voice his humanistic ideology for the people and the nation. Furthermore, the inferior undertone of "common," compared to the specificity of "One loss", foregrounds that the values of these human universalities inadvertently diminish collaterally in Wordsworth's abandonment of revolution. In other words, Wordsworth willingly gives up his fight for the human commonalities that he used to cherish passionately, letting his personal sorrow hinder the hope to prevent more sorrows from social repression. To Shelley, despite his praise of Wordsworth's lone but powerful past endeavors in arduous circumstances, Wordsworth is no longer capable of inciting the same pivotal influences on social progress—"The Glory and the Nothing of a Name," as Byron cruelly satirizes Wordsworth ("Churchill's Grave" 43). Thus, in

the time of turmoil, Shelley openly usurps Wordsworth and takes upon himself the Romantic heir of *Zeitgeist*.

The haunting sense of repentance no doubt wears out Wordsworth's early ideological forces. However, his turn to "internal quest-romance" alternatively furnishes readers the stage to explore certain universal internalities of humanity mentioned by Shelley. Readers are inspired by Wordsworth's isolated individuality and his personal philosophy while finding their own individual ideology amidst personal growth. Although Shelley found it preferable to advance politics radically through literature so as to live up to his ideological position that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (*A Defense of Poetry* 140), Byron, with his cosmopolitanism, took his politics further into action in the Greek War of Independence. This ambitious pursuit, however, does not restrain Byron's consciousness of the self and his personal ideology at all, and his political achievement hardly overshadows his individuality as the "bold bad Bard Baron B" as Wordsworth once referred to him (25 February 1816; *The Letters* III.283). Thus, he is not only a national hero of Greece but also an empathetic antihero to his readers. Byron's radicalism, after all, verges more conspicuously on the personal side; and yet the intriguing twist of politics and individualism renders the ideologies in his works at once critical and emotional, vertiginous and harmonious.

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage traces Byron's early contemplation about the political and the personal. The poem's omniscient narrative shifts between depiction of nature and landscapes, and the gloomy thoughts about the life of the wandering protagonist, Harold, which are mostly considered to be an indirect disclosure of Byron's own mind impacted by a war-torn Europe. The poem's sense of politics manifests in the relics and traces of past civilizations, oftentimes juxtaposed with the natural surroundings still prevailing in the present. "Those days are gone—

but Beauty still is here, / States fall, arts fade—but Nature doth not die” (Canto IV.3.5-6), Byron proclaims and divulges his reverence for nature’s timeless endurance. The transience of political phenomena, namely the bygone civilizations and their definite history, render the unresolved tension of personal reflection all the more predominant in the narrative of the poem. From Harold’s escape to nature in order to find solace amidst a similar apocalypse befalling Europe, a renewed interest in personal internality is foregrounded not only by the frustrated relationship between humans and the social externalities they live in and with, but also by the primitive, empathetic, and consistent connection of humans with nature:

There, in a moment, we may plunge our years
 In fatal penitence, and in the blight
 Of our own soul, turn all our blood to tears,
 And colour things to come with hues of Night;
 The race of life becomes a hopeless flight (Canto III.70.1-5)

Is it not better, then, to be alone,
 And love Earth only for its earthly sake? (Canto III.71.1-2)

On the surface, these lines convey a sense of withdrawal to the internal and the personal. Similar to Wordsworth, the reflective mood is evoked by an admiration for nature. Nonetheless, the dynamics in Byron’s turn to internality somehow differs from Wordsworth. To Wordsworth, the turn to internality is more or less a thorough escapism and displaced optimism through the power of imagination; whereas, to Byron, it is hardly intended to conceive an alternative utopian reality, but rather to accentuate a philosophical and somehow factual pessimism about humanity and its life. Living can be sorrowful, and even our spiritual self, the soul, is blighted because of the hopeless mundanity.

