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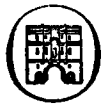

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Introduction

THE history of poetic theory in the period 1750–1820 has been often and, by now, very thoroughly investigated. Besides the accounts of the Romantic and 'pre-Romantic' eras to be found in general histories of criticism,[1] there exist several studies investigating in greater detail the origins and growth of Romanticism considered as a body of theoretical doctrine.[2] Yet these surveys, admirable in other respects, pay little attention to one interesting and, on the face of it, important topic: the theory, at this date, of poetic composition and style.

The topic seems important since, whatever the views of a theorist about the nature and function of literature, they must to a large extent be determined by his assumptions (if he makes any at all) about the aims and procedures of the writer. This part of his theory will be logically prior to the rest. To the student of critical history, interested in understanding and assessing the theories of a given time, it is naturally of the greatest value first to examine the fundamental conceptions upon which they are built. The whole may not be accurately interpreted unless due account has been taken of the most basic part.

The basis in this sense, however, of poetic theory during the period in question here has never yet been fully investigated.

The following study is, in its immediate aim, an attempt to make good the deficiency. It sets out to describe ideas current in the late Neo-Classical and early Romantic periods about the composition of poetry—about the 'art of poetry' in the traditional sense of the phrase, the practical principles upon which poetry is, or is held to be, written.

It is in the nature of the case, however, that this aim should subserve a further and more general one. It has not been very widely noticed, but is readily noticeable, that in the eighteenth century poetic theory was closely related to rhetoric.[3] Rhetorical

ideas, on the other hand, play a conspicuously unimportant part in the work of the Romantic critics. The eighteenth-century 'art of poetry' is, in fact, largely derived from rhetoric, and is throughout founded upon presuppositions (about, for example, the nature of language or the relation of the writer to his audience) which have been taken over from rhetorical theory. This is not the case with Romantic theories of composition and style, which are based on assumptions not only different but hostile to those adopted by the rhetoricians. The two sets of ideas stand in sharp contrast to each other.

The fact is, apart from anything else, historically interesting. Nearly all recent historians of criticism have favoured the view that Romantic theory in England represents the culmination of a slow development over a period of at least half a century, that Romantic ideas about poetry were neither, at the time, unusually subversive in their implications, nor particularly new in themselves: in other words, that no 'revolution' occurred, merely a gradual 'evolution'.[4] Yet, as will appear in what follows, there is one department of poetic theory, a fundamentally important one, in which the Romantics did produce a radically new set of ideas. Their notions about the writing of poetry are indeed so much at variance with any hitherto entertained that they might almost be said to have invented a new conception of the art. It is notable that Wordsworth and Coleridge, and their fellow poets and critics, themselves asserted that in their lifetime a new sort of poetry had begun to be written on new principles.[5]

To show that these principles were genuinely new, and in what way, will be the larger aim of this study.

The question of 'pre-Romanticism' must figure largely in such an undertaking. It will be necessary to show that the concept is of extremely limited value in this particular field. It is true, no doubt, that many leading Romantic doctrines appeared first in the work of their eighteenth-century predecessors, and that most of those general tendencies which are normally cited as defining characteristics of Romanticism (e.g. the demand for originality and spontaneity, a preoccupation with the expression of emotion, with the individual and subjective rather than the general and objective) are likewise apparent at an earlier date. Nevertheless—or so it will be argued here—it is only by comparing such ideas and beliefs out of context that one set can be made to look convincingly like a 'fore-

shadowing' of the other. 'Pre-Romantic' ideas are always offshoots of traditional doctrine: re-formulated by the Romantics they appear in a different guise, in fact they become different ideas because they have been adapted to a different context of beliefs.

This argument would carry no weight, of course, unless it were established that authentically new ideas made their first appearance at a particular date. It will be postulated here that the revolution in poetic theory, though it was not accomplished at any given moment, did begin at a given moment, i.e. with the publication in 1800 of Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

The Romantic 'revolution' will be described as an event in the history of poetic theory. Its characteristics will in fact be studied in one department of poetic theory. Though, since the changes effected there were radical ones, it will follow that a complete transformation of outlook must have accompanied them, this fact will not be presumed to throw any light upon the much-debated problem of 'Romanticism'. No new definition of Romanticism will here be mooted, and no attention paid, or reference intended, to the concepts of Romanticism or pre-Romanticism at large with all their aesthetic, philosophical, social, and even political implications. These concepts, though muddled, have their uses, but their introduction into the present study would thoroughly confuse every issue.

