Romantic Alienation Reconsidered

Eric K.W. Yu
Department of English
National Dong Hwa University

Abstract

Ever since the mid-1940s, due to such influential “visionary” Romantic scholars as Frye, Abrams, Bloom and Hartman, the portrait of the English Romantic poet as a solipsist alienated from his society has been grossly exaggerated and firmly established. Turning away from “ego romance,” Leftist critics use crude economic models to account for Romantic poets’ social alienation. More recent Deconstructionist and New Historicist criticism, in fact, have not gone very far to radically question the deeply problematic understandings of Romantic alienation. Having recourse to the study of the history of reception, the present paper offers a comprehensive critique of Romantic alienation. Borrowing from Hegel’s and Marx’s notions of labor and alienation, the writer tries to rethink Romantic alienation in relation to the rise of professional literary reviewing and the politics of taste during the Romantic Period.

Keywords: alienation, history, reception, Romantic, selfhood
Romantic Alienation Reconsidered

The point of departure for the present paper is the problems with “Visionary Romanticism,” by which I refer to the studies by such influential twentieth century Romantic scholars as Northrop Frye, M. H. Abrams, Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman. There is, of course, a certain theoretical violence in grouping them under the umbrella term “Visionary Romanticism.” But the coinage does have the merit of highlighting some important academic consensus from the mid-1940s down to at least the 1970s: the over-emphasis on the “visionary” or transcendental aspect of English Romanticism and the exaggeration of socially alienated selfhood. Related to this are the firm establishment of the canonical “Big Six,” the conviction that English Romanticism was a more or less homogeneous movement, and the “Great Divide” between “Pre-romanticism” and post-1789 or post-1798 “Romanticism” as a sudden, all-powerful poetic revolution or revolt analogous to and enormously influenced by the French Revolution.

Ever since Visionary Romanticism, selfhood has often been understood in terms of “inwardness” and social estrangement, whether in a rather vacuous philosophic perspective of “solipsism,” in a primarily psychoanalytic perspective about narcissism, or in a Marxist perspective as the effects of social alienation under the capitalist mode of production. Deconstruction has brought a rigorous questioning of self-presence and shifted the attention to aporias, textuality or linguistic revisionism. Yet the general conception of a “Romantic revolt” still persists. For Hartman, the Romantics are “clairvoyant rather than blind precursors of later movements that tended to disown them while simplifying the radical character of their art” (Wilderness 47). For Tilottama Rajan, “the current debate between organicist and deconstructionist critics over the nature of Romanticism was originally waged by the Romantics themselves and was not resolved in favor of either side” (Dark Interpreter 19). In other words, “romantic literature marks the dawning of an age of linguistic anxiety” (“Deconstruction” 317) and “is better seen as a literature involved in the restless process of self-examination, and in search of a model of discourse which accommodates rather than simplifies its ambivalence toward the inherited equation of art with idealization” (Dark Interpreter 25). Instead of transcendence, we now have ambivalence, tensions and unresolved
contradictions. Curiously, the decentering of the self has actually left the stereotype of the Romantic as a solipsist almost unchanged.

With the so-called “return to History” since the early 1980s, one would have expected a closer scrutiny of the production and reception of Romantic poetry. But the main concern in such “New Historicists” as Majorie Levinson, David Simpson and Alan Liu is textual explication, not reading formations in history. Most troubling in recent Romantic studies is the notion of “Romantic ideology,” made well-known by Jerome McGann’s *The Romantic Ideology* (1983). “The scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its work,” McGann complains, “are dominated by a Romantic ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations” (1). Later in the 1980s Clifford Siskin and Levinson repeated more or less the same charge. The peculiar thing is, regardless of their commitment to history, they fail to see that the consolidation of the so-called “Romantic ideology” or “Romantic discourse,” supposed to be at least one and a half centuries old, is mainly due to the authority of twentieth-century Romantic scholarship. In condemning the visionary critics’ and the Romantics’ own “naiveté,” recent Leftists only perpetuate the portrait of the English Romantic as an “ineffectual angel” (Arnold) or “a victim of romantic melancholy… incapable of action” (Babbitt 243). In what follows I shall engage the major visionary critics’ views on selfhood, then I shall turn to related Leftist scholarships and further reflect on the problematics of Romantic alienation.

The portrait of the Romantic as a solipsist was not created *ex nihilo*. A lonely meditative figure in the landscape was indeed quite popular with respect to gardening, painting and poetry long before the advent of the “New School of Poetry” represented by Wordsworth and Coleridge. “No landscape garden of the eighteenth century was complete,” John Dixon Hunt reminds us, “without its hermitage or even its hermit” (1). They are symbols of solitary meditation based on “the austere regimen of the hermit fathers” and akin to the “Pre-romantic” tradition of retirement as exemplified by the Countess of Winchilsea’s “A Nocturnal Reverie” (1713), much admired by Wordsworth. The Augustan invocation of well-established traditions of eremiticism or pastoralism, of “the hermit fathers, myths of Arcadia and Paradise, the *beatus ille* theme, the melancholy syndrome” (6) and the soft music of *sic transit gloria mundi* aptly distinguished the more refined taste of the aristocracy or *grande bourgeoisie* from “vulgarity” in what Addison called “Mob-readers.” Despite the posing, the tradition of “rural retreat” and
solitary meditation fittingly served the self-elevation of the “man of Taste.” When the Romantics like Wordsworth and Shelley used the solitary figure in their poetry, they were turning to an older convention. What characterizes Wordsworth’s poetry is not just “pensive solitude” but the willingness to step out of the *hortus conclusus* and to reach out, at least intellectually, for the low and rustic life. The theoretical violence of Visionary Romanticism is to reduce Romantic poetry into an “ego romance” of the poet, where preceding cultural and poetic conventions are almost irrelevant, and poetic effusions are understood as “pure” lyricism, the expression of “fugitive” emotions voided of larger sociocultural meanings.

Bloom’s “Internalization of Quest-Romance” is one of the best known essays in Visionary Romanticism. His thesis is simple and eloquent: Romanticism is marked by acute self-consciousness; the Romantic quest proceeds “from nature to the imagination’s freedom,” which “is frequently purgatorial, redemptive in direction but destructive of the social self” (6), and eventually, to the poet-hero’s “own mature powers,” when, having overcome Selfhood, “the triumphant Imagination” turns “outward” (17). Detached from the concrete social context, “nature” and “imagination” are like shadowy figures in Bloom’s revised version of the “Freudian psychodynamics” akin to ego psychology. Radicalism is invoked by Bloom only as a prelude soon to be forgotten, marginalized from the “Real Man, the Imagination.” “In the Prometheus stage,” Bloom elaborates, “the quest is allied to the libido’s struggle against repressiveness, and nature is an ally, though always a wounded and sometimes a withdrawn one.” “In the Real Man, the Imagination stage, nature is the immediate though not the ultimate antagonist,” and “the final enemy to be overcome is a recalcitrance in the self… [or] Selfhood…” (11-12). Bloom’s “master narrative,” however elegant, is strikingly limited in its scope of application, for only two of the “Big Six” are able to reach the ultimate stage of the Romantic quest. Only “Blake and Wordsworth had long lives, and each completed his version of this dialectic” (17). Most troubling about Bloom’s “Romantic quest” is not its utter inability to accommodate what Ann Mellor calls “Romantic irony,” but the ideological implications of its compelling teleological “plot.” With this interpretive model, what William Hazlitt saw as the “leveling” muse in the *Lyrical Ballads*, along with Coleridge’s ambivalent feelings in *Fears in Solitude*, not to say radicalism in Southey’s *Joan of Arc*, Wordsworth’s “Salisbury Plain,” and Coleridge’s Bristol lectures, are all deemed irrelevant to the poet-hero’s “own mature powers” or the “more imaginative vision.” All the complicated
reactions to Jacobinism and to the failure of more liberal English social reforms are reduced to a melodrama of the mind: the French Revolution is remembered only for its arousal of millennium expectations and its precipitation in mental crises to be “triumphantly” resolved; the “spirit of the age” is “internalized” as a “revolution” of subjectivity, the victory of the solitary poetic imagination. Coleridge appears merely as a flawed genius, a damaged archangel who “gave up the [Romantic] quest.” His vita activa of public lectures, topical journalism and powerful “table talks” is to be slighted and “unremembered.” And yet how could one be so oblivious of the fact that the poet of “Limbo” and “Work without Hope” is also an earnest Christian apologist and the “Sage of Newgate,” who tried to gulp down almost all branches of contemporary knowledge?

