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Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Mirror for Poets: the Biographia Literaria *as a 'mise en abyme' of Wordsworth's Poetry-Writing*

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SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE'S MIRROR FOR POETS: THE *BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA* AS A 'MISE EN ABYME' OF WORDSWORTH'S POETRY-WRITING

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Riassunto: L'articolo esamina il rispecchiamento o *mise en abyme* dell'amicizia e della poetica di Wordsworth e Coleridge come appare nella *Biographia Literaria* di Coleridge. Il testo mette in luce che i due poeti hanno idee quasi opposte. L'uno - Coleridge - è portato alla romantica *suspension of disbelief* ispirata dalla *imagination,* dalle *fairies*, quei *supernatural characters* che altrove attribuisco all'invenzione del paesaggio nordico, l'altro – Wordsworth – è invece portato a cercare di rinnovare il mondo quotidiano e reale. I tre temi sono il contenuto, la forma mimetica, i soggetti rappresentati. Insomma: *in nuce* si articola qui la diatriba tra il pensiero riflettente del kantiano giudizio *als ob,* 'come se', in Coleridge, e il giudizio determinante, saldamente appoggiato al reale di Wordsworth. Tale amicizia/inimicizia produsse la loro precipua poesia come risultato di una girardiana, e bloomiana prima, ansietà dell'influenza, entrambi guardando all'altro nel momento creativo nel tentativo di distanziarsi dal loro sé represso.

Abstract: The article examines the mirroring or the *mise en abyme* of the friendship and poetics of W. Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge as it appears in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. The text shows they have nearly opposite ideas. On the one side, Coleridge relies on the imagination, i.e., the reflective 'as if' Kantian judgement, whereas Wordsworth privileges the poetry of nature and the determinant judgement, realistic and ascertainable. The three themes discussed are content, mimetic form, subjects depicted. The *mise en abyme* of actual poetry into the language of criticism, reflecting two different mindsets, created opposite mimetic methods: the *Biographia* being the mirror of reflection and Coleridge's way of criticising Wordsworth, as to defend himself from his too direct influence. Indeed, this poetic friendship and enmity produced their poetry as a result of a Girardian, and Bloomian before that, anxiety of influence, both poets trying to distance themselves from one another, the other being still present and representing their repressed self.

Parole chiave: Coleridge, Wordsworth, mimesis, immaginazione, *mise en abyme,* sé represso, ansia dell'influenza, H. Bloom, R. Girard.

Key words: Coleridge, Wordsworth, Mimesis, Imagination, *Mise en abyme,* Repressed Self, Anxiety of Influence, H. Bloom, R. Girard.

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This spiritual Love acts not nor can exist
without Imagination, which, in truth
is but another name for absolute power
and clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
and Reason in her most exalted mood.
W. Wordsworth, *The Prelude,* XIV

The Genius of the poet hence
May boldly take his way among mankind
Wherever Nature leads
W. Wordsworth, *The Prelude,* XIII

My contention in this article is that the *Biographia Literaria*[1] acts for Coleridge as a *'mise en abyme'* of Wordsworth's poetry, exactly as it happened with the medieval *Mirrors for Magistrates*, which presented matter for thought to those in power – providing a means for the education of the Prince – confronting its readers with emblematic lives and writings of those that were no more. I take this as my matrix and symbolic idea in examining what Coleridge says about his beloved (and despised) friend William Wordsworth.[2] This will be interesting in that in

1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions,* ed. George Watson, London, Dent, 1956 [1817], hereafter recalled in the text directly as BL and page numbers.

2 Let us mention here Stephen Maxfield Parrish, *The Art of the «Lyrical Ballad»*, Cambridge MA, Harvard U.P., 1973. The critic revised the conception of the aura of friendship between them, a revisionary attitude present also in Harold Bloom's *The Anxie-*

examining when he is purposefully criticizing him, done so in order to justify himself, he will provide us with food for thought about his own, different poetic choices.

One great critic and scholar of the *fin de siècle* poetry, Arthur Symons, does not sound encouraging about my chosen instrumental means, given that he famously said that: «The *Biographia Literaria* is the greatest book of criticism in English and one of the most annoying books in any language».[3] In order to justify thus this hazardous move, I will quote Coleridge's own apologetic words: «the ultimate end of criticism is much more to establish the principle of writing than to furnish rules on how to pass judgement on what has been written by others».[4] It is thus with this animating spirit, of establishing if possible the principles of writing, that I undertake my analysis of what Coleridge says, *en abyme*, of Wordsworth's way of writing in his *Biographia Literaria*.