The relevant terms will be used instead purely as conventional labels. 'Romantic' will apply to the revolutionary school of theorists, 'Romanticism' to their views. Similarly 'Neo-Classicism' will denote only 'the theory of poetry current before 1800'. The term 'pre-Romantic' does not, of course, come into the same category since it implies not merely a period 'placing', but a tendentious historical judgment. Again, however, if its use is deprecated, it is the meaning 'precursor of the Romantic critics' which will be held objectionable, and no other possible implication of the term.

The dates demarcating the limits of this study have not been chosen altogether arbitrarily. 1750 marks accurately enough the beginning of a period of greatly increased activity in criticism, a period also of many new developments, inspired in part by the philosophies of Hume and Hartley which had recently come into notice.[6] By 1820 Romantic theory had received its fullest exposition, and was already on the way to being accepted as orthodoxy.

It will be the works largely of rhetoricians and literary theorists that are discussed below: among the theorists, however, a handful of aestheticians, psychologists and philosophers will be found included. At the same time 'theorists' will not be assumed to exclude those writers whose views were never set forth in extended and formal treatises. The critical literature of the period is vast, and the present study does not pretend to exhaustiveness, but it is hoped that all the important authors, and a sufficiently representative number of the less important, will have received due notice. An attempt has been made, too, not to ignore altogether the writers of non-theoretical or 'practical' criticism, who so often supply valuable clues to the theoretical assumptions of their time. Since the Romantic period saw less than the preceding one in the way of formal and systematic theorizing, more attention has been paid in the second than in the first part of this study to informal writings such as letters and memoranda. These often serve, in the case of the Romantics, to illustrate or complement ideas which may not be fully or clearly enough explained in their (contemporaneously) published works.

A part only of the theory of poetry will be fully treated in the ensuing pages, that part of it which relates to composition and style. Though obviously no clear-cut boundary can be laid down between this and neighbouring areas of investigation, the discussion has as far as possible been focused on a few leading topics which are clearly and obviously connected with the question: How is poetry written? Throughout the period philosophical and psychological speculation provides a basis and justification for answers to this question, and such arguments have been given their share of attention. Little direct notice, however, has been taken of another apparently relevant and, certainly at the time, important branch of inquiry. Aesthetics (in the strict sense of the term: theories about the nature of beauty, sublimity, and so on) has its bearing on the theory of composition, but it is not, during the eighteenth century at least, a close one. Though its principles may relate to the kind of subject a writer attempts, hence to the particular sorts of skill he must display, they do not directly apply to the more general problem of composition itself and how it proceeds.

Two topics of much nearer relevance have been left almost entirely out of account: the question of rhythm and 'music' in poetry and that of versification and metre. The justification, if any,

for these omissions must be that treatment of these topics would have lengthened and complicated the discussion while contributing little of importance to the purpose in hand.

The division of this study will be partly chronological: Neo-Classicism and Romanticism will be discussed separately. Within these two main divisions, however, sub-divisions will follow a series not of successive periods or successive authors but of separate topics. The aim will be to present a general conspectus of the ideas current in either part of the period, rather than to trace in detail the development of these ideas, or to describe in full the particular views of individual critics. This method allows for a clearer and more comprehensive survey of the subject, and some care has been devoted to overcoming the concomitant disadvantage, namely that both Neo-Classicists and Romantics will be considered *en bloc*, a large number of writers coming under discussion with each topic. In a study of this scope minor eccentricities in individual critics must necessarily be ignored, but an effort has been made to take into account every marked divergence from views that are otherwise put forward as typical of a given time.