Hartman’s notion of “anti-self-consciousness,” at first sight, seems to be a corrective for other visionary critics’ obsessions with alienated selfhood. But in fact it is only a more sophisticated variant. Hartman sees “the violence in France as well as the slower trauma of industrialization” as merely things that “coincided with Wordsworth’s inner sense of irreparable change: they foreboded a cosmic wounding of Nature – of natural rhythms, of organic growth – which reinforced his fear of an apocalyptic rate of change and nature-loss” (Wordsworth’s Poetry xvi). Again, Hartman underplays the communicative and ideological aspects of poetry, emphasizing that “subjectivity – even solipsism” is the heart of Romantic poetry (“Anti-Self-Consciousness” 53). The Romantic poets’ “self-alienation” and “self-consciousness” are taken for granted, for “mind has its blissful islands as well as its mountains, its deeps, and treacherous crossroads” (54). Wordsworth, for Hartman, “cannot find his theme because he already has it: himself” (53). In Keats, despite his “negative capability,” “the ‘egotistical sublime’ remains” (55). The Romantic predicament is thus a mere matter of personal psychology. To save itself out of this morass, the self must interact with “that self within the self” (52), “unconsciousness,” “unselfconsciousness,” or “anti-self-consciousness,” as it is variously labeled (55). But nature in Hartman is also the false guide. The most important conclusion drawn from his study of Wordsworth is the famous “via naturaliter negativa”: “the brooding soul [moves] out of itself, toward nature first, then toward humanity” (55). But this “growth into self-consciousness” is never steady”: “Wordsworth insisted on the creativeness of the mind and foretold its wedding to nature, yet what I saw mainly was the solipsism inherent in a great imagination, the despair tracking apocalyptic hope, the disabling shadow of ecstatic
memories, and passion betrayed into compulsive empathy” (Wordsworth's Poetry xvii). For textual explication of The Prelude, Hartman’s dialectic is no doubt subtle and interesting. Yet his attitude toward the move “toward humanity” is deeply problematic. No real disciple of “Natural Supernaturalism,” Hartman is far more interested in Wordsworth’s “poetics of error,” the curious displacements, “the very movement of imagination’s eccentric path” (xix) than the humanization of imagination, which, for Hartman, is necessarily self-deceiving. Valorizing the rare moment of the Snowdon-consciousness, Hartman finds Wordsworth’s poetry “after this peak from 1805 to the 1814 Excursion… a fall because post-self-consciousness is unimaginable in the Hegelian method,” argues Alan Liu (515). Hartman’s attitude toward The Excursion is especially ambivalent. On the one hand, he states that the poem can “offer us not a vision, but a voice” and “its failure, and to some extent its distinction, reside in that” (292). On the other hand, he confesses that “to read carefully its nine books is a massively depressing experience” (292). Finding in the poem no interesting “psychopathology of everyday life,” Hartman at last praises the Wanderer’s “noble description of the Chain of Being envisioned at its fullest and most dynamic” (Wordsworth's Poetry 322), and concludes that “the specter of selfhood-solitude is purged, and imagination circulates rejoicing through infinite arteries of links” (323). However, Wordsworth’s will to more direct social involvement after the so-called “Great Decade” (1798-1807), as exemplified by his pamphlet The Convention of Cintra (1809) and his patriotic sonnets, has utterly no place in both Bloom’s quest-romance and Hartman’s dialectic of the self. The irony is, as Stephen Gill puts it, “Wordsworth began to matter to his contemporaries just as, in the judgment of most critics [after Matthew Arnold], he stopped being an important poet” (viii). It is no accident that Bloom considers The Excursion “an aesthetic disaster” (“Internalization” 19) while Hartman sees it as “the one great defect” (Wordsworth’s Poetry 292). For the visionary critics love unearthly visions or “pure” lyrical effusions to no immediate social ends. Having overstated the turn from “the mirror” to “the lamp,” they shy away from the intense lamplight of Romantic – they would rather say “Victorian” – moralizing. Comparing Wordsworth’s more didactic The Excursion and his more personal The Prelude, a recent critic remarked that Wordsworth “gave his Victorian epic to the Romantics; his Romantic one, to the Victorians” (Johnston 291). If we have found this puzzling, or even regrettable, we should ask ourselves whether our stereotyping of the Romantics and the Victorians has seriously gone wrong. In The Romantic
Ideology, McGann concedes that Hartman’s early study of Romanticism is faithful to the Romantics themselves:

Hartman’s formulations are well known because they represent a contemporary academic consensus about Romantic literature. The strength of the position lies in the accuracy with which it reflects, or translates, the original materials. His is what Peckham would call a “pure” response to Romanticism, that is, one which is, despite its new terminology, “free of non-Romantic notions inconsistent with the Romantic… metaphysic.” (41)