Historically a real friendship between the two poets started when Samuel Taylor Coleridge made the acquaintance of William Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, in Somerset in 1795; Wordsworth, soon after, mentioned him directly: «I wished indeed to see more [of Coleridge] - his talent appears to me very great'.»[5] Coleridge was so enthusiastic of meeting Wordsworth at Grasmere[6] that a few years later, in 1798 a moment in time which represented the height of their friendship, as they jointly produced the *Lyrical Ballads*, with a second edition in 1800, and a third in 1802.[7] Another fellow poet, Robert Southey, joined them and the trio was commonly

ty of Influence: A Theory of Poetry, New York, Oxford U.P., 1973. Their controversial friendship has also been the object of study in William A. Ulmer, *Radical Similarity: Wordsworth, Coleridge and the Dejection Dialogue*, «EHL», Spring 2009, 76, n. 1, pp. 189-213.

3 Arthur Symonds, *Introduction* to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, London, Dent, 1921 [1906], p. X.

4 *Ibid*., p. XI.

5 Lucy Newlyn, *Coleridge, and Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion*, London, Oxford U.P., 1986, p. 5.

6 Grasmere, in Cumbria, is at the heart of the Lake District and was made famous by Wordsworth's 14-year residence there.

7 Cf. «*The Preface[s]*: *[1798] 1802, 1805, to S.T. Coleridge, W. Wordsworth*, *Lyrical Ballads*» in *Lyrical Ballads: Wordsworth & Coleridge*, eds. R. L. Brett, A. R. Jones, London, Routledge, 1991, pp. 7-9, and pp. 241-272. The differences between the first «Advertisement» and the two editions of the *Prefaces* are cleared on p. 241. See also M. Damer, D. Porter, *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1800, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Toronto, Broadview, 2008, pp. 31-36.

referred to as 'The Lake Poets'.[8] By the time of the third edition, as said, in 1802, of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth, nevertheless, stated to their common friend William Sotheby that he and Coleridge had radically different opinions on poetry. In a letter by Coleridge of 13 July 1802 to his friend Robert Southey,[9] Coleridge, for his part, stated a rift in their ideas, and friendship:

> I rather suspect that somewhere or other there is a radical difference in our theoretical opinions respecting poetry; this I shall endeavour to go to the bottom of, and, acting the arbitrator of the old and new school, hope to lay down some plain and perspicuous, though not superficial canons of criticism respecting poetry.[10]

This seems to have given a prompt to William A. Ulmer to write an essay with the title *Radical Similarity*,[11] in contrast to what Lucy Newlyn, she too quoting Coleridge, called a «radical difference» of «theoretical opinions» between the two poets, concerning their idea of poetry,[12] positions that had been examined, before them, also by Stephen Parrish.[13] The friendship between the two was also ruined by the fact that Coleridge had been misinformed by Basil Montagu «that Wordsworth referred to him as a 'burden' and a 'rotten drunkard'».[14] Coleridge was at that point addicted to liquid opium, laudanum, like many other artists (De Quincey, and his *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, 1821, being the major example),[15] and prob-

8 Cf. Ward, William S., *Wordsworth, the 'Lake' Poets, and Their Contemporary Magazine Critics*, «Studies in Philology», vol. 42, no. 1, 1945, pp. 87–113, and for friendship-issues see George Whalley, *Coleridge and Southey in Bristol, 1795* «The Review of English Studies», Vol. 1, No. 4, Oct. 1950, pp. 324-340.

9 In *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956-1971), vol. 2, p. 830. Hereafter abbreviated as CL and volume cited parenthetically and page number. Coleridge had made similar statements in a letter to William Sotheby on 13 July 1802, cf. CL 2:812.

10 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Letters. Volume 1*, ed. Earnest Hartley Coleridge, Altenmünster, Jürgen Beck Verlag , s.d., [1895], p. 204.

11 See William A. Ulmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 189-213.

12 Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception*, cit., p. 87.

