INTRODUCTION

Percy Bysshe Shelley and Ralph Waldo Emerson were major Romantics of the early nineteenth century. They, one an English Romantic poet and critic and the other an American, belonged to two different continents and cultures. The foundation of the poetics of these two thinkers can be located in the classical Greek tradition through nineteenth century German thought—Romanticism and Idealism as manifest in the writings of the European literary thinkers. Besides this, there are manifest parallels of modern literary theory like New Historicism, Feminism, Ecocriticism, Psychoanalysis, Post-colonialism, Formalism and some aspects of Hermeneutics, Marxism, Post-structuralism and Deconstruction as well as Reader-responses/Reception theory.

The objective of this thesis is to account for the close relationship between the poetics of P.B. Shelley and R.W. Emerson and modern literary thought. The theoretical statements and poetics and prose compositions of these two poets and critics reveal many affinities.

In the West, poetics as a theoretical discipline began with Aristotle in the second century B.C. All subsequent work in literary theory is either an extension or a reinterpretation of Aristotle. In the eighteenth century, interest in the Aristotelian discipline moved to Germany. It became a major discipline with Romanticism (the Schlegel brothers). In the England it was taken up by Coleridge and in the latter part of the nineteenth century with the symbolist movement, the discipline took roots in France. Not till the late nineteenth century did different literary concerns arise. Modern developments such as Russian Formalism, Morphologism, New Criticism and its later developments including Deconstruction and Psycholinguists have been inspired and influenced by Saussure. In all these approaches there is a marked preference for linguistic exegesis as an analytical tool.

In his essay, The Poet, Emerson echoes many of Shelley’s insights expressed in his Defence of Poetry, Shelley’s view of the poetic or artistic process has many obvious affinities with contemporary psychology, German Idealist thought and also modern literary theories. He seeks to establish poetry as an expression of the human creative spirit. All artistic expression for Shelley is connate (cognate) with the origin
of man and hence has deep psychological roots. The process is untenable without imagination, which makes it possible to rearrange the perceptions and impressions stored in the mind. It produces living pictures in the artist's mind and Shelley's Imagination is also philosophical, visionary and lyrical. The sub-conscious being the originator and repository of all creativity has a particular role to play in the process. Besides this the creative process is an interaction of emotion, intuition and inspiration with reason determining its qualitative aspect.

Shelley sums up the function of the poetical faculty as a two fold function: "by one it creates new materials of knowledge, and power and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good."¹ Since poetry arises from socio-psychological reactions. a poem for Shelley is therefore the "very image of life expressed in its eternal truth."

In a more restricted sense Shelley sees poetry as the expression of, "those arrangements of language, especially metrical language...created by the imagination."² It is a harmonious arrangement of words and poetry itself is harmony. Words and combinations of words themselves are repositories of pleasurable order.

Shelley was the first poet to recognize the unique resources of language. When he narrows his focus to "the nature itself of language," he expounds his sense of the relation of mind and language with considerable exactness. He begins by saying that language is a more direct representation of the action and passions of our internal being than any other artistic media and thus is more subtly responsive to the mind's expressive activity. This clearly implies that the mind's thoughts and feelings exist prior to the words originally created or subsequently employed to constitute them. As a "representation" of our "internal being," language presupposes an anterior presence or presentation of mental actions and passions. That language might play a constitutive role in determining what those "actions and passions" are in the first place is not part of Shelly's theory. It is thought that resolutely constitutes or produces language:

For language is arbitrarily produced by the imagination and has relations to thought alone....⁴
As mentioned earlier, Shelley considers both sounds and thoughts, like words, as the expressions of the imagination. One implication of this reduction of poetic language to imagination is that it marks every "true" poet as original. In the preface to *The Revolt of Islam* he claims that his diction follows the natural movement of his thoughts and that he has not:

Permitted any system relating to mere words to divert the attention of the reader, from whatever interest I may have succeeded in creating, to my ingenuity, in contriving to disguise them according to the rules of criticism.  

The "most obvious and appropriate" words are chosen to delineate the "moving adventures" of his poem. He attempts to make the poem "properly my own," avoiding style as such, since all styles are "peculiar to...original genius," a concept in which, as formulated by Edward Young, "original" is "of a vegetable nature, it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius." Imitations on the other hand, "are of a sort of manufacture wrought up by those mechanics of art and labour, out of pre-existent material not their own."

R.W. Emerson is his essay *The Poet* considers "words and deeds to be quite indifferent modes of the divine energy." Words are also actions and actions are a kind of words. The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty, "some men, namely poets are natural sayers sent into the world to the end of expression." Emerson further adds "language is fossil poetry" and the poet works through his imagination- "this insight which expresses itself by what is called imagination, is a very high sort of seeing." The quality of imagination is such that it "intoxicates the poet" and the expressive power of the poet "is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree." As pointed out by Wimsatt and Brooks the above phrase echoes the metaphor used by Coleridge. It also reflects Coleridge's purpose. Emerson like Coleridge is emphasizing that, verbal expression, to use Coleridge's phrase, it not "a pure work of the will" – it is not a willful and arbitrary thing but is as natural and organic as the growth of a leaf is organic.

iii
There are many such parallels of phrasing between Coleridge, Shelley and Emerson. As Wimsatt and Brooks observe that these "phrasings" may be accidental and we should not rely too much upon the somewhat rhapsodic language which Emerson habitually used. They also refer to Shelley's essay *The Defence of Poetry* as "rhapsodic didacticism." This study is an attempt to show that the parallels of thought between Emerson and Shelley are not accidental but due to the prevalent foregrounding of the senior Romantic poets who in turn were attuned to European thought.

Emerson like Shelley drew upon Coleridge's sources in neo-Platonism and German idealistic philosophy. They both also drew directly from Coleridge himself. But Emerson was apparently affected even more deeply than Coleridge by a sense of crisis in the problem of knowledge while Shelley was more agitated over the issue and role of literature.

Both however, were concerned with the specificity of language. They involved themselves with the concepts that govern words and reality. I.A. Richards saw reality, as man can be aware of it, as a symbolic construction. In the theories of both theoreticians there is an underlying linguistic approach, which shows affinities with contemporary literary thought. Besides this both felt that the creative process is an interaction of emotion, intuition and inspiration with reason determining, as has already been said, its qualitative aspect. They had shared views on the concept of the poet; sources of creativity and the creative process; the nature of poetry and the language of poetry.
NOTES


2 Shelley 231.
3 Shelley 229.
4 Shelley 229.
7 Emerson 239-40.
8 Emerson 138.
NOTES


2 Shelley 231.

3 Shelley 229.

4 Shelley 229.


7 Emerson 239-40.

8 Emerson 138.

SHELLEY AND EMERSON:
AN ESSAY IN COMPARATIVE POETICS
SHELLEY AND EMERSON:
AN ESSAY IN COMPARATIVE POETICS
SHELLEY AND EMERSON:
AN ESSAY IN COMPARATIVE POETICS
SHELLEY AND EMERSON:
AN ESSAY IN COMPARATIVE POETICS