Actually, such a notion of alienated selfhood depends very much upon a selective reading of Romantic poetry, the reluctance to engage the Romantics’ writings other than verse, and the indifference to the history of reception. The Romantics’ own views seem to be more diverse and ambivalent. Although in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth talks of “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings… recollected in tranquility,” he also stresses, perhaps even more emphatically, that the poet is “the rock of defense of human nature” and “a man speaking to men,” that “each of [his poems] has a worthy purpose” (*Wordsworth* 735-58). In other words, Wordsworth’s understanding of poetry is not merely “expressive” but communicative and also moral. It should be noted that Wordsworth’s early admirers were not so much concerned with emotionality per se, but with metrical beauty and Humanistic values. John Wilson, Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh and an important critic of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, valued the *Lyrical Ballads* next to his Bible when he was young (Rannie 250). Wordsworth himself gave immense attention to *The Excursion* (1814) because he wished to save himself from the charge of “egotism” and “puerility” directed to his *Poems* (1807). *The Excursion* was conceived as “a philosophical poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society,” as a part of his never finished grand “edifice” *The Recluse*, intended to be “a literary work that might live” (*Wordsworth* 589). The curious fate is that *The Prelude*, when eventually published in 1850, did not make an immediate impact, but with the rise of Visionary Romanticism in this century, it has eventually replaced *The Excursion* as Wordsworth’s *opus magnum*. Charles Lamb, however, loved Book IV, “Despondency Corrected,” of *The Excursion* for its “moral grandeur,” “imagery,” and its “tender personal appeals” (Reiman A 2: 829). Jonathan Bate reminds us that: “The primary attraction of *The Excursion* for readers from its first reviewers
through Ruskin to Leslie Stephen was its ethical content; it appeared to be Wordsworth’s crowning achievement because it was the fullest embodiment of his philosophy” (64). Arnold is the first important critic who claimed that neither *The Excursion* nor *The Prelude* were Wordsworth’s best works. Bloom mentions that Hazlitt and Byron also considered the poem a failure. But their objections in fact are quite unlike Bloom’s or Hartman’s. Byron, in a letter to Leigh Hunt, belittles Wordsworth’s poetic talent and, relating *The Excursion* to mysticism, claims that: “who can understand him?” (*Letters* 4: 324) His comment goes well with a certain contemporary view on the “Lake Poets” as eccentrics who, confining themselves to the countryside, do not “know the world.” That Hazlitt is critical of the later Wordsworth is in part due to his detestation of Wordsworth’s apostasy. In his review of *The Excursion*, Hazlitt compares Wordsworth unfavorably with Young and Cowley and laments the lack of primitivistic or Gothic coloring in Wordsworth’s poetry. Furthermore, Hazlitt objects to Wordsworth’s idealization of the country folk and sees Wordsworth’s clothing of “the most insignificant things” with excessive “borrowed grandeur” as a breach of decorum (*Reiman A 2*: 527-28). Above all, with his usual exaggeration Hazlitt claims that Wordsworth writes “as if there were nothing but himself and the universe.” While Hazlitt finds *The Excursion* too “egotistical,” our visionary critics, symptomatically, regret that the poem is too much burdened with “didactic intrusions” and is thus not genuinely lyrical.

In Visionary Romanticism much effort has been given to systematize Coleridge’s “metaphysics” in the light of German aesthetics. But the prize of such systematization is not only over-generalization but the oversight of specific social context, especially with respect to eighteenth-century poetic traditions, and the sociopolitical implications of Romantic poetry. Politics is not necessarily “Jacobin”; it may be Commonwealthian, republican, or Tory, and still should not be evaded. The deepest problem of the visionary critics is precisely that they too readily equate radicalism with the guillotine, but at the same time they are weary of Romantic apostasy. Alluding to the history-making French Revolution, foregrounding the “apocalypse of imagination” while evading political contents or subversive innuendoes, the visionary critics, not the Romantic poets themselves, have turned what Irving Babbitt calls a “sham religion” into a “Romantic ideology.” I do not agree with Marilyn Butler’s suggestion that the rise of Visionary Romanticism was directly related to academic radicalism of the 1960s, or, as Martin
and Jarvis put it, a matter of “post-Romantic social non-conformists eager to find ancestral cultural-heroes” (xiv). However, it is tempting to see the curious emphasis on English Romanticism as a “revolution” rather than gradual and uneven transformation, as a “politics of vision” rather than a “weak grasp upon the actual,” unearthly rather than Bohemian, and the underlying valorization of the sensitive individual at odds with the “money-nexus” and Philistinism, as consonant with a certain post-war academic Liberalism.

Two pioneers of British Leftist scholarship on Romantic alienation are Raymond Williams and Marilyn Butler. A common beginning of their studies is the exaggerated portrait of the Romantic as an egoistic individual alienated from the public. Given the influence of Visionary Romanticism, it is not surprising to find that in Williams’ famous study *Culture and Society* (1958), the term “Romantic artists” refers mainly to Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Byron, Shelley and Keats, rather than to Joseph Warton, Edward Young, Thomas Gray and William Cowper, or to Scott and Crabbe. The sextet in the canon of “Visionary Romanticism” are all included, though the less visionary Southey still remains. Had Williams included Scott in his discussion and attended closely to the equally popular Byron, nevertheless, his conclusion could have been very different. Perhaps Williams’ merit is also his Achilles’ heel: when most of the Romantic scholars in the 1950s were obsessed with the influence of the French Revolution on the “apocalypse of imagination,” Williams turned, unfortunately too exclusively, to the much neglected scenario of the Industrial Revolution and the commodification of literature. In the chapter entitled “The Romantic Artist,” Williams does not mention “alienation,” nor does he allude to the young Marx. But his characterization of “a radical change… in ideas of art, of the artist, and of their place in society” foregrounds the Romantics’ “feeling of dissatisfaction with ‘the public’” (49, 51). He cites Blake, Shelley and Keats, and treats Wordsworth’s “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” to *Poems* (1815) as paradigmatic of an “acute and general” change in the “habitual attitude towards the ‘public’” (51). What Williams has ignored is the important fact that all the Romantics he cites, including Wordsworth at the time he wrote the essay, suffered from the lack of popularity or from attacks by their contemporary reviewers, which might help explain their uneasiness. In Williams’ list of “Romantic artists,” most were not very successful writers during the Romantic Age, now often taken to extend from about 1798 to 1830. Best-selling poetry during that period was written by Scott,
Byron, John Keble, and Robert Pollok. Savaged by hostile reviewers like Francis Jeffrey, Wordsworth’s standing was especially low between 1870 and 1814. His popularity could not even match that of George Crabbe. And it was not until well into the Victorian Period that Shelley and Keats gained high reputation. According to Williams’ account, the Romantic predicament is general and grounded in the “institution of commercial publishing” (52) initiated in “the third and fourth decades of the eighteenth century” with the growth of “a large middle-class reading public” (50). Due to “liabilities to caprice” (50) and “professional pressures” (55) in the commodified and “impersonal” market, the Romantics during the early nineteenth century developed a negative habitual attitude towards the public. The most interesting and suggestive part of Williams’ study is that, as defensive responses to this predicament: “a theory of the ‘superior reality’ of art, as the seat of imaginative truth, was receiving increasing emphasis… [and] the idea of the independent creative writer, the autonomous genius, was becoming a kind of rule” (50). “In the continuous pressure of living, the free play of genius found it increasingly difficult to consort with the free play of the market, and the difficulty was not solved, but cushioned, by an idealization” (63). The mystification of art as transcending the mundane and the artist as autonomous genius, in other words, is “a self-pleading ideology” (63). In Anthony Easthope’s more recent rephrasing à la Georg Lukács, “Romantic ideology is a compensatory structure in which an imaginary subjective unity seeks to make good an objective lack” (21). However eloquent, such arguments are ultimately based on a rather crude mode of production: the change from aristocratic patronage, through subscription patronage, to “commercial publishing.” Assuming for the moment that this generalization is sound, one still has to ask: why is it that only some Romantic poets, rather than earlier poets or other writers, first dramatized the unhappy relation with the reading public? Given that most scholars have placed a great emphasis on the impact of the French Revolution and related radical intellectual currents on Romanticism, it is astonishing to find that politics in the sense of partisan or class conflicts plays absolutely no part in Williams’ scenario.