13 See Stephen Maxfield Parrish, *The Wordsworth-Coleridge Controversy*, «PMLA», vol. 73, n. 4, pp. 367-374, where «radical Difference» is invoked by Coleridge between him and Wordsworth in a letter to Sotheby in 1802, p. 367. See also his *The Art of the «Lyrical Ballad»*, cit., *passim*.

14 Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romanticism: An Anthology*, Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p. 448.

15 Opium, we must point out, during that time, was used as a medicine sold by apothe-

ably recognizing the truth behind the accusation. But besides the personal issues, Coleridge states his theoretical disagreements with Wordsworth also in the *Biographia Literaria*. In chapter XIV, speaking of the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads*, he states that they had decided to put their respective efforts in pursuit of two different aims:

> My endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object to give charm of novelty to things of everyday life. (BL: XIV, 168)

The mentioning of «persons and characters supernatural» is a distinguishing mark of what I see as a feature of the invention of a 'Northern aesthetics', which, during the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, retrieves the Celtic tradition of supernatural and magic creatures, like the fairies, as well as its chthonic, underworld ones. These mentioned characters were also present in the latent tradition of King Arthur, a literary strain later defended by the Warton Brothers' first *History of English Poetry* (1774-1778-1781).[16] Shakespeare had himself contributed to the revival of the autochthonous Northern tradition with his *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-96), while a similar move had already appeared in Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* (1590). Fairies were later directly linked to 'romantic' elements in poetry, as the third Satyrane's letter, by Coleridge, to «a Lady in Ratzeburg», describing a part of Hamburg, demonstrates:

> The trees on the ramparts […] could not have been more regular, All else was obscure. *It was a fairy scene! – and to increase its romantic character*, among the moving objects, thus divided into alternate shade and brightness, was a beautiful child, dressed with the elegant simplicity of an English child, riding on a stately goat, the saddle, bridle, and other accoutrements

caries, see my essay: Yvonne Bezrucka, *Food for Dreams and an Appetite for Nations: Opium and Darwinian Metaphors in Victorian Literature,* « RSV», 44, pp. 31-53.

16 See my study of the Warton Brothers' *History of English Poetry* in Yvonne Bezrucka, *The Invention of Northern Aesthetics in 18th-Century English Literature*, Newcastle Upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2017, pp. 81-92, 171-184.

> of which were in a high degree costly and splendid.[17]

If we read the *Biographia Literaria* what immediately becomes relevant is Coleridge's focus on the opposition of intents agreed upon by the two poets: Wordsworth was to exercise a «faithful adherence to the truth of nature» as to intensify and «excite the sympathy of the reader» whereas Coleridge had to exercise «the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination» (BL: XIV,168). A third hypothesis, «the practicability of combining both», which would produce the sudden charm which «accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape» (Ibid.), what we nowadays would call an estrangement or sublime effect, was not pursued. One intention was then to aim at a style convenient to depict the «poetry of nature» pursued by Wordsworth, the other was to pursue a poetry of «dramatic truth of created events by the make believe as if they were true», pursued by Coleridge. The plan was then to create:

> a series of poems […] composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections led by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. For the second class subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life: the characters and incidents were to be chosen from ordinary life. (*Ibid.*)

What we also know for sure is that Coleridge went to Germany to study German philosophy, and that they all departed, in 1798, Coleridge and the Wordsworth (William and Dorothy), landing in Hamburg on 19th September 1798, and returning in 1799. On arrival they parted and Coleridge was a guest of the brother of the poet Klopstock, a philosopher, who might have directed him to Kant's work, because the words previously used, and – unequivocally – the 'as if' reference reminds us of Kant's work on the determinant and the reflective judgement in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), the phrase 'as would' in the previous is in fact a direct reference to the Kantian language pertaining to the reflective judgement, which is the result of an 'als ob'- attitude, in German, or an 'as if' hypothesis in English – which is the par excellence hypothesis of

17 This group of three letters appears towards the end of the *Biographia* and is called *Satyrane's Letters*. They appear at the end of Chapter XXII, as an adjunct, in Arthur Symons' edition of the *Biographia Literaria*, cit., p. 297 (my emphasis).

the imagination – in contrast to the determinant judgement which refers to real and physical, scientifically ascertainable, rules of nature.[18] Indeed, the als ob (as if) gives laws only to judgement but not to nature. Kant speaking of Newton says:

> So all that Newton has set forth in his immortal work on the Principles of Natural Philosophy may well be learned, however great a mind it took to find it all out, but we cannot learn to write in a true poetic vein, no matter how complete all the precepts of the poetic art may be, or however excellent its models.[19]

This is not to be taken as implying that such a reasoning must be actually assumed (for it is only the reflective judgement which avails itself of this possibility as a principle for the purpose of reflection and not for determining anything): «but [that] this faculty rather gives by this means a law to itself alone and not to nature» (K:16).

