

Romantic Creativity and the Ideal of Originality: A Contextual Analysis

*Jessica Millen**

Poetry as an original expression of individual creativity is a recurring definition shared by many Romantic poets. The Romantic poets transformed concerns of creative expression and ownership into the 'institution' of originality, where ideas of individual imagination and creativity have been theorised to signify value in poetic and wider literary criticism.¹ Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* celebrates poetry as the shaping of 'deep feeling' through 'profound thought' into words that possess a 'sense of novelty and freshness'.² Similarly, Friedrich Schlegel asserts that if poems are 'not completely *unique*, free and true, then...they're worthless' [emphasis added].³ Shelley describes poetic inspiration of 'the greatest poet' as 'original purity and force', shaped by 'labour and study'.⁴ High poetic value is placed upon originality and unique expression, and this mindset of celebrating creativity and scorning imitation remains deeply ingrained into today's literary culture. A concentration on 'originality' and individual 'sincerity' in artistic expression, writes Thomas Mallon, continues today under the 'fearful legacy of the Romantics'.⁵ 'True literature', according to Hazlitt, is 'pure invention'.⁶ This preoccupation with originality and the pursuit of individual truth through poetry resonates with poets of all ages, but it was the musings of the Romantic poets that transformed originality, that 'sense of novelty', into a key aspect of judging poetic value.

* Jessica Millen is in her second year of a Bachelor of Philosophy (Arts) degree at the Australian National University. She is a current resident of Bruce Hall.

¹ Forest Pyle, *The Ideology of Imagination: Subject and Society in the Discourse of Romanticism* (Stanford University Press, 1995) 28.

² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (J. M. Dent & Co, 1906) 166.

³ Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments* (University of Minnesota Press, 1971) 15.

⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in Alasdair D. F. Macrae (ed.) *Shelley: Selected Poetry and Prose*, (Routledge, 1991) 228.

⁵ Thomas Mallon, *Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism* (Harcourt, 1989) 24.

⁶ *Ibid* xi.

This essay will examine the ideal of originality as a value that arose from the pressures of a late eighteenth and early nineteenth century context. It will also consider the significance of two different conceptions of originality, *creatio* and *inventio*, in shaping our understanding of the creative process. In order to demonstrate the ongoing legacy of the Romantics' creative ideal of originality, this essay will explore Modernist attitudes towards individual creativity in relation to those of the Romantic poets, using T. S. Eliot as a key theorist on Modernist literary values.

Originality arose as a central poetic virtue during the Romantic period for a number of reasons, shaping the Romantic poetic ideal into a union of the old (practised poetic skill) and the new (organic poetic inspiration). John Stuart Mill for example, describes poetry as not only 'the thoughts and words in which emotion spontaneously embodies itself', but also 'the exhibition of a state...of human sensibility'.⁷ It is originality *within Romantic poetic conventions* that is truly valued. This is where the Romantic poetic ideal of originality becomes problematic. Romantic poets celebrated original 'genius' as the talent for producing works that are independent of the ideas and expressions of others, works 'for which no definite rule can be given'.⁸ However, this is contradictory in its very essence, as any attempt to define genius is placing upon it a 'definite rule'. Edward Said argues that the Romantics' concept of 'originality' is a 'variation of a dominant pattern' and is, in turn, enclosed within a tightly delineated framework.⁹ Similarly, Bloom argues that the influence of history and past poets is inescapable – naturally all ideas come from the individual, but the individual is shaped by their context, which in turn has been shaped by everything that preceded it.¹⁰ Thus Romantic originality is a response to an historical context that included elements like growing mass industrialisation and an intensifying sense of competition with past and contemporary poets for cultural relevance. These elements have,

⁷ John Stuart Mill, 'What Is Poetry?' *Early Essays* (1833) 203, 223.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (J H Bernard trans, Hafner Press, 1951) 150 [trans of *Kritik der Urteilsckraft* (first published 1790)].

⁹ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, the Critic* (Vintage, 1991) 134.

¹⁰ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1973) 8.

however, endured over time and are still present in our current context, resulting in our ongoing preoccupation with striving for the original.