Butler’s Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries (1981) elaborates on Williams’ argument about the Romantic predicament as a general condition of alienation with respect to the “man of letters” or “artist-intellectual”:

Social changes, which put pressure on all sections of society, certainly did not spare the artist. It could be said that urbanization and the
growth of a literate leisured class gave him an unprecedented freedom and status, as compared with his lot in the days of the aristocratic patron. But the new conditions, an art marketed rather than an art commissioned, also imposed upon the artist-intellectual the symptoms of disorientation…. Alienation is perhaps at the root of them, and it is seen as early as 1750 in that hero and archetype of intellectuals, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the sensitive, near-paranoid ill at ease in an aristocratic world…. With the modern man of letters, modern literary Angst was born. (71)

Butler’s emphasis on the “symptoms of disorientation” and “peculiar strains” imposed by the market is reminiscent of Williams’ emphasis on the capricious “free play of the market.” But she goes further in connecting the artist-intellectual’s predicament to “the frustrating and alienating experience of other citizens in an increasingly complex and specialized environment” under a certain capitalist mode of production. If, as Butler suggests, “the writer was not in a unique position,” then she has to explain why only some Romantic poets and earlier artists, but not writers of popular novels and journalistic essays, or the doctors, lawyers and other urban professionals dramatized such effects of alienation. Why, one may ask, did Pope and Defoe so cheerfully accept the new literary market while some of the Romantic poets did not? Is it just a matter of the partial change from subscription patronage to book-selling through publishers and bookshops? If “professional pressures” means the obligation to conform to public taste and the need to write in great haste, then Scott is a good example showing exactly how a writer could handle such pressures without distress. “I love to have the press thumping, clattering and banging in my ear,” Scott wrote in his Journal. “It creates the necessity which always makes me work best” (122). If “professional pressures” means the difficulty of attaining popularity and economic security, then William Collins and even Samuel Johnson had suffered without much grudging. If the expression means the danger of political persecution, Leigh Hunt had been one such victim. However, personal or professional frustrations did not necessarily make their writings particularly melancholic or angry. Retelling his experience in jail as a result of having insulted the Prince Regent in print, Hunt is in fact quite good-humored. Looking at a small garden outside his cell, Hunt will indulge himself in recollecting a passage of an Italian poet, or will “shut [his] eyes… and affect to think [himself] hundreds of miles off” (244). If anonymity, as Williams
and Butler imply, is the key, then one might well ask in what sense most of the
3,000 or so readers of *The Spectator* were not “anonymous” to Addison and Steele.
That Butler has taken Rousseau as the representative of the “modern literary Angst”
is quite telling. In the case of Rousseau, the morass actually had nothing to do
with the mode of literary production or the bourgeois reading public, but much to
do with his temperament and his ill relations with other people, including not only
his aristocratic patrons but also his friends like Diderot and David Hume.
Psychologically, as Paul Johnson observes, Rousseau “emerged from childhood
with a strong sense of deprivation and … self-pity” (5). Given his vocational
ambition, his self-conceit and past failure, and dependence on women, on the
aristocratic patrons and audiences, and his social and educational ideas ahead of his
times, his notorious social relations are quite understandable.

In fact, the labels “writer,” “poet,” “artist,” “intellectual” and “man of letters”
shuffling in Williams’ and Butler’s studies do not denote quite the same things.
“Intellectuals” as we commonly see it today are not necessarily professional writers;
with the *philosophes* as the exemplum, they are often defined by their critical
attitude towards society and government and by their will to social reform or
revolution. In modern times, Philip Rieff suggests, “the major political vocation
of the intellectuals has lain in the enunciation and pursuit of the ideal” (32). As
radicals or idealists, of course many English Romantic poets were frustrated by
brutal social realities. Coleridge, especially, did not always fit easily with the role
of what Antonio Gramsci calls the “traditional intellectual,” even after his apostasy.
Another reason why the Romantic poets were more likely to be dissatisfied by the
public is that they refused to become “hacks,” following some popular formulae
they found distasteful or too vulgar. If we mean by “men of letters” those
professional writers who make a living primarily through publication in newspapers
and magazines, then we should note that in journalistic writing rarely would they
indulge in anti-public sentiments. In her discussion of Coleridge as a new type of
“man of letters,” Butler aptly highlights Coleridge’s persona in essay writing, his
“dignified, disinterested public tone, so typical of discourse in the Enlightenment,
which is with us still in the leader-columns of *The Times* and the *New York Times*”
(71). Generic norms certainly govern what could or could not be said. It is
significant that almost only in their private letters or journals did the Romantic
writers and their predecessors vent their uneasy feelings about the public or about
their professional status. Wordsworth is perhaps the first famous writer who
daringly expressed in an 1815 essay his dislike of the reviewers and his defiance of popularity and the “unthinking” readers. His feelings were by no means new; new were the occasion and the form in which they were rendered into public discourse. With Byron and the French Bohemians, interestingly, defiance of the public could be “capitalized” and become a salable mark of personality. At any rate, there is no compelling evidence, with respect to our “Big Six,” that “the public posture of confident integrity,” as Butler suggests, belies “a syndrome of private neuroses.” And her bold claim that “private neuroses have remained characteristic of Western intellectuals from that day to this” (71) has yet to be substantiated.

Butler is more helpful in pointing out the similarity between the Romantic and the Renaissance artist. Citing Rudolf and Margot Wittkower’s Born Under Saturn on the Italian Renaissance artists’ eccentric, Bohemian or saturnine “artistic temperament,” Butler claims that: “What happened in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century may be at most a further series of social changes, which threw the emphasis on to the writer, even more than the painter and composer, as a man representative of the educated ‘professional’ class in everything but his eloquence” (72). To examine this general thesis, one must first clarify the actual conditions of the Renaissance artists. The “artistic temperament” of those painters and sculptors, one must note, was not so much a matter of “uncertainties built into the system of patronage.” Instead, the Wittkowers’ account seems to suggest that it was the rising status of a few highly successful individual artists, that fired some aspiring practitioners into great expectations. The ambitious artists had to fight for precarious freedom and esteem against the still persistent old public contempt on the one hand, and restrictions by the guilds as a powerful institutional force on the other hand. Quoting E. Zilsel’s statistics, they wish to demonstrate that the status of the artists during the Renaissance, though improving, was still quite low. In England as perhaps all over Europe, we should note that there was absolutely no sign indicating that the status of writers fell significantly from the Renaissance to the early nineteenth century. On the contrary, the rise of journalism and the commercial book market, made possible by the expansion of the middle-class readership since the Augustan Age, had enabled some professional writers to enjoy great economic success and literary fame. Scott and Byron were two prominent examples during the Romantic Period. With respect to economic security, the English Romantic writers were not any worse than the Italian Renaissance artists. To complicate the situation, among the six arch-Romantics, only Coleridge was a
truly professional writer. The others had other financial resources. Besides, patronage of one form or another still remained during the Romantic Period. Wordsworth, for instance, enjoyed “many years of early liberty” in part because of a legacy of £900 left by his friend Raisley Calvert; the Beaumonts and Lord Lowther also offered him accommodations or financial assistance. Besides, Wordsworth received an annuity and he became a stamp distributor for Westmorland in 1813. With a patrician background, Byron and Shelley could live rather leisurely without jobs, even though they might often encounter temporary economic difficulties. Blake was a painter and engraver and little known as a poet. Keats the “blue coat boy” gave up his medical apprenticeship for poetry at twenty-one. Although troubled by financial problems and ill health, Keats was still able to travel around the British isles and to Italy. Unlike Coleridge, at least he did not have a wife and children to feed. If by “professional pressures” we mean financial security related to the career of writing, then only Coleridge felt the full burden. Robert Southey, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt were all men of letters, but unlike Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley, they seldom despised the public nor complained about their profession. Byron’s showy anti-social sentiments make an exceptional case. It must be stressed that Byron was not so much against the public as his fans but against his critics, as he dramatizes in his notorious English Bards and Scotch Reviewers. If he appeared to despise his readers, as a glamorous individualist he affected to despise so many other people.