> Now this transcendental concept of a purposiveness of nature is neither a concept of nature nor of freedom, since it attributes nothing at all to the object, i.e. to nature, but only represents the unique mode in which we must proceed in our reflection upon the objects of nature with a view to getting a thoroughly interconnected whole of experience, and so it is a subjective principle, i.e. maxim, of judgement. (K:19)

It is therefore, to simplify, the principle of the imagination which foremost proceeds via as-if hypotheses.

Let us now read how the reflective judgement affects chapter XIV of the *Biographia Literaria* where the as-if hypotheses create different ways of writing:

> During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination [XIII]. The sudden charm, which accidents

18 I have diffusedly studied these connections in Yvonne Bezrucka, *Genio e immaginazione nel Settecento Inglese*, Verona, Università di Verona, 2002.

19 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicholas Walker, New York, Oxford U.P., 2007 [1790], p. 138, hereafter recalled in the text as K: and page number.

of light and shade, which moon-light or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature. […]

In this idea originated the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads*; in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.

With this view I wrote *The Ancient Mariner*, and was preparing among other poems, *The Dark Ladie*, and *The Christabel*, in which I should have more nearly realized my ideal, than I had done in my first attempt. But Mr. Wordsworth's industry had proved so much more successful, and the number of his poems so much greater, that my compositions, instead of forming a balance, appeared rather an interpolation of heterogeneous matter. Mr. Wordsworth added two or three poems written in his own character, in the impassioned, lofty, and sustained diction, which is characteristic of his genius. In this form the *Lyrical Ballads* were published […]. To the second edition he added a preface of considerable length; in which, notwithstanding some passages of apparently a contrary import, he was understood to contend for the extension of this style to poetry of all kinds, and to reject as vicious and indefensible all phrases and forms of speech that were not included in what he (unfortunately, I think, adopting an equivocal expression) called the language of real life. […]

My own conclusions on the nature of poetry, in the strictest use of the word, have been in part anticipated in some of the remarks on the Fancy and Imagination in the early part of this work. What is poetry? – is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? – that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind.

[…] Finally, Good Sense is the Body of poetic genius, Fancy its Drapery,

> Motion its Life, and Imagination the Soul that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole. (BL, ch. XIV, pp. 168-174)

The *Biographia* is thus, not by chance, called '*Literaria*': it can be seen as an 'imaginative' and specular reduplication[20] of things literary in the metalanguage of criticism as a *mise en abyme*, and as such also a critical self-analysis of the act of writing, produced via the 'two mindsets' that can be used in reproducing, representing and in thinking reality, as being different in the two poets. These theoretical statements serve Coleridge to set Wordsworth's way of 'representing' reality – *en abyme* – via contrast and similarities, as to create and justify his own distinguished style, filtering it critically as to make sense of reality even if in the modality of an unusual non-determinant way, privileging the 'reflective' capacities of the mind, pursuing, and championing the guiding romantic ideal of liberty and independence from constraints. This done rather than through the empiric Baconian inductive determination via scientific laws, but, in this case, following mimetic rules. The two poets, via Coleridge's reflections, paved their way along two diverse paths of their gnosis, the apprehension via reflection, scientific comprehension producing in the end different mimetic methods and styles of representing reality.

Connected to this master-interpretation, the *Biography*, as such, looks rather like a mirror – the device for a 'conscious' *mise en abyme* of writing and its challenges – that Coleridge uses – so we are entitled to think in reading certain excerpts – to criticising Wordsworth's works. But why? Probably to defend his own narcissistic writing-style. *The Biographia* provided Coleridge the opportunity to measure '*en abyme*', i.e. in a specular way, through another poet's poetry, that of Wordsworth – considered to be the 'father' of English Romanticism – to draw attention to his own style, and defending thus his own 'imaginative' poetical choices and poetry-production, through his critique of Wordsworth's poetry. Wordsworth will not be late in examining the deteriorating friendship with Coleridge in *A Complaint* by comparing their friendship to a well that he hoped would never dry.[21] The two poets are nevertheless variously different and this took its toll.