There are three principal elements of the Romantic poets' historical context that led to an obsession with originality and individuality. Firstly, the high currency placed upon originality in Coleridge's late eighteenth and early nineteenth century context was a reaction against the advent of mass production that spread through Europe with the industrial revolution. With the dawn of the age of mechanical reproduction came concerns for the preservation of art and creativity. In this way, 'the rise of industrial society and commodity culture' caused mechanically reproduced imitations 'to be contrasted to the genuine or authentic, such as...the composition of fiction'.¹¹ An unoriginal poem was thus compared to the unthinking production of a machine. Edward Young's 1759 *Conjectures on Original Composition* reflects the contemporary opinion that 'imitations are often a sort of manufacture wrought up by those mechanics, art and labour, out of pre-existent materials not their own', giving imitation a dehumanised quality.¹² According to Young, unoriginal work was of little value; it was simply another mass-produced commodity on a poetic production-line. This portrayal of indebted poems as soulless and mechanic further served to increase the importance placed upon originality.

The second contextual influence upon the Romantics' ideal of originality is a sense of 'identity crisis', where the human soul must struggle for relevance in a society filled with machines. Young, for example, writes of the 'perpetual progress and increase' of 'arts Mechanic', but the 'decay' of arts 'Liberal'.¹³ As the drone-like existence of factory workers becomes a reality for more and more of the population, the fear of losing humanity's intellectual and spiritual faculties becomes more and more heightened. If industrialised society is perceived as the dying ground of humanity, then the Romantic poets believe that the 'pen of an Original Writer, like Armida's wand, out of a

¹¹ Nick Groom, *The Forger's Shadow* (Picador, 2002) 43.

¹² Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition* (The Scholar Press Ltd, 1966) 12.

¹³ *Ibid* 41.

barren waste calls a blooming spring'.¹⁴ In this way, Romantic poetry and its ideal of originality is the process of self-discovery in a world where human voices are being drowned out by technological advancements, leading to 'the palpable diminution of the meaningful self'.¹⁵ Surrounded by technology, the Romantics celebrated 'organic form' while shunning the idea of 'mechanical regularity'.¹⁶ The Romantic poets' appreciation for authenticity and originality stems not only from a desire to assert their own individuality, but also from a longing for the infinite truth of what it means to be human. Both of these desires were shaped by a historical context of industrialised mass production and urbanisation that presented originality as the essential expression of humanity.

A third reason for the Romantics' preoccupation with originality concerns a heightened awareness of the rise of mass-culture. Coleridge and his Romantic contemporaries were acutely aware of what Walter Jackson Bate terms 'the burden of the past', which poses a question that, as time passes, grows increasingly difficult to answer: 'What is there left to do?'¹⁷ McFarland describes this phenomenon as an 'exponentially increasing deluge of culture' that weighs down upon all poets as 'an intellectual fear of inundation by masses of books'.¹⁸ Our increased capacity to preserve and distribute past works means that poetic achievements are 'constantly multiplying in an eternal present'.¹⁹ Bate argues that the Romantics were more intensively concerned with the impossibility of avoiding repetition and imitation than any preceding literary generation. McFarland effectively expresses this attitude towards originality in market terms: 'as the available commodity became scarcer, so demand grew proportionally more urgent'.²⁰ This

¹⁴ Ibid 10.

¹⁵ Thomas McFarland, 'The Originality Paradox', (1974) 5(3) *New Literary History* 448.

¹⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, Thomas Middleton Raysor (ed) (Dent, 1960) i.

¹⁷ Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (Harvard University Press, 1970) 4, 3.

¹⁸ McFarland, above n 15, 453.

¹⁹ Ibid 4.