If by alienation Butler has in mind the condition of “alienated labor” in a factory production line, she has to explain the irony that some creative poets who could afford to look down upon bourgeois city life and whose labor is supposed to be the expression of their individuality still had to suffer, perhaps even more seriously, from social alienation or professional pressures. Wordsworth, one must remember, presented himself in front of the public as a poet living in rural retirement. The Leftist argument in terms of the commodification of literature, in the last analysis, has little explanatory force.

One alleged symptom of Romantic alienation is the anxiety about poetic labor, or in David Simpson’s words, “anxieties about the business of poetry, and its place in the labor cycle and in the ‘respectable’ world” (35). Simpson argues in Wordsworth’s Historical Imagination (1987) that “anxieties about labor, poetry and property” is apparent throughout Wordsworth’s 1807 Poems (26). And yet despite his interesting and meticulous textual explication, Simpson has not addressed a
fundamental question: why did Wordsworth, rather than Milton, Spenser, Pope, Blake, or Scott, in the first place, suffer from such anxieties? A mere allusion to the Puritan work ethic will not do. A more comprehensive account, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, must include a historical account of the changing literary taste, of the curious vocational identity of the poet, of the rise of literary reviewing and of particular interpersonal relationship. Besides, as Brian Goldberg reviewed, “critics have recently suggested that Wordsworth transforms his personal anxiety about money and his ambivalence about the status of poetic work into sources of imaginative power” (327). It is hardly convincing to see poetic labor in terms of alienated labor in a factory.

Perhaps the best part of Hartman’s *Wordsworth’s Poetry* is not the famous “via naturaliter negativa” theme but the shrew observation that self-consciousness is not peculiar to Romanticism. Introspection and care of the self are not even peculiar to the moderns. George Steiner reminds us that self-contemplation and the attendant discipline of confession were essential in the Christian’s struggle against sin. Michel Foucault in his *Le Souci de soi* has detailed the “examen de conscience” in pagan Antiquity, though Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self* stresses that “radical reflexivity,” the adoption of the “first-person” standpoint, to be “aware of our awareness… [or to] try to experience our experiencing,” properly began with St. Augustine (131-32). With respect to the early modern England, Stephen Bygrave has noted “the new lexicon of introspection which enters the English language in the period of Shakespeare’s plays… such… as ‘identity,’ ‘characterization,’ ‘conscious,’ ‘idiosyncrasy’ and ‘individuality’” and that “the *OED* cites nearly thirty new compounds with ‘self’ in the period 1580-1610” (8). Christopher Caudwell argues that “all the period from Marlowe to Milton was the… assertion of the self” (63). In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt, influenced by Max Weber, traces the habit of “self-analysis” and “extreme egocentricity” in Daniel Defoe’s characters to Calvinism. Stephen Greenblatt cautions that “after all, there are always selves – a sense of personal order, a characteristic mode of address to the world, a structure of bounded desires – and always some elements of deliberate shaping in the formation and expression of identity” (1). In any case, what Hartman calls “the shared fact of self-consciousness” had been well established long before the advent of Romanticism. As far as poetry is concerned, the more important thing is not, as Hartman suggests, “the way each poet faces it” (6) but the way each poet writes it. A specific question is whether there are some
characteristic themes concerning introspection or solitary meditations in Romantic poetry. Some cues can be found in Abrams’ “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric.” With its emphasis on the transformation of loco-descriptive poetry into the Romantic lyric, Abrams’ article is remarkably similar to Hartman’s “Inscriptions and Romantic Poetry.” Again, lyricism is seen as the essence of Romanticism. But unlike Hartman, Abrams does not hold that lyricism is necessarily related to precarious thoughts or random feelings. Nor does he focuses narrowly on introspection per se. Rather, he alerts us to the affinity between Romantic meditations and “their closest analogue in the devotional poems of the seventeenth century” (225). One might indeed trace morbidity and inwardness in Romantic poetry to the expression of “soul-sickness” in Romantic poetry to the expression of “soul-sickness” in the early Judeo-Christian tradition, to the penitential experience of the religious elite. The self in Sir Thomas Wyatt’s translation of the penitential psalms, in Stephen Greenblatt’s reading, is “the individual, cut off from his kinsmen and followers” and suffering from “an unmistakably personal crisis of consciousness” (116-17), no less introspective, guilt-ridden and alienated than any of the English Romantics. In fact the biggest difference in the Romantic lyric is the inscription of “specific locality” – the record of place and time of composition or of the excursion on which the poem is supposed to be based. This observation is a very important corrective to the usual exaggeration that the Romantic self engulfed the external world, that “Romantic nature poetry… was an anti-nature poetry” (Bloom, “Internalization” 9). Why, then, do the Romantics pay such a great attention to the seemingly trivial particulars of place and time? To answer this question, I shall return to the issue of Romantic lyricism and examine it in terms of the expressive view of selfhood as we find in Hegel’s discussion of private property and in the young Marx’s discussion of productive labor. Both Butler and Terry Eagleton have used the term “alienation” in their studies of the Romantics’ estrangement from the public. By “alienation” they probably allude to Marx’s 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, which was first published in 1932 and translated by T.B. Bottomore into English in the early 1960s. Marx’s notion of alienation (*Entfremdung*), borrowed from Hegel and developed in the *Manuscripts*, has been popularized by Erich Fromm and widely known in the Anglophone intellectual circles. It is a pity that neither Butler nor Eagleton go directly to Hegel and Marx for critical insights. In what follows, I shall first draw the reader’s attention to Walter Jackson Bate’s *The Burden of the*
Past and the English Poet (1970) and then discuss the expressive view shared by Hegel and Marx.