The themes that Coleridge addresses via Wordsworth can be abridged

20 See Lucien Dällenbach, *Le Récit Spéculaire. Essai sur la mise en abyme*, Paris, Seuil, 1977, concerning specular reduplication, in the case of Coleridge a metacritical one, reflecting about how this determines the way of writing.

21 Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romanticism: An Anthology*, cit., electronic edition, p. 1017.

into three strategic topics:

1. Content: the depiction of Nature seen through a still pastoral matrix, of old rural England, as a perfect countryside-life habitat, which is, nevertheless, threatened, for example, by the strictly economic knowledge of trusts and legal matters on properties, as happens in the poem «Michael» (1800). This poem expresses an emblematic last instance of this kind of life, and is portrayed concentrating one's attention on Luke, the son of the shepherd, who is obliged to go into exile to America, because his fatherland is not his anymore. This focus will make Jonathan Bate affirm that, from an environmentalist perspective, Wordsworth is the father of a new poetry of Nature,[22] something we could probably contest with the affirmation that Coleridge not only wrote about the necessity of a new attitude towards Nature's protection in his emblematic poem «The Rime of the Ancient Mariner» (1798 Ist v., revised in 1817, in the collection *Lyrical Ballads*), but he also focused on the Cartesian dualism of humankind and nature where the sin of the violation of mother earth is depicted with the climate-change aftermath of her own revolt. This poem is also a good anticipation of nowadays' urgent issues, confirmed by the incontestable fact that if nature does not speak, it takes action. Coleridge's ideas, with the Mariner, anticipate a beforetime deep-ecology attitude like the one of Arne Naess,[23] in espousing James Lovelock and Linn Margulis's *Gaia Theory*, thus anticipating topical issues of our own times.[24]

2. The second field of disagreements is mimetic form. Wordsworth feels entitled to attack Coleridge: «The poem of my friend has indeed great defects, […] the principle person has no character […] [the Mariner] does not act but is continually acted upon […] the events have no necessary connection».[25] More importantly, he stresses that «the imagery is some-

22 See Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, London, Routledge, 1991.

23 See Yvonne Bezrucka, *Nature as Oikos and Kepos: Ecocriticism as a Branch of Bioethics*, «Nuovi Quaderni del CRIER», X, 2013, pp. 33-54, where I analyse various ecological positions in order to point to bioethics and deep ecology as possible solutions, for the ethics of animals and of all vegetal and mineral species as well, along the line of the intrinsic value of «non-human life on earth». For 'deep ecology' see Arne Naess, *Self-realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World*, «The Trumpeter», 4, 3, 1987, pp. 35-42.

24 James Lovelock's idea of the Earth as a bio-organism, a hypothesis on which he has worked since the 1960s, took form in his book: *Gaia. A New Look at Life on Earth*. Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1989.

25 Duncan Wu, (ed.) *Romanticism: An Anthology*, cit., electronic edition p. 1529, quoting

what too laboriously accumulated»[26] meaning that he believed the concise, meticulous descriptions in Coleridge were a flaw. In fact, Wordsworth, even here, attacks what he, purposefully, does not, avoiding imagery and using 'personification'. Furthermore, the two poets disagree also on the controversial point of using «the language of man speaking to man» rather than the 18th-century 'poetic diction' of Alexander Pope and John Dryden, which Coleridge did not totally approve of, but which became a stronghold in the famous *Preface* to *Lyrical Ballads*.

3. Subjects depicted: relevant seems in Wordsworth also the democratic depiction of those people in villages even the impaired, minority-people which had not previously found a literary 'poetic' channel for their presence, as testified in «The Idiot Boy» or in «The Blind Highland Boy».[27] Coleridge had privileged supernatural characters.