²⁰ Ibid 24.

tone of urgency and anxiety is evident in the writings of many Romantic poets. Goethe, for example, asks:

Where would an earnest soul, capable of appreciating genius,
find the courage even to set pen to paper, if he were aware of
such unfathomable and unreachable excellence already in
existence!²¹

Reflecting this same negative tension, Keats imagines himself as ‘cowering under the wing of great poets’, questioning whether his work is merely an ‘imposition’ upon the cultural present in light of the immensity of the cultural past.²² Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence*, argues that poetry is the literary expression of a filial struggle for creative autonomy from previous poets, sparked by anxiety concerning the difficulty of originality. ‘A poem’, he asserts, ‘is not an overcoming of anxiety but is that anxiety’.²³ Poetry, according to Bloom, is the manifestation of a poet’s aggressive struggle for self-assertion while lost in a sea of past poets. This reflects the role of pressures from a fruitful cultural past in shaping the Romantic ideals of originality and creative individuality that continue to resonate with later literary generations.

Originality as an ideal is shaped by cultural and literary context, and conceptions of originality vary over time. As outlined in George Steiner’s *Grammars of Creation*, there are two contrasting cultural concepts of originality in literary creation.²⁴ I would like to position these two variations of originality as two opposite poles, where cultural attitudes towards originality swing back and forth between the two in a dialectical manner. The distinction between the two poles concerns the poet’s source of creative originality, whether this be from within the poet himself or from external influences.

²¹ Bate, above n 17, 6.

²² Ibid 77.

²³ Bloom, above n 10, 94-95.

²⁴ George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (Yale University Press, 2001) 13-53.

The first theory of originality is *creatio*, which connotes the creation of something from nothing.²⁵ Creators bring their works into existence either from within themselves or from an intangible force that works through them. *Creatio* suggests a moment of inspiration, where, as George Puttenham argues, the mind conjures up ‘all the world out of nought’.²⁶ The Romantic poets’ preoccupation with creative originality represents a movement towards this understanding of originality. Wordsworth’s theory of poetry as the ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ reflects this idea of originality as having no source but the poet himself. In this way, *creatio* is associated with neither hard work nor skill, but with an unconscious force that results in a work free of any borrowed elements. It is a process by which all ideas spring from the ‘individual soul’ and ‘the imagination creates its ideas...from nothing!’²⁷ This shows the appeal of the theory of originality as *creatio* for the Romantics, where the pressures of industrialisation and the weight of the cultural past gave Romantic poets feelings of anxiety for a sense of ownership over individual character and identity. As an organic process of creativity, *creatio* embodies the Romantic ideal of originality as individual freedom from cultural influence.

Coleridge and his contemporaries theorised originality in the form of *creatio* as a natural poetic gift that only a select number of individuals possess. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge argues that poetic genius ‘may be cultivated and improved, but can never be learned’ and that true imagination is a ‘gift’.²⁸ This expression of poetic skill as natural talent further illustrates the Romantics’ conception of poetic originality as an assertion of their individuality. Therefore, the idealisation of poetic originality by the Romantic poets reflects the desire for individuality amongst a growing population and a literary tradition that is rapidly expanding in volume. An opinion shared by many Romantic poets is the impression of the ‘born poet’.²⁹ Shelley stresses the ‘delicate

²⁵ McFarland, above n 15, 6.

²⁶ Ibid 2.

²⁷ J A Héraud, ‘On Poetical Genius Considered as a Poetic Power’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, (1830) 1, 63.

²⁸ Coleridge, above n 2, 168.

²⁹ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 1953) 102.

sensibility' of the natural poet, while Wordsworth argues that the 'spirit of life' is active within a poet 'more than other men'.³⁰ The ability to achieve *creatio* is, for the Romantics, a state of being that a poet either inhabits or does not inhabit from birth. It is not only spontaneous moments of intense emotions that the Romantics valued; the idea of inhabiting a heightened state of emotional and intellectual awareness is also consistently upheld as a Romantic ideal. As a result, originality as a natural, unlearned gift is intrinsically tied up in ideals of creative genius and poetic quality.

However, originality as *creatio* is also hailed as a supernatural force that is channelled through the poet, where the poet is not the source but the 'prophet' of a higher creative power.³¹ Coleridge writes of the 'magical power' of 'divine inspiration' that uses the poet as a vessel for poetic originality, suggesting that originality is only achievable through an affiliation with a mystical creative energy.³² It is Coleridge's concept of the 'primary Imagination' that presents poetic originality as an idea that transcends both the poet's will and personal skill. Coleridge's 'primary Imagination' is 'the living power and prime agent of all human perception', which personifies human creativity as an external, omnipotent force, giving poetic originality a supernatural quality.³³ Thus originality in the Romantic creative process is presented as the result of an overarching natural or supernatural *power*, rather than a skill. This way of thinking, where originality is an innate and mystical quality, demonstrates the rise of creative originality as an aspect of value judgement in Romantic poetry.