Intimidated by past literary achievements, the modern poet finds it hard to write anything new, to “differ in order to secure identity” (8) – this is Bate’s famous theme, a more sophisticated version of which is found in Bloom’s notorious Anxiety of Influence (1973). Although Bate tends to see this as a general predicament all writers from Dryden to the present day suffer, he does highlight some important changes during the eighteenth century which are relevant to our discussion. One was the deepening and spreading of the concept of “originality” since the 1730s and 1740s. “Add to the social appeal of the concept of ‘originality’ its association with the individual’s ‘identity’… as contrasted with the more repressive and dehumanizing aspects of organized life” (104). Furthermore, the ideal of originality grew with “an ancillary ideal: that of sincerity” (107). What I wish to point out is that lyricism, sincerity and originality are closely related. Romantic lyricism, in a sense, is the expression of “private” or “personal” sentiments. To better understand the “lyric turn,” one must ask what the “personal” precisely means, which would bring in such notions as privacy, particularity and normalcy. Privacy, according to Fernand Braudel, “was an eighteenth century innovation” (308-309). Originated from the minority Protestant groups’ struggle for the freedom of religious beliefs against civil authorities, it gradually became a realm of personal beliefs “extended to include all beliefs that in the believer’s eye do not endanger others” (Munro 8). For the radicals during the 1760s and 1770s and those after 1793, the awareness of “personal” or “private” thoughts and feelings versus the authorities and the general public must have become more acute. Coleridge’s apology for his “querulous egotism” in the preface to his Poems on Various Subjects (1796) may best be understood in this perspective. “Compositions resembling those of the present volume are not infrequently condemned for their querulous egotism,” wrote Coleridge. The main reason for Coleridge’s apprehension was not that his poems were too “lyrical” in the sense of excessive sentimentalism, but that, I would suggest, his were “prompted by very different feelings” (1135). Coleridge, then belonging to what Wordsworth called “the odious class of men called democrats,” must be well aware of the fact that some of his “effusions” were simply too “different” for many of his readers who were no friends of Joseph Priestley or John Thewall. Included in this volume were such pro-radical poems as “To Priestley” and “To Erskine,” and the more
ambivalent ones like “Religious Musings.” What was largely an ideological problem in Coleridge’s defense was disguised as a generic one: “But egotism is to be condemned then only when it offends against time and place, as in History or an Epic Poem” (135-36). Against his probable disclaimers, Coleridge skillfully persuades them: “Surely it would be candid not merely to ask whether the Poem pleases ourselves, but to consider whether or no there may not be others to whom it is well-calculated to give an innocent pleasure” (1136). Coleridge, as a poet whose “egotism” “leads us to communicate our feelings to others” is, as he would has it, “innocent.” The appeal to “poetic license” was, in a sense, an extension of the concept of “privacy.”

All through the eighteenth century, individualism had not only developed in the sense of acknowledgement and toleration of other people’s opinions and behaviors but also in the sense of a curiosity about their difference. Once the reading public was interested in “private” lives, not only in what someone else as a particular individual did but also how he or she felt, then “personal feelings” became something valuable in literature. Even in the heyday of the neo-Classic quest for universals, we already detect in Defoe’s novel an immense interest in the “private” lives of different people, including thieves and prostitutes. The later rise of sentimental novels and the interest in biographical and autobiographical writings certainly paved the way toward the acceptance of lyricism as an essential element of poetry. In a passage added to his preface to the 1797 edition of Poems by Coleridge, Lamb and Llyod, Coleridge had said: “If I could judge of others by myself, I should not hesitate to affirm, that the most interesting passages in our most interesting Poems, are those in which the Author develops his own feelings” (Complete Poetical Works 2: 1144). “Spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” is of course a key phrase in Wordsworth’s preface to the Lyrical Ballads. Keats’ idea that good poetry is the “true voice of feeling” and J.S. Mill’s statement that “the poetry of a poet is feeling itself” (Essays 357) represents further emphasis on lyricism in poetry. On the other hand, the increasing demand for literary originality probably also reflected a deepened consciousness of private property, a result of the increasing commercialization of literature and of culture in general. In the older days when literature was not yet a cashable product, when copyright laws were non-existent or seldom implemented, and when personality of the writer had little to do with the popularity of his writing, the concern with originality was less urgent. Given the widening concern with individuality and private property
not only in England but also in other advanced countries in Europe, it is not surprising that both Hegel and Marx theorized on selfhood in relation to private property, labor and personality.

“Property is the embodiment of personality,” Hegel writes in Philosophy of Right (51). For Hegel, there are three ways we can acquire property: “We take possession of a thing (a) by directly grasping it physically, (b) by forming it, and (c) by merely marking it as ours” (54). Among the three, the second means of securing private property is the most important, for through one’s labor or “forming” activity one objectifies or expresses one’s will and individuality. “When I impose a form on something, the thing’s determinate character as mine acquires an independent externality,” Hegel argues (56). Marx follows Hegel in seeing property as essential to self-realization. In the Second Manuscript he argues against the negation of “the personality of man in every sphere” in “crude and unreflective communism” and urges for “genuine appropriation” of private property rather than its abolition (153). For Marx, self-conscious “productive life” characterizes man’s “species-life” (127). Through the objectification of labor, the individual “reproduces himself... actively and in a real sense, and he sees his own reflection in a world which he has constructed” (128). The objects he produces “then confirm and realize his individuality” (161). Writing lyric poetry, in this sense, is indeed an ideal way of self-realization. Lyric poetry, in other words, is the poet’s perfect form of private property. One feasible explanation of the specification of place and time in Romantic lyrics, in this light, is the authentication of the poem as genuinely personal “effusion,” true expression of he poet’s particular self. Bowles was one of the first who stressed that his poems were descriptive of “his personal feelings”: which “naturally rose” from his real experiences during excursions. The avoidance of “poetic diction,” the loosening of syntactic structure or rhyming, fragmentation, the details of time and place of composition, the emphasis on spontaneity or sincerity of emotions – all these were important to Wordsworth, Coleridge and their followers in so far as they help create the impression that their poems truly “originated” from the real interaction between an individual and the external world. The valorization of originality and sincerity did not so much entail increased “inwardness,” “psychological depth” or “enchantments of Selfhood,” but the growing cultural awareness of a “private sphere” as opposed to the “public sphere” and the related interest in “private lives,” in “personality,” in individual difference, and the awareness of poetic labor in terms
of personal creation or “originality.”

Perhaps the Romantic emphasis on sincerity or authenticity of personal emotions was also related to a reaction not just against “the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers” (Wordsworth, *Prose* 1: 116) but against the “vulgar” forms of sensibility as represented by what Wordsworth had called the “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” (*Wordsworth* 735) after the bourgeois “sentimental revolution.” Hence the return to “pensive solitude” and “sweet melancholy” of genteel poetry with the lyrical transformation which made Romantic lyrics not only “elevated” but “original” and “sincere.” Besides, the lyrical turn in Romantic poetry also paralleled the development in religion against the rising “man of science” who had challenged both the clergy’s and the poet’s claim to truth. Wordsworth’s statement in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* that “poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge,” “the first and last of all knowledge,” while “the man of science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor” (738) could best be understood in terms of the poet’s anxiety about the intimidation of science about his status as a generalist in a cultural elite. The appeal to the “heart” or lyricism in poetry, thus, was a defense against the rising hegemony of science, a strategy akin to the turn away from the “head” in revealed theology. The emphasis on the sublime and the pathetic was an eighteenth-century heritage of sensibility. In Wordsworth’s preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* we have the first explicit theorization of how sensibility was “internalized” and linked to poetic labor. There the poet is characterized not so much by his linguistic talents as his “more than usual organic sensibility” (*Wordsworth* 735) and “a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions… do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events” (737). Reminiscent of the language of British Empiricism, Wordsworth’s argument traces the “origin” of poetry not so much in sensory impression as in emotional response to external objects and more importantly, the subsequent mental working on “emotion recollected in tranquility” “in a healthful state of association” in the poet. Given this expressive view of poetry, one need only go one step further to claim poetic labor as an ideal way of self-actualization and poetry as an ideal form of private property. In the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth’s view is not just expressive but also pragmatic. Having emphasized the lyrical aspect of poetry and defined the poet by his extraordinary
Romantic Alienation Reconsidered

sensibility, he acknowledges the aim of poetry as “giving immediate pleasure” to the reader and he elevates the poet’s role to that of “an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love” (738). “Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge – it is as immortal as the heart of man,” he claims. Nowhere in the preface does he stress the poet’s individuality or “solipsism”; instead, he focuses on the social and communicative functions of poetry. In his famous “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties,” written in the 1830s, J.S. Mill offers a clear conception of the centrality of lyricism in poetry based on an unprecedented emphasis on the chasm between emotion and reason. Poets, Mill asserts, “are so constituted, that emotions are the links of association by which their ideas, both sensuous and spiritual, are connected together” (356). For the “naturally poetic mind,” thought is “only [employed] as the medium of its expression” but “thought itself” is not “the conspicuous object” of poetry (357). To the metaphysicians, man of science or of business, on the other hand, “objects group themselves according to the artificial classifications which the understanding has voluntarily made for the convenience of thought or of practice” (357).