It remains only to say here that the argument in support of a Romantic 'revolution' will not be pursued entirely for its own sake. A correct historical perspective is necessary to a correct interpretation of both Romantic and Neo-Classical ideas, as well as to a just evaluation of them. The belief that Romanticism took its origins in the work of certain eighteenth-century critics has encouraged a historical confusion of some moment, since it involves seeing the Romantic achievement as the culmination of a development, the final re-attainment of a true understanding of literature which the previous age had been groping to regain. It is this sort of historical interpretation and evaluation which the present study may help to discourage if it succeeds in showing that Romantic theory differs sharply in kind, but not in degree of depth or completeness, from its Neo-Classical counterpart; that it is a new theory supporting a new kind of poetry, but not necessarily for that reason a more highly-developed one.

Part One: 1750–1800

1

Rhetoric and its Relation to Poetry

THE last thirty years or so have seen a marked resurgence of interest in rhetoric, more particularly in the use of rhetorical methods and devices in poetry. But this is a comparatively recent phenomenon. For over a century, that is from the Romantic era onward, no critic in the main tradition paid any more than cursory attention to the rhetorical aspects of composition and style, that is to the question of the effects of poetry and how they are achieved.[1] The Romantic view was, of course, that the subject did not warrant systematic investigation and analysis and was moreover, by its very nature, unamenable to it.

In point of fact, we have by no means entirely relinquished this view: even the new rhetorically-minded criticism seeks not so much to discover *how* poetry is, or may be, written, as simply to analyse its structure. It aims to describe what is there rather than ask why it is there. We find, it is true, critical studies of individual poems which not only define but ascribe a value to their structural characteristics, but rarely is any attempt made to generalize about methods and devices, their particular uses, their relative importance, their suitability in one context rather than another.[2]

In fact no such attempt could begin from present-day assumptions about the way poetry affects a reader. The effects of poetry are now understood as so extremely subtle and complex, so highly specific in each individual case, that any possibility of defining and classifying them, tracing them to their causes, and laying down principles of composition and style in accordance with the findings, is scarcely to be conceived. We are still really of one mind with the Romantics in believing the workings of poetry to be almost wholly mysterious.

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the critical attitude to these questions had been strikingly different. It was taken for granted that the methods of poetry could be isolated,

examined and described, and principles derived from them. Poetry was an 'art', not in the modern sense of the word, or not only in the modern sense, but also in that older sense (which still survives in certain contexts) of 'craft', 'skill', 'know-how'.

It is well known that the critics and theorists of the Renaissance regarded the writing of poetry as an 'art' in this sense.[3] Precisely the same view survived into the last decades of the eighteenth century, although the last treatise to employ the phrase 'the art of poetry' in its title, at the same time attributing its traditional meaning to the phrase, appeared in 1762.[4]

The theory of poetry as an 'art' had, during the Renaissance, borne a very close resemblance to the theory of rhetoric. The reasons are not far to seek. Though Aristotle maintained that rhetoricians had originally learnt their skills from the poets, it was in fact the former who took the lead in analysing and rationalizing what might be called the 'artistic' use of language. It was rhetoric from the first that legislated in this field. Hence Aristotle does not find it necessary to discuss 'thought' and 'style' in the *Poetics:* he refers the reader to his companion treatise.[5] The situation in the sixteenth century is no different. Theorists of poetry borrow wholesale from the rhetoricians for their stylistic maxims and precepts. Indeed, as a consequence of their indebtedness they can no longer draw any precise theoretical distinction between poetry and its sister discipline.[6] Since they consider poetry as an 'art' and rely, for defining an important part of their conception, on the categories of a closely similar 'art', the result is inevitably a near-identification of the two.

Poetry is still, in the later eighteenth century, regarded as an 'art', and still retains its connexion with rhetoric. However, before we turn to examining the nature and implications of the relationship—the main purpose of this and succeeding chapters—it might be as well to glance briefly at the fortunes of rhetorical theory itself during the period. Whereas Neo-Classic theories of literature have been thoroughly investigated, very little has been written on this subject. It seems generally to be assumed, perhaps on the authority of Croce's review of critical history in the *Aesthetic*, that the theory of rhetoric reached the culmination of its development during the seventeenth century and that its later history is accordingly of little interest or consequence.[7] Thus eighteenth-century rhetoric has been almost completely neglected in histories of

literary criticism; furthermore no general account has yet been written of the continuous development of rhetorical doctrines in England from the Renaissance onwards, and of their constantly changing relevance to literature.[8] In view of this lack, some brief and very general indications of the status and function of rhetoric in the late eighteenth century will be useful in the present context and may at least suggest the directions that previous developments had taken.