What is then the strategy which Coleridge uses to criticize Wordsworth in order to defend himself? It is that of initially paying homage to his friend, by focusing on his way of writing, then demolishing it to aggrandize his own different choices: both stylistic and thematic ones. Two are the chapters where this aim is brought forth in the *Biographia* (XXII and XIV), criticising how Wordsworth took inspiration from nature via the «spontaneous overflow of feeling», but via also the thoughtful «emotions recollected in tranquillity», or attacking how he lets himself be mesmerized and influenced by nature, for example in *Tintern Abbey*. Passion, as Lucy Newlyn says, was for Coleridge more important than a polished and artificially 'recollected' language.[28] Coleridge was concerned with the Christian God and looks for his signs, Wordsworth was an Anglican inclined to pantheism, who emphasizes religious symbolism.

Last but not least, this point regards the defence of the faculty of the imagination, which Coleridge recovers from the 'Enlightened' romantic strand,[29] that had recovered Locke and Hume, via Joseph Addison

from *Lyrical Ballads* (2nd edition, 2 vols, 1800).

26 *Ibid*.

27 William Wordsworth, *Poems,* Volume I, (1815), see «The Blind Highland Boy». Cf. also Claire Laville, *Idiocy and Aberrancy: Disability, Paul de Man, and Wordsworth's* Idiot Boy, «An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal», 47, 2, June 2014, pp. 187-202.

28 Cf. Lucy Newlyn, *Coleridge, and Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion*, cit., *passim*.

29 I have developed extensively this point in Yvonne Bezrucka, *A New Romantic Canon: 'Enlightened Romanticism'. Addison's Rejection of Innatism and 'The Pleasures of the Imagination' (1712)*, «Romanticismi. La rivista des C.R.I.E.R.», 4, 2019, p. 11-51.

and his *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1712)[30] whereas, on the contrary, Wordsworth relies on the Neoplatonic understanding of cognition as being a faculty already present in the mind, and not inscribed by external experiences on the *tabula rasa* of the mind.[31] It is in particular this last point that seems controversial between the two poets, regarding the differences between the use of the primary fancy and the secondary, esemplastic, imagination.[32] Indeed, via *The Pleasures*, published in Addison's Journal «The Spectator» (1712-1714), the faculty of the imagination becomes not a gift of the gods but a faculty present in all human minds, which, activated by sight – the major faculty of the senses, imprints impressions on Locke's model of the mind seen as a *tabula rasa* – which in their turn activate thought and the imagination: inaugurating a rejection of innatism. This last upheld the creationist idea and, most importantly, the antidemocratic hierarchical idea of the innate geniuses, that were, being the best talented people, chosen and privileged by the gods. In this sense I see Addison's work as the first European real pre-romantic work which provides, via John Locke's attack on innatism, an anticipation of all traits of Burke's treatise on the Sublime empowering the senses – and the body – as the only gates and filters of knowledge. How this important freedom and equality principle of humankind is then linked to the invention of a Northern aesthetics is developed in another book of mine.[33]

If the reader had been created with the Reformation's emphasis on the personal reading of 'the' Book: the Bible, via Addison, it was the turn of the birth of the observer, the one who monitors situations in contrast to the one who accepts authorities as such. Addison indeed anticipates the theory of the primary and the secondary imagination, a faculty that all people possess and, eventually, not only the geniuses. Joseph Addison, as I hope to have demonstrated in *Genio e immaginazione*,[34] seems to have been a basis for Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790).[35]

30 See Joseph Addison, *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1712 nos. 411-421), in «The Spectator» (1712-1724).

31 See Keith G. Thomas, *Wordsworth, and Philosophy: Empiricism and Transcendentalism in the Poetry*, Ann Arbor, Michigan U.P., 1989.

32 I have dealt with this extensively in Yvonne Bezrucka, *A New Romantic Canon…,* cit.

33 See Yvonne Bezrucka, *The Invention of Northern Aesthetics in 18th-Century English Literature*, cit., *passim*.

34 For Kant's use of Addison see Yvonne Bezruck, *Genio e Immaginazione*, cit., p. 133, note 3 and *passim*.

35 For the philosophical connections between Germany and the United Kingdom, see Rosemary Ashton, *England and Germany*, in Duncan Wu (ed.), *A Companion to Ro-*