And yet, can we escape by means of imagination as our solution for living; or rather, should we? Romantic poetry might give the impression of such escapism but, at the end of the

day, the melancholy truth remains that we can hardly live on in what we conjure as an alternate reality. Our futility compels us to live on:

And thus I am absorbed, and this is life:
I look upon the peopled desert Past,
As on a place of agony and strife,
Where, for some sin, to Sorrow I was cast,
To act and suffer, but remount at last
With a fresh pinion; which I felt to spring, (Canto III.73.1-6)

“This is life”, as Byron asserts; we inevitably live on and relive the very same end. Instead of perpetuating escapism, Byron “remounts” with a depiction of himself conquering life’s adversity with pinions as though a bird, rather than of the proverbial “back on our feet”—at once rendering his image animally primitive and yet humanly ambitious. In fact, it is Byron’s uncompromisingly strong and resilient attachment to living that enables the affective connection the readers have for most of his works. His anti-heroism offers readers a glimpse at the potential in living with one’s own troubling ideology; and its affective characteristic echoes Berlant’s idea of “cruel optimism,” which does not necessarily “*feel* optimistic,” and yet “the object hovers in its potentialities [and] is [in] the operation of optimism as an affective form” (“Cruel Optimism” 33).

From Harold’s reignition of passion for life in a setting of lone pilgrimage, we can discern a critical thought process initiated in the protagonist himself which leads Harold to resolution, rather than through reacting to the external, doctrinal “lessons” similar to that of the ideological critiques. Oftentimes, as Slavoj Žižek observes, the doctrinal social ideologists are prone to the idea that “the only real solution to their problem is to be found in the global revolution” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, pp. xxvii). For such reason, instead of persisting with our individuality, we are expected to learn our collective critical function in the society

through the lessons of history so as to eventually achieve a unified revolution, in that we find the ultimate *solution* of human problems. After all, “[m]an is,” Žižek writes,

an animal sick unto death”, an animal extorted by an insatiable parasite (reason, logos, language). In this perspective, the “death drive,” this dimension of radical negativity, cannot be reduced to an expression of alienated social conditions, it defines *la condition humaine* [the human condition] as such: there is no solution, no escape from it; the thing to do is not to “overcome,” to “abolish” it, but to come to terms with it, to learn to recognize it in its terrifying dimension and then, on the basis of this fundamental recognition, to try to articulate a *modus vivendi* [way of living] with it. All “culture” is in a way a reaction-formation, an attempt to limit, canalize—to cultivate this imbalance, this traumatic kernel, this radical antagonism through which man cuts his umbilical cord with nature, with animal homeostasis. (Žižek pp. xxvii-xxviii)

Because our human problems precisely define our human existence; because we live and die; because we are cursed with our critical faculties (reason, logos, language) and cannot help but be emotional, there can never be a single ideology that altogether solves our individual problems of living, not even the totality in social-political-historical ideology culturally promulgated by literary criticism. As Žižek proclaims, it is such a misguided, unnatural, and modulative attempt to convert humanity for the service of social progress that we start to diverge from nature and consequently paralyze our human nature.

Therefore, rather than as a solution, Byron’s *Pilgrimage* is a reconciliation with the universal and inevitable, sorrowful but quintessential internalities of humanity, as well as a resolution to “come to terms” with living similar to the idea that Žižek proposes. Byron himself affectively incites the drive of living through ideological attachment to the personal rather than

the collective—his “intimate attachment”, “umbilical cord”, primitive and empathetic connection with the world itself, not necessarily with society. Thus, not only has the value of Byron’s works transcended beyond the history of his time, but also Byron himself as a person who affects generations of readers.

Like Harold with rekindled passion, Byron continued his political pursuit abroad in Greece after his politic “career” proved ineffectual domestically. The Independence War was a success for liberty that he had a strong faith in but did not live to see. During his time there, Byron picked up poetry again occasionally and wrote perhaps some of his greatest and most poignant lyrics, explicitly and intricately twisting the personal and the political. These poems include the very last poem in his life “January 22nd 1824. Messalonghi. On this day I complete my thirty sixth year,”¹⁶ a title as though an omen about the fall of himself amidst the rise of Greece:

'T is time this heart should be unmoved,
 Since others it hath ceased to move,
 Yet though I cannot be beloved
 Still let me love.

My days are in the yellow leaf
 The flowers and fruits of Love are gone—
 The worm, the canker and the grief
 Are mine alone.