A clear indication of the standing of rhetoric may be looked for in definitions of the term current during the period. Needless to say, no one definition is accepted by all rhetoricians alike. Even in Classical times definitions of rhetoric had been legion. Quintilian employs several pages in examining and rejecting a series of these before fixing on his own '*scientia bene dicendi*'.[9] But even the Classical definitions may be divided into two classes: one which assumes rhetoric to be the theory exclusively of public speaking, the other which considers the theory as applying indiscriminately to all forms of discourse. One might call them Aristotelian and Ciceronian respectively, after the authors of the earliest extant treatises in which they are represented. The two types of theory corresponding to these definitions naturally emphasize, on the one hand, argument and evidence as means of persuasion, and, on the other, structure and style as the means to obtaining every kind of rhetorical effect. They overlap, of course—the Aristotelian rhetorician does not ignore effectiveness of composition and style any more than the Ciceronian does logic and the selection of evidence—but the difference of emphasis is important. It is because the Ciceronian view of rhetorical theory was able, for various reasons, to gain wider acceptance, virtually ousting by late classical times the stricter Aristotelian conception, that, as long as the classical tradition lasted in literature, rhetoric was able to maintain a powerful influence in more 'purely' literary spheres. This type of rhetoric concerns itself with every kind of writing. The Aristotelians, who see rhetoric as applicable to oratory alone, have—at any rate in England since the Renaissance—constituted an uninfluential minority.

In England, then, we deal with rhetoric as primarily an 'art of speaking and writing'. During the Renaissance, indeed, a strong tendency developed to identify rhetoric with the study merely of style,[10] to the exclusion of other considerations. The so-called

'reforms' of Ramus, who achieved some influence in England, served only to strengthen the tendency.[11]

By the eighteenth century the balance has been restored. It is only exceptionally that rhetoricians devote themselves exclusively to style, and then with a consciousness that they are treating only a part of their subject. In fact the rhetorician's net, as we shall see, is now being cast wider than ever before, though the definition of rhetoric most widely accepted after 1750 is still the traditional Ciceronian one of 'an art of speaking and writing well'.

A new emphasis, however, is now placed on what was always implicit in Classical rhetoric: the principle that good speaking or writing consists in the perfect adaptation of means to chosen ends. This is stressed in some of the definitions offered during the period. Rhetoric is 'that art or talent by which the discourse is adapted to its end'. 'He who speaks, or writes, in such a manner as to adapt all his words most effectually to [his] end, is the most eloquent man'.[12]

For a few writers rhetoric still retains its orientation towards the platform and pulpit, and they offer appropriate definitions: 'Oratory is the art of speaking well upon any subject, in order to persuade'.[13] But these 'Aristotelians' make it clear that what they have to say must not be considered altogether irrelevant to other forms of discourse.[14] They are in any case a small handful, writing in the earlier part of the period.[15]

The more important writers define rhetoric as relevant to literature generally. Some who are not explicit in defining the bounds of their subject show in their works that they conceive it to have a very wide range. Not only do they run the whole gamut of traditional rhetorical concerns, invention, arrangement and style, they attack every kind of literary and aesthetic problem as well. They discuss the origins of the sublime and the beautiful, the doctrine of imitation, the psychology of literary invention. And these discussions are not merely incidental divagations, the result of an interest in the fringes of the subject. The very titles of some of these works—*Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*—indicate that their writers intend to effect a deliberate *rapprochement* between rhetoric and literary theory. The contents even of works which proclaim a concern with one of the two disciplines rather than the other make it clear that no precise de-limitation is implied by their titles: thus Campbell in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* leads the reader as naturally