Using William A. Ulmer's study *Radical Similarity: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Dejection Dialogue* [36] where he speaks of an «agonistic rivalry» between the two poets (189) that Stephen Parrish sees pared down by critics (189)[37], Ulmer comes to the conclusion that Wordsworth in showing to Coleridge what true poetry was, «emasculated him» (190), showing him that he «was no Poet» (190, CL 2:714). Coleridge, Ulmer says, took his revenge by making Wordsworth concentrate for years on a philosophical poem, *The Recluse,* later to be incorporated in *The Prelude*. William Ulmer makes thus a good point in confirming the antagonism of which Harold Bloom speaks in his *Anxiety of Influence*, a revision-based theory made of appropriation and subversion in order to attest one's difference from one's elected model, and I think that we cannot stress enough the results this friendship and enmity produced. If, as William Ulmer says:

> Wordsworth and Coleridge initially controlled their oppositions successfully enough to collaborate and encourage each other's best writing. But with the passing of time, scholars caution, Wordsworth creatively emasculated Coleridge, while Coleridge took his slowly gathering revenge by obligating Wordsworth to a philosophical project, *The Recluse,* which his temperament left him helpless to complete. One could almost say that the two men destroyed each other as writers and that certainly seems to have been Coleridge's opinion when he commented to William Godwin, in 1801, «The Poet is dead in me... If I die, and the Booksellers will give you anything for my Life, be sure to say – 'Wordsworth descended on him, [and] by showing to him what true Poetry was, he made him know, that he himself was no Poet'.»(CL, 2:714). Wordsworth and Coleridge criticism has extended the «radical Difference» dialectic further still by incorporating it into the poetry itself. So, the story of the two poets' growing estrangement has become a story told by their poems.[38]

manticism, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 1999, pp. 535-544.

36 William A. Ulmer, *Radical Similarity: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Dejection Dialogue*, «ELH», vol. 76, 1, Spring 2009, pp. 189-213.

37 See Stephen Maxfield Parrish, *The Art of the 'Lyrical Ballad'*, cit., *passim*, and Id., *The Wordsworth-Coleridge Controversy*, cit., pp. 367-374.

38 William A. Ulmer, *art. cit*., p. 190.

We cannot restrain us to apply the above *mise en abyme* grid to a more significant echoing contrastive passage between Wordsworth's and Coleridge's works to see how both poets analyse each other's poetry in order to produce their own, via *en abyme* criticism, guided by willful opposition. I am here using Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence,[39] but also, in a certain sense, René Girard's 'triangulation' of the mimetic or rival desire, desire never really being one's own but cast via one's admired and elected «driver and model», in this case the *en abyme* literary text.[40] A *locus classicus* is the fact that the relation between Wordsworth and Coleridge, in 1802, when Wordsworth read to Coleridge the first 4 stanzas of *Immortality Ode*, and as a reaction Coleridge produced his first draft of *Dejection: an Ode*, the version called «A Letter to ---------» composed on the same day of Wordsworth's reading, the 4th of April, and published on the 20th. Repeated criticism on other poems prompted Coleridge to publish the rewriting or the Letter as *Dejection: An Ode*, published in October 1802, the anniversary of both Coleridge's and Wordsworth's marriages.[41]

What is the result of this agonistic poetry writing? A radical Similarity which produces echoes via Dissimilarity:

> The echoes of the opening tableau of the «Ode» in the «Letter» are entirely manifest: Wordsworth's «celestial light, / The glory and the freshness of a

39 «Bloom's account of the nature of interactions between poets in *The Anxiety of Influence* is built on the idea that the relationship between a poet and their predecessors is an antagonistic one, and that the poet is in a state of anxiety over the possibility of originality in relation to a massive poetic tradition. The idea has a particular utility when it comes to uncovering the prejudices of an interpreter such as Coleridge. All of Coleridge's energies during the latter part of his life were directed towards the goal of philosophical originality. As a result, his interpretations of his philosophical predecessors and contemporaries are marked by the most fundamental of all of Coleridge's prejudices: his desire to be able to pursue creative philosophical production alongside them. In other words, the kind of anxiety that Bloom describes as characteristic of poets in relation to their poetic predecessors also holds of Coleridge in relation to his philosophical predecessors. The result of this is that Coleridge's frequent miss-readings of texts, exaggerated disagreements with texts, and even more frequent exhibitions of anxiety can be used as landmarks in the business of uncovering his prejudices.» (Richard Berkeley, *Coleridge and the Crisis of Reason*, London, Palgrave, 2007, p. 10).