Logically, this theory of originality as creation *ex nihilo* is inherently problematic, for nothing can be made from nothing. This problem is particularly relevant to poetry, which is a highly regulated form of expression through language. Nevertheless, originality as *creatio* remains as a highly-valued quality in Romantic poetry. It is, however,

³⁰ William Wordsworth in Nowell Charles Smith (ed), *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, (Amen House, 1925) 23.

³¹ Anthony John Harding, *Coleridge and the Inspired World* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985) 5.

³² Coleridge, above n 2, 166.

³³ *Ibid* 159.

only one side of Coleridge's poetic ideal, reflecting the influence of past and contemporary poetic conventions and judgements on the Romantic poets. Coleridge describes the spark of original thought as a 'tumult' that must be tamed by deep meditation and patient study, which in turn gives birth to 'stupendous power'.³⁴ Poetry is 'a union...of spontaneous impulse and voluntary will', where impulsive originality is organised into a conventional medium in order to allow communication and understanding of the poet's individuality.³⁵ This reflects influences from Friedrich Schlegel, who writes that 'there is nothing more rare than a poem' due to the abundance of 'poetical sketches...fragments...and raw materials' that lack either the spark of originality or the mastery of poetic convention to shape them into poetry.³⁶ As Herder argues, 'if the imagination is without consciousness and understanding, the poet is only a raging dreamer', as order and unity must be used to contain the poet's original creative energy.³⁷ It is the combination of 'talent and much reading' that makes 'creative power and intellectual energy wrestle as in a war embrace', reflecting the Romantic poets' struggle between asserting their individuality and adhering to poetic convention.

This reflects the problematic nature of the ideal of originality as *creatio*. A poem is challenged to simultaneously express the originality and individuality of one man and the universal experience of humanity. Any natural or supernatural force that sparks original inspiration is translated into shared constructions of meaning. As Shelley states, 'a poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, the one'.³⁸ However, the poet also expresses 'the actions and passions' of an 'internal being', which can only be his own.³⁹ This paradox shows the limits of Romantic preoccupations with *creatio* in poetry and other mediums of creativity. While originality as *creatio* remains a highly valued element of great

³⁴ Ibid 172.

³⁵ Coleridge, above n 16, 164.

³⁶ Schlegel, above n 3, 1.

³⁷ Frederick Burwick, *Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) 27.

³⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Literary and Philosophical Criticism*, ed. John Shawcross (Oxford University Press, 1909) 124.

³⁹ Macrae, above n 4, 208.

poetry, Romantic creativity is the unity of both individual soul and poetic convention to convey a sense of the universal human spirit.

This leads us to the second cultural definition of originality: *inventio*, which represents creation as the rearrangement of existing parts.⁴⁰ While *creatio* brings something into existence from nothing, *inventio* composes already existing material into novel constructions. *Inventio* can therefore be considered a more pragmatic understanding of originality. However, this pragmatism lessens its value as a cultural concept in a Romantic, post-neoclassic context in which neoclassic ideals of Reason are being usurped by Romantic ideals of Imagination. *Inventio*, in contrast to *creatio*, is not associated with sparks of inspiration and innovation, but with the hard work and skill that are required to shape influencing factors into poetry. There are an infinite number of external factors that may serve as building blocks in the theory of *inventio* – the aesthetic tradition that the poet inhabits, the socio-political undercurrents of the time, or even the last piece of literature that the poet reads before setting pen to paper. Harold Bloom takes this one step further with his theory of influence, which claims that all poems are simply misinterpretations of previous poems. Bloom argues that writing a poem is revising an earlier poem. ‘True poetic history’, writes Bloom, ‘is the story of how poets as poets have suffered other poets’.⁴¹ Asserting that the true value of a poem can only be found through an understanding of its relation to other poems, Bloom’s argument demonstrates a swing towards the pole of *inventio* in defining the ideal of originality. Despite any attempts to remove themselves from the cultural past, writes Bloom, all poets are entrapped within a poetic ‘family romance’, where poems are simply refractions and re-workings of others.⁴² Bloom presents the relationship between the two theories of originality as the relationship between the intended ideal (*creatio*) and the inevitable, realistic result (*inventio*).