Selfhood in the senses of dignity, introspection, autonomy, vocational ambition, personal responsibility and dignity, was already there long before Wordsworth and Coleridge. Self-awareness and the will to “self-fashioning,” as Greenblatt observes, did not even “suddenly spring up from nowhere” at the turn of the sixteenth century (1). The Romantic innovation, one may argue, is not the exploration of psychological depth but the strategy of authenticating “poetic effusions” as original and sincere expression of the self. To say that nature in Pope is “methodized” and his feelings “impersonal” or “artificial,” and that “in such later poets as Dyer, Shenstone and Akenside, their verse is still heavy with epithets which blunt any innate sharpness of vision” (Roston 74) and that “the interweaving of thought, feeling, and perceptual detail, and the easy naturalness of the speaking voice… characterize the Romantic lyric” (Abrams, “Structure” 211-12) is to take linguistic effects too much for granted. Nature, rendered into poetic discourse, whether with Latinate syntactic involutions and epithetizing or with “a selection of language really used by men,” is equally mediated by language. Besides, the movement away from neo-Classic poetic diction was a gradual one running through the entire second half of the eighteenth century with such developments as the Celtic revival, the interest in Hebrew literature and in the ballads. “Wordsworth’s adoption of ‘the language of conversation,’” as Mary Jacobus has reminded us,
“had behind it a century of primitive pastiche – whether Celtic, Norse, Oriental, or Turkish” (191). The deepening of awareness of privacy and the rising interest in personality were also a gradual one. When George Steiner remarks that the love poetry of Wyatt or Donne does not require a biographical knowledge for our understanding, he is not suggesting that their feelings were “pretentious” or “impersonal.” In a sense, all feelings are personal and therefore “lyrical.” The point is, before the generation of Rousseau, the claim that the feelings were “genuine” and “truly mine” was rare, and man’s exaltation depended on his “adherence to normalcy” rather than on individuality.

Even with an expressive view of selfhood on Romantic lyricism, there is no place for “solipsism,” for poetry is a form of social communication which always already presupposes the consciousness of norms or conventions. What we have in Wordsworth, reputed to be the most “egotistical” of the English Romantics, is a fundamentally expressive-cum-pragmatic view of poetry. What we find in the Romantic poetic experiment is not “fugitive feelings” (Hartman) or “the free flow of consciousness” (Abrams), but at most some new experiences, like Wordsworth’s “strange fit of passion,” not yet articulated in earlier poetry, or some new ways of articulating them. Here one must clarify Bate’s notion of the “burden of the past.” In previous discussions of Romantic selfhood, too much undue attention has been paid to inwardness and particularity. Sheer difference “in order to secure identity,” in fact, is never desirable in poetry. Bate, of course, must be aware that the quest for originality is a dialectical one: changes always entail the consciousness of previous norms and the respect for at least some of these conventions while struggling to write something new. Change, as Clifford Siskin rightly insists, must be conceived with a sense of continuity, not “creative originality” ex nihilo. “Original” sentiments if unsanctioned by the appeal to some norms or reason would only strike the reader as “unpoetic.” They would be denounced as “eccentric,” “egotistical” or even “perverse” depending on how far they were perceived to diverge from established norms, propriety or common sense. It is certainly an overstatement to claim that “the Romantic revolt is in a sense not so much a revolt against shared standards and conventions of an earlier age; it is a revolt in a more thoroughgoing sense, against the very existence of dominating shared standards and conventions” (Everest 5). Even the reaction against “poetic diction” does not mean that the Romantics were free from the “burden of the past,” in the sense of established conventions. They still had to decide whether to use the Spenserian
Romantic Alienation Reconsidered

stanza, the ballad form or Miltonic blank verse, for example. That Abrams has found thematic affinity between seventeenth century devotional poetry and the “greater Romantic lyric” precisely indicates that the Romantics were struggling for their own norms, that is, new decorum. One would almost search in vain in Romantic poetry for “personal” or “private” sentiments in the sense of “random” emotions or “precarious” thoughts. The English Romantics from Wordsworth to Keats all care about overt meanings and “purposes” of their poems. Wordsworth’s greatest wish was to write a grand “philosophical poem.” For Coleridge, “no man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher” (179).

Bate has exaggerated the “continued pressure for difference,” the compulsion in the poet to try “desperately to be unlike” (10, 21). Romantic lyricism had at least partially solved the problem of originality. What one writes about might not be entirely new, but with the conviction that it is “deeply” rooted in authentic personal experience, as immediate impressions or “emotions recollected in tranquility,” one could still claim that it is the “original” expression or objectification of one’s “unique” self. The Romantics could also wishfully negate some past achievements to lessen the sense of intimidation. Wordsworth, for instance, boldly asserted that “Dryden’s lines are vague, bombastic, and senseless; those of Pope, though he had Homer to guide him, are throughout false and contradictory” (Wordsworth 747). That many Romantics turned from neo-Classicism to the older English tradition precisely indicates that they did not just want to be different, but also, and more importantly, to justify their difference by appealing to some other norms or authorities. So it is not a simple matter of “our threshold of expectation had been constantly rising,” as Bate phrases it (75). What most poets badly need, after all, is not “‘originality’ per se” (88) but public recognition, the intersubjective agreement that they are, in Wordsworth’s words, “Laborers divine.” And to be accepted as a great poet requires a great deal more than just to write something “new.” Literary fame is not simply a matter of personal preference, or the precarious change in the public taste, but a historical product of canonization. That explains why Milton’s contemporaries could afford to despise his poetry, but once he was “deified” in the course of the eighteenth century, few dared belittle him. Neglecting the social history of poetic production and reception, Bate has left many specific questions unanswered. One merit of Bate’s study is his attention to how a poet feels. Bate mentions the “loss of
self-confidence” (7) and that the poet’s “anxiety… is a psychological imposition of [his] own” (88), which “is not at all historically determined and necessary” (88). While accepting the significance of the poet’s feelings, I would suggest that it is exactly the larger historical background which shapes how one feels about one’s “poetic vocation,” what one can aspire to and, to some degree, how one will interact with the public.