40 For the role of envy in the triangulation of desire see René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Y. Freccero, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins U.P., 1976.

41 William A. Ulmer, *art. cit.*, p. 191.

> dream» (CW, 4-5) recurs in Coleridge's «This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist» (C, 310); Wordsworth's «My head hath it's coronal» (CW, 40) recurs in Coleridge's «I too will crown me with a coronal» (C, [Dejection]1.36); Wordsworth's «The things which I have seen I now can see no more» CW, 9) recurs in Coleridge's «They are not to me now the things which once they were» (C, 294), and so on.[42]

We can thus draw a contrastive table: Wordsworth, on the one side, is interested in the natural environment, in the human heart, in pantheism, in palpable reality, and is not against prosaic literalism. Coleridge, on the other side is interested in the supernatural quality of nature and he has a theocentric vision, is thus interested in abstractions, and uses symbolic understanding. Nevertheless, as seen, in my opinion he rejects innatism, for what concerns the imagination.

To conclude: we could say that if the *mise en abyme* – as it is exerted in the *Biographia Literaria* via literary references to ways of writing – criticizes the stylistic choices of writing of the rival poet, it can also be seen as an appropriation of the rival poet's choices, providing us a clear proof that writing is always re-writing. The poetic *mise en abyme* here examined can thus be inserted into a catalogue of the 'anxiety of influence' list of devices and as a Girardian reaction, or as a possible and impossible dismissal of the influence, which remains, even if removed, still, an influence, as the triangular mimetic desire, focused on the poetry of the rival poet, and determined by rivalry, confirms once more.[43]

The important element that still remains to be stressed here is the role of the critic. People with a strong imagination can capture without too much of an effort images that might become emblematic syntheses of beauty or of situations, «objective correlatives» as T.S. Eliot would call them, which are – via the imagination and the 'als ob' process – related to the reflective judgement and not the determinant one, and a mode of reflection that opens our capacity to imagine also what has not yet been envisaged, or what maybe will be in the future, a sheer novelty as such, a process that Thomas Kuhn[44] (1962) sees as the trigger that produces also scientific revolutions, which do not always proceed by the daily pains-

42 *Ibid.*, p. 193.

43 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York, Columbia U.P., 1985.

44 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962.

taking job of putting together, setting up, and piling one information after the other, until a design is cast or casts itself, but which is rather the result of the capacity to create, or like Einstein did, a momentum when the big acceleration of knowledge happens. This gave him the possibility to formulate the relativity-hypothesis of a waving universe ridden by the presence of black holes. Maybe a similarity could be drawn via a process of knowledge reached by *gnosis*, underlining the fact that it is not the result of an activity of constant amelioration and only, sometimes, the result of happy intuitions and sudden revelation. However, and this is my contention, if there is a critic that can meta-linguistically open the *mises en abyme* scattered in texts, via the explanatory capacity to define how dissimilar specularity works, this has to be Coleridge, who in musing over the literary friendship/enmity, but still partnership with Wordsworth, used the *mise en abyme* as a rhetorical device which opened symbolic clues that provided him, and us, hints about how the poetical creative process sets off, and thus providing us the possibility of tracing influences, by imitating either the better authors, as Robert Louis Stevenson did, or using a copying process in order to learn, or to analyse one's unacknowledged *mises en abyme*, more or less spontaneous ones, which later once explained might and can produce the drive for new unexpected processes of understanding, processes that critics try to make use of every day.

T. S. Eliot's quote from his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* where he says that each new work of art changes and modifies and readjusts the whole previously accumulated knowledge, is a case in point here,[45] as intuitions are a gift bestowed, that need to be pursued and explained. I suppose thus that a *mise en abyme* pertains to the field also of 'objective correlatives' that need, probably, to be restudied, since the plus of a *mise en abyme* is its unclarity, the 'fortunate confusion', or 'fruitful disorder' of which William Empson speaks in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), the book which ushered in the New Criticism School in the USA.[46]

45 T.S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, in Id., *Selected Essays*, London, Faber 1986 [1932], p. 15.

46 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, London, Hogarth Press, 1984 [1930], see p. V and 174.