The fire that on my bosom preys
 Is lone as some Volcanic Isle,
 No torch is kindled at its blaze
 A funeral pile! (1-12)

The first five stanzas of the poem, including the three quoted here, make up exactly one half of the poem that depict Byron’s reflection of his own (soon ending) life in the present. The craftsmanship is itself emblematic of his poetics and his personal voice. On the one hand, the

alternating rhymes consist of certain highly provocative pairs of words about sentiments such as “move” and “love” (which appeared before in *Pilgrimage*) with its contrasting variance “unmoved” and “beloved” (in negative syntax), “gone” and “alone,” “pain” and “chain” in the fourth stanza, and particularly in the fifth stanza the ominous “*here*” and “bier” (with the possessive case “hero’s” which allusively connects with Byron’s recognized status). On the other hand, the octosyllabic lines are one of Byron’s *modus operandi* and somewhat echoes his magnum opus *Don Juan*, written in ottava rima which also recalls his appreciation of the aesthetics in the number eight. Although the poem is similarly meditative as Coleridge’s “conversation poems” written in blank verse, Byron adapts a sentimental form of ballad and adorns it with his own characteristics. Besides the occasional deviations in syllables, there are some modifications in the second and the fourth lines. They now consist of rhymes that consolidate the overall connection between lines and within stanzas. Furthermore, although now “long-short” with one octosyllabic line and one tetrasyllabic, the two odd lines still add up a total of twelve syllables in contrast with the conventional ballad with unrhymed hexasyllabic odd lines while rendering the last line exceptionally striking and enigmatically provocative because of its brief nature. Altogether, aside from the birthday title, the versification renders the poem strikingly intimate to Byron himself as a person.

Opening the poem is a heartfelt contradiction about love. Aside from the general sense of attachments to other earthly matters, we should also “suspend our disbelief” that there is possible “uncritical” inclusion of romantic love,¹⁷ which would undoubtedly deepen the complex dynamics in the personal and the political and therefore render the poem all the more intriguing. It is, after all, an inevitable yearning quintessential in human life. The conflicted plea to love and passion amidst the decline of life and the presumably ensuing indifference accentuates the strong

faith Byron possesses not in the recovery of himself but in the future of Greece, further juxtaposed by the naturalistic imagery of decay and dying flame in the second and the third stanzas. Moreover, similar to *Pilgrimage*, the ideological traces of Byron coming to terms with life and mortality are also evident in the succeeding two stanzas:

The hope, the fear, the jealous care
 The exalted portion of the pain
 And power of Love I cannot share
 But wear the chain.

But 'tis not *thus*—and 't is not *here*
 Such thoughts should shake my Soul, nor *now*
 Where glory decks the hero's bier
 Or binds his brow. (13-20)

Byron “wears the chain” as though a willing surrender to the everlasting, cyclical, and dyadic entanglement of “the hope” and “the fear”, as well as “the pain / and the power of Love” in life. Nonetheless, in the fifth stanza, Byron does not explicitly get back on his feet. Instead, he refutes himself for the selfish, soul-wrenching thoughts: “not for these, not here, and not now” when others are in the battle either dying for glory or surviving to be laurelled. “How am I a hero for thinking about myself in the storm of war?” Byron might have thought so; but he cannot refrain from the selfish thought and the poem is itself the plain fact. Thus, the first half of the poem candidly showcases Byron’s personal struggle in entanglement with his sense of duty.

In the second half of the poem, Byron furthers his refutation in order to draw himself back and refocus on Greece:

The Sword—the Banner—and the Field,
 Glory and Greece around us see!
 The Spartan borne upon his shield
 Was not more free!

Awake! (*not* Greece—she *is* awake!)

Awake, my Spirit—think through *whom*
 Thy Life blood tracks its parent lake
 And then strike home!