For an aspiring poet, “effusion” is only the beginning, public recognition leading to literary fame is always more important than “private” indulgence. The expressive view on selfhood, as we have seen, does not explain the poet’s social alienation or anxieties. One major source of anxiety in some Romantic poets, as Raymond Williams has noted, was the “public.” But who were the “public”? If it means the admirers and buyers of the poet’s works, then they must indeed be supporters of the poet. Even if they neglected the poet and did not buy his books, the poet need not feel apprehensive about them, for, after all, they were anonymous. The real cause of worries, in fact, is to be found in the following sentence from Wordsworth’s “Essay Supplementary to the Preface” to Poems (1815): “… lamentable is his error who can believe that there is anything of divine infallibility in the clamor of that small though loud portion of the community, ever governed by factitious influence, which, under the name of the PUBLIC passes itself, upon the unthinking, for the PEOPLE” (Wordsworth 751). Who, then, were “that small though loud portion of the community”? They were, in fact, the critics, or more precisely, the literary reviewers, who had increasing influence on the success of one’s poetry in the literary market. The “public” was but a “displacement” of his anxiety about the critics.

A seldom noted fact about the Romantic Period, as John Hayden puts it, is the “phenomenal outburst of periodical criticism” (ix). In the older reviews like Gentleman’s Magazine (1731-1868) or the Scots Magazine (1739-1826), book reviews were still “often no more than a paragraph, and vied for the reader’s attention with many other features, such as original articles, correspondence, and chronicles” (Hayden xi). “During the eighteenth century,” John Wain writes, “magazines were for the most part owned and directed by booksellers… and the bookseller, a semi-piratical figure who had not yet developed into his respectable modern counterpart, the publisher, saw to it that reviewing was governed by a simple principle; his own books were praised to the skies and those of his rivals plentifully smirched with mud.” “Then, suddenly, the situation was completely
transformed” (13). With the *Edinburgh Review* (1802-1929) and the *Quarterly Review* (1809-1968), there appeared not only long but serious literary reviewing. In the early 1820s, when reviewing was at its peak, there were more than thirty periodicals which regularly carried literary reviews. The rise of reviewing indicated not only the growth of middle-class readers who looked for guidance about which book to buy, but also the widening of the learned minority who were serious about literature. For a poet, the reviewer could be friend or foe. The beginner and unestablished poet especially need favorable reviews. Popular poets like Scott and Byron, on the contrary, could afford to neglect hostile critics. For an ambitious poet embittered by criticism, like Wordsworth before the mid-1810s, the attitude toward reviewers would naturally be chillingly negative.

With an expressive view on selfhood and labor, we have seen that Romantic poetry, with its fervent lyricism, may be taken as an ideal form of private property. Why, then, did some Romantics like Wordsworth suffer so much from an anxiety about their poetic product? Some cues may be found in Marx’s discussion of alienated labor. For Marx, one’s product would be alienated, lost, if one had to surrender it to someone else. Curiously, in a sense poetry as a discursive product would not be “lost,” for what the reader buys is only a copy, a mechanical reproduction of the text, while the poet could still be recognized as the “origin” of his poems. Marx’s saying that “the more objects the worker produces, the fewer he can possess” is utterly irrelevant to the Romantic predicament. For Marx, one’s labor would be alienated if it was under an “alien will,” forced by material returns, or when “my means of life belong to someone else, that my desires are the unattainable possession of someone else, but that everything is something different from itself, that my activity is something else and finally… that an inhuman power rules over everything” (178). What Marx describes here seems to apply to the factory workers rather than the poets. When the Big Six wrote their poems, they were seldom under urgent need to secure the necessities of life, nor ever directly under some “alien will” or “inhuman power.” Economic burdens and worries about his work did once trouble Coleridge immensely in early 1796. But Joseph Cottle, his supportive friend, sent him enough money to ease his mind. Coleridge’s block, as with some Renaissance painters, seemed to be rooted in his high ambition in attaining Miltonic “immortality.” His anxiety was complicated by his financial difficulty as well as his sense of responsibility which obliged him to complete his task for Cottle as soon as possible. And yet if he could lower his
expectations and become a more contented “hack,” he might have been just as calm and efficient as Scott and Southey. In general, the writing of Romantic poetry fits well with Marx’s notion of unalienated labor. However, alienation in the sense that one’s product becomes an “alien, hostile, powerful and independent object” to one’s own oppression could indeed be found if we attend to parody and to criticism.

An unknown poet in fact published a volume of poems in 1803, in which Wordsworth is parodied and plagiarized. In 1808, the “Lake Poets,” especially Wordsworth, were mocked by a satire entitled The Simpliciad for their supposed degradation of true simplicity. For the “simpliciads” there were always some aggressive “Dunciads.” When a Romantic poet’s work was mocked and quoted out of context in unfavorable book reviews to demonstrate that it was “babyish,” “sickly,” “vulgar,” “absurd,” that “this will never do,” when the lines were incorporated into the critics’ or parodist’s text, turned against the writer’s own will, being sneered at and subverted, then the poetic product, in a sense, was no longer the poet’s own but had become an alien and hostile force. The parodist and more importantly, the rising critic, should they happen to be hostile, became exactly “another alien, hostile, powerful and independent man” (130) and “lord” of the poet’s product in Marx’s words.

With this reinterpretation of a major form of Romantic alienation, however, we still have to ask why, given the acknowledgement of their poetic talents, poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge still suffer from merciless attacks. Was it a matter of politics and “yellow journalism”? In the Function of Criticism (1984), Terry Eagleton suggests that Romantic criticism was “explicitly, unabashedly political,” a regrettable sign of the “disintegration of the classical public sphere.” Donald Reiman has pointed out that in the post-war period of 1816-17, “amid threats of rebellion on the one hand and reactionary oppression on the other, the criticism of literature, together with all other human concerns, lost its pretense of aesthetic distance.” According to Reiman, “the reviewers for Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine (established in 1817) completed the transition from the gentlemanly even-handedness of Ralph Griffiths’ Monthly Review and the Critical Review to open character assassination that had been begun by Croker and John Taylor Coleridge in the Quarterly and by Hunt and Hazlitt in the Examiner.” “The reading public,” Reiman adds, “was ready for scandal and pointed opinions,” for “yellow journalism” (A 1: 55). However, in my own study of the reception of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s early poetry, it is found that Romantic book
reviewers still often appealed to reason, propriety and traditions. The critics, too, had their burdens of the past. Even if motivated by political biases or personal malice, literary criticism, no matter how venomous, was still mediated by the normative notion of taste, and required the sanction of “good sense.” Was it just a matter of the change in literary taste, that the Romantics were too far ahead of the times? The answer seems to be an entanglement of politics and taste. During the 1790s, apparently most critics could still admire a poet whose political sentiments differed from their own. Coleridge’s poetry was then well received. Contrary to the common mistake today that the *Lyrical Ballads* was too bold for its time, the book, though never a best-seller, still found favorable reviews. The war against the “Lake Poets” was not started till Francis Jeffrey launched his attack on Southey in 1802. Hazlitt’s idiosyncratic portrait of Wordsworth’s “egotism” and “apostasy,” ironically, has had immense influence on the mid-twentieth century understanding of Romantic alienation, which is still dominant despite the more recent turn toward the “New Historical” studies. A close study of nineteenth century criticism and the politics of taste will certainly illuminate on the problematics of Romantic alienation. With this remark, my initial exploration concludes.

**Works Cited**


Romantic Alienation Reconsidered