⁴⁰ McFarland, above n 15, 6.

⁴¹ Bloom, above n 10, 94.

⁴² *Ibid* 30.

Similarly, T. S. Eliot argues that ‘No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone’.⁴³ Written in a Modernist context, Eliot’s assertions are an example of a continuing preoccupation with originality, but also a swing towards the pole of *inventio* within this preoccupation. Embracing the influence of other poets, writes Eliot:

compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

Eliot’s essay clearly demarks a movement away from *creatio* in ideas of literary value in the twentieth century. Rather than viewing past poets as competition, Eliot views past poets and their works as a tool to enrich and shape contemporary poetry. Eliot acknowledges that comparison with previous poets is inevitable for all present poets, but stresses the mutual nature of this comparison, whereby all works are measured not only against but *by* each other.⁴⁴ Eliot does not see himself or his contemporaries as arriving after the dead poets. Instead, he sees current poets as joining the eternal present of creative expression. In the relationship that Eliot envisages, old works are judged by the new to the same extent that new works are judged by the old. He argues that:

...what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it...the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.⁴⁵

As E. M. Forster’s motto asserts, ‘History develops, Art stands still’.⁴⁶ Eliot and his contemporaries view the great poets of the past not as creative competition, but as partners. However, this awareness of the significance of a shared cultural past, whether viewed in a positive or a

⁴³ T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, *Perspecta* (1987) 19, 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid* 42.

⁴⁵ *Ibid* 38.

⁴⁶ Aleida Assmann, *Exorcising the demon of chronology: T. S. Eliot’s Reinvention of Tradition*, in G. Cianci and J. Harding (eds), *T. S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) 18.

negative light, is an awareness directly inherited from the Romantics' preoccupation with originality. It also reflects a swing towards the pole of *inventio* within the ideal of originality, and therefore a continuing obsession with originality and novelty in creativity.

However, like the Romantic ideal of *creatio*, the Modernist ideal of originality as *inventio* also has points of difficulty and contradiction. Although *inventio* connotes hard work and wide knowledge, Eliot argues that originality 'does not happen consciously or of deliberation' and therefore shows that *inventio* also requires the poet's creativity to have an 'unconscious' quality. This perspective concerning originality as *inventio* is shared by the Romantic poets. For example, Goethe describes Shakespeare as having created 'golden apples in silver dishes' and suggests that careful study may build upon this in an original manner. However, he also warns against attempting *inventio* without great poetic skill, as the silver dishes are no use if we have 'only potatoes to put in them'.⁴⁷ This is where *inventio*, too, becomes problematic, as it also requires a form of organic originality that flows through or from within the poet to bestow new value upon pre-existing materials. In essence, the two cultural concepts of originality are striving for the same result – a sense of novelty and originality that reflects the transcendent creative genius and skill of the poet.

Despite changes concerning the comparative value placed upon the alternate poles of *creatio* and *inventio*, we have clearly inherited the cult of originality from the Romantic poets. A strong possessiveness over ideas that stems from our obsession with individual innovation shows itself in our ongoing obsession with plagiarism, copyright and the public figure of the author. It is also clear that *creatio* and *inventio* are not entirely separate from each other, and that all expressions of creativity lie in the space between the two poles of originality. The understanding of creativity that we have inherited from the Romantic poets, including the ideal of originality, therefore has two forces working upon it – the burdensome pressure of the cultural past and the uplifting power of the human imagination. It is the friction between these two forces that sparks creative inspiration, and the ongoing,

⁴⁷ Bate, above n 17, 5.

mutually-transformative relationship between the two that develops a creative space in which we continue to contribute both poetry and criticism to the cultural and literary dilemma of originality.

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