Tread those reviving passions down
 Unworthy Manhood—unto thee
 Indifferent should the smile or frown
 Of Beauty be. (21-32)

The mention of Greece becomes explicit in the sixth stanza. Compared to the first half of the poem, Byron is now more focused on the national matter and consequently renders his appearance more implicit. Nevertheless, the representation of himself shifts to his “Spirit,” which conveys a sense of transcendence and inalterability as Byron diverges from the previous imagery of earthly decay. In fact, because of this shift, the more explicit focus on the political is ironically offset and equilibrated by the significance of Byron’s spiritual self. With the apostrophic plea, he asks for the return of his passionate self, perhaps “formed” during his younger life, to his now mature self—his powerless, “Unworthy manhood.” If we suppose Byron’s “Spirit” as a separate entity in the poem, then the self-interrogation in the penultimate stanza turns out to signify a shift of perspective:

If thou regret'st thy Youth, why *live*?
 The Land of honourable Death
 Is here—up to the Field! and give
 Away thy breath!

Seek out—less often sought than found—
 A Soldier's Grave, for thee the best,
 Then look around and choose thy Ground
 And take thy Rest. (33-40)

The existential crisis of Byron’s mature self is altogether cast aside by one rhetorical question asked by his spiritual self: “why *live*?”—banal and yet perplexed, simple and yet perpetually unanswerable, but at once philosophical and sublime. In the resolute utterance of his spiritual self

in imperative mood and the political assertion that Greece “*is* awake,” Byron’s personal ideology of living spontaneously aligns with his political pursuit and becomes transparent towards the last stanza: he shall die a soldier with honor and a hero with glory. And so he did.

Nearly two hundred years later, the poem now lingers with an uncannily prophetic resonance: Greece was indeed where Byron died—too surreal even for Romanticism, or Yeats’ Irish airman. The birthday poem foreshadows Byron’s vision of himself converging tragically with death as the final resort to reconcile with the living. Without his witness, Greece was salvaged; and yet Byron cannot be salvaged from

The unreached Paradise of our despair,
Which o'er-informs the pencil and the pen,
And overpowers the page where it would bloom again. (*Pilgrimage*; Canto IV.112.7-9)

The “Paradise of our despair” is not Greece, nor a liberated society/nation; it is everything we attach ourselves to in life. Byron profoundly realizes “the unreachedness” because of our mortal futility, and consequently uses the ideological force, the passion, to pursue his *modus vivendi* until the very end. Eventually, he has left to us the unsolved and unsolvable lament of love that perpetuates the affective quality in his own Romantic ideology and inspires our individual way of living. In failing to be a hero for himself he becomes the hero and antihero we love him for. In the end, high in the flight of life as His Lordship once imagined himself, Byron was still “the poor bird whose pinion fluttering down / Wafts unto death the breast it bore so high” (“Last Words on Greece” 7-8).

Conclusion

To conclude this thesis, let me start with a brief recapitulation of the previous chapters. We begin with the striking tension between Romantic poetry and its ideological critiques, wherein the critical paradigm of the latter appears to contradict and fails to duly encapsulate the emotional characteristic of the former. Consequently, critics oftentimes verge on a tendency to resist the emotional depth in the poems so as to remain critical. In chapter 1, as we delve in the ideological critiques, however, we have found that critics themselves are as romantic as the poets while promulgating their own ideologies in the form of cultural study, whatever the nature of their ideologies. Therefore, critics are ironically caught in the ideological forces of Romanticism that they deem uncritical, as though a “vortex.” In chapter 2, we trace back the origin of such ideological forces to the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge, wherein we discern their endeavors to retain a harmonious equipoise between the critical and the emotional, regardless of their evident personal preference for either side of the extreme. As a result, the two predecessors infuse a perplexity in Romanticism that evokes not only empathy but also critical reflection among readers. In chapter 3, through the reading of Shelley and Byron, we have found the possibility of personal ideology, the individual’s way of living, inspired by the very inclusion of so perplexed a way of living in Byron’s own work, which also aligns harmoniously with his own politics in contrast to the usual perception of a mutual exclusion. After all, from such conflicted mindset depicted in the Romantic poetry we discern the “perplexed poetics,” wherein our familiar binaries of ideas resolve into a unity.

Having studied such perplexed poetics, I hope to have drawn attention to the fact that the vertiginous, romantic, and ideological forces inherited in our individual and scholarly enthusiasm for studying Romanticism are almost inevitable if we are to be faithful to the integrity of

Romanticism. The personal and emotional are always counterintuitively involved in our critical processing of these literary texts. Therefore, the contribution of this thesis is, again, a sort of eclecticism in reading Romantic poetry that hopefully echoes the protean nature of Romanticism. The acceptance of a personal connection to and attachments with the texts can potentially turn out to aid our understanding of Romanticism, instead of being a hindrance as conventionally perceived. In so doing, perhaps, the transcendent essence of Romanticism will be perpetuated with its totality not only in the future scholarship, but also in the spirit of many coming ages.

Notes

1. See Bloom's "The Internalization of Quest-Romance".
2. For example, while Romanticism is generally considered to be a reaction to the French Revolution, there are other accounts which also consider Romanticism as a reaction to Enlightenment and/or Industrial Revolution.
3. See Hogle's "Romanticism and the 'Schools' of Criticism and Theory".
4. The resistance, similar to that of "the resistance to theory" in Paul de Man's essay of the same name, is a critical error which Redfield also discussed.
5. William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* offer an example of such duality of themes and ideas, wherein the "companion poems" represent contrasting perspectives based on one phenomenon.
6. Although Abrams's essay "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age" is cited by McGann, Theodore Ziolkowski further observes from Abrams's highly celebrated study of Romanticism that his "grand scheme in *Natural Supernaturalism* is unacceptable [to McGann] because Abrams's understanding of romanticism is so somber that it cannot accommodate a figure like Byron" (281).
7. See Trott's "Wordsworth: The Shape of the Poetic Career".
8. The "double vantage," or "historical dialectic," is a critical approach of New Historicism which McGann advocates in his book. Literary critics of this school tend to analyze the history of ideas in literature, namely the historical phenomena that catalyze literary texts.
9. See Bishop's "Wordsworth and the 'Spots of Time'".

10. See Schulz's "Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the 1800 Preface to Lyrical Ballads" for more biographical details about the Wordsworth-Coleridge controversy.

11. For example, in the 1798 version of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge's archaic spelling (such as "Ancyent") was condemned by the "common people" the *Lyrical Ballads* was intended for.

12. See Byron's satirical poem "Churchill's Grave" and the prose note to the poem from the editorial commentary: "The following poem (as most that I have endeavoured to write) is founded on a fact; and this detail is an attempt at a serious imitation of the style of a great poet—its beauties and its defects: I say, the *style* for ... the thoughts I claim as my own. In this, if there be anything ridiculous, let it be attributed to me ... at least as much as to Mr. Wordsworth, of whom there can exist few greater admirers or deplorers than myself. I have blended what I would deem to be the beauties as well as defects of his style ... it ought to be remembered that in such things, whether there be praise or dispraise, there is always what is called a compliment, however unintentional" (447-448).

13. In fact, without the philosophical speculation, "The Eolian Harp" would seem more of a love poem to Coleridge's wife Sara Fricker.

14. The operation of aeolian harps is based on the Kármán vortex street effect. When the motion of wind "caresses" the strings of the instrument, alternating vortices are shed by the motion, causing the strings to vibrate and consequently create different sounds accordingly to aerodynamics.

15. Chapter's title is line 5 of the same poem cited from a manuscript version in Jerome McGann's *The Complete Poetical Works* of Lord Byron, along with all other lines cited; also "I

am a fool of passion” in other versions. According to the editorial commentary, Byron left the poem untitled and undated when he died (153).

16. The lines cited are from a manuscript version in Jerome McGann’s *The Complete Poetical Works* of Lord Byron. Other versions exist with identical titles, commonly “On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year,” and “Messalonghi” is usually spelled “Missolonghi.” However, the poem was originally untitled; and the commonly received titles are based on the explanatory headings for this poem in Byron’s manuscript. See the editorial commentary for the composition circumstances originally documented by Count Gamba, which also attests that Byron rarely wrote while in Greece: “January 22—This morning Lord Byron came from his bedroom into the apartment where Colonel Stanhope and some friends were assembled, and said, with a smile, ‘You were complaining, the other day, that I never write any poetry now:—this is my birthday, and I have just finished something, which I think, is better than what I usually write’” (151).

17. In fact, Byron’s two other lyrics written in Greece, “Last Words on Greece” and “Love and Death”, also recall historical anecdotes about his romantic love.

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