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THE CONCEPT OF ORGANIC FORM IN AMERICAN ROMANTIC POETRY

Very sensitive to local conditions and large enough to comprehend them, romanticism was the expression of the particular nations' consciousness of their specific identities. American romanticism was the climax of America's hitherto intellectual development; it was the first national literary movement which played a very active part in the process of consolidating the new Republic.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the concept of the process of creating a work of art in American romantic poetry against the same concept in the English poetry of that period. For this purpose the ideas of S. T. Coleridge, R. W. Emerson and W. Whitman will be taken into consideration. The choice of Coleridge from the pleiad of English romantic poets is dictated by the fact that he gives a theoretical account of the romantic conception of art in general.

Coleridge does not believe in imposing a preconceived form on the material for a work of art. Every kind of material should be formed in a different way, according to its immanent structure. Thus the form of a work of art is essentially innate in the matter which it grows out of. Coleridge employs the parallel with organic growth of a living organism, e.g., that of a tree, to account for the development of a work of art which is encoded in the artist's inspiring idea, just as the shape of a tree is already contained in its seed. All the parts of a tree are attached and related to it, and in the same way the parts of a work of art must pertain and add to the dominant idea deve-

loped in this work of art. Thus a poem grows like a tree does. The artist's mind works in a way similar to nature.

The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material; - as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fulness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form¹.

The American romantics seem to go a step further. Here the artist's mind is identical with nature. The artist's complete identification with the outside world results from his absolute faith in the benevolence of God as well as the world which God created. The artist submits himself to the will of God, and since nature is the result of God's will, the artist submits himself to nature. Hence in American romantic poetry the process of creating a work of art is not merely analogous with the natural process of the growth of living organisms. It belongs to the same category as nature does because in the act of creation the artist's mind is governed by exactly the same laws that govern nature. The artist is no longer conscious of the separate existence of his own mind, for his consciousness is dissolved in nature; "artist works not as he wants but as he must", Emerson says.

Since the universal mind is the sole creator of both the useful and the beautiful, the only way for the individual to partake in the creative act is by submitting himself entirely to this primal source beyond the understanding².

Emerson did for American romanticism what Coleridge had done for the English, i.e., he formulated its theoretical conceptions. But, unlike Coleridge, he did not succeed in putting them into practice himself. Although Emerson's ideas concerning the relationship between man, nature and art have a lot in common with the analogous ideas of Coleridge, there are at least

¹ F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, Oxford 1974, p. 134.

² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

three points in which his philosophy differs: Emerson is a teacher, a religious man, and a patriot deeply involved in everything that concerns his country. This involvement in the problems of his days is reflected in Emerson's writings.

In his essays, which he read in public throughout the United States, Emerson praises man above all. He expresses faith in man, opening before him the possibility of becoming as great as God himself. He speaks with reverence about God, but it is a benevolent and generous God, the Oversoul, whom everyone is part of. This potential possibility for everyone to become as perfect as God is the basis of Emerson's idea of democracy and equality. A developing democratic country needs strong, active people. Aware of this, Emerson draws in his essay a model of a self-reliant man, one who is never afraid of doing what he thinks is right but knows how to live in the society of his times.

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors or invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort and advancing on Chaos and the Dark³.

He also calls for a self-reliant country which would turn to its native resources for developing its own science, art and literature instead of copying foreign ones.

The soul is no traveller; the wise man stays at home and when his necessities, his duties, on any occasion call him from his house, or into foreign lands, he is at home still and shall make men sensible by the expression of his countenance that he goes, the missionary of wisdom and virtue, and visits cities and men like a sovereign and not like an interloper or a valet⁴.

³ R. W. Emerson, Self-Reliance, [in:] Selected Writings of R. W. Emerson, New York 1960, p. 146-147.

⁴ Ibid., p. 164-165.

Emerson managed to do a very important thing for America, namely to turn what seemed to be the disadvantages of the American cultural situation into advantages. The United States of the mid-19th century was a country with little historical background. Writers such as Longfellow tried to create an American historical tradition but the results were not convincing. Emerson turned the attention of the American artists away from the past and toward the present and the future. "Living, not having lived avails", he says. The future has limitless potentials, and this is what America should look forward to. The past does not matter, the present and the future need not be consistent with the past. It is the promise of the future that counts. But Emerson does not stop at that. The future must be built now. America is in the process of constructing its paradise, and this process in itself is very important. Emerson introduced into American literature the modern version of the archetype of man the voyager. He puts a stress on man's need to know the key to relating himself to reality, which is more important than knowing reality itself. Life is not static; reality is ever changing, man must become in every situation, and this is what he must know how to do. The "key" that Emerson proposes is faith, the unlimited belief in God's benevolence and in the absolute union of man and God.

Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person who in his integrity worships God, becomes God⁵.

Emerson is convinced that nature, man and art are only different expressions of the Oversoul. He sees no distinction between them. Art and nature should be governed by the same laws of creation.

A true announcement of the law of creation, if a man were found worthy to declare it, would carry art up into the kingdom of nature, and destroy its separate and contrasted existence⁶.

⁵ Ibid., p. 275.

⁶ Ibid., p. 313.

Emerson believes that the artistic expression of the Oversoul resides in "man's most basic feelings". Man is therefore the agent capable of transmitting nature into art. Nature and art come together in man, as they do in the Oversoul.

The acute awareness of the uniqueness of the American condition and the desire to render this in a new literary form is characteristic of Whitman as well as of Emerson. Whitman is the one who actually succeeded in putting the idea of a new kind of poem into practice.

His purpose in writing the poem is to make man conscious of the unity that exists between him and the external world. He has a new approach to both man and reality. Nothing is static in Whitman's world. He accepts travel and exploring as the mode of existence; and his man is the voyager. There is no definite goal that the travel leads to, just as there is no single discovery to be made. The journey is the destination in itself, and the human responses to the encountered life situations are the subject of the poet's interest. The road is of paramount importance to a constant traveller. The road is the line of contact between the travelling man and reality. The poem indicates the road, it is the road, as the voyager and what he sees are united in the uttered words, i.e., in the poem. While Coleridge uses a metaphor of organic growth of a plant to account for the process of creating a work of art, the endless road through unexplored regions always ahead of us could be Whitman's metaphor for that process.

But the voyager-reality-poem relationship is ambiguous. The poem creates reality, just as much as it is created by reality, due to the power of the uttered word which Whitman believes in. The poem does not describe reality; it is itself a realization.

When Whitman writes, "See, steamers steaming through my poems", he is admonishing both himself and his audience that no distinction can be made between themselves, the steamers, and the words. Indeed, no distinction can be made between the poet and the reader: "It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue of you"⁷.

⁷ C. Feidelson, Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature*, Chicago 1969, p. 18.

If the poem is a realization of language, then there is always the possibility that the poet's idea behind the poem is to bring into being as much of the language as possible. The numerous long catalogues and frequent repetitions in Whitman's poetry support this idea. The poet himself calls "Leaves of Grass" - "only a language experiment" in the "American Primer".

Whether a reflection of man's endless journey through life or the realization of language, the poem is unlimited in length in both cases. It goes on as long as the poet lives and responds to reality. This is what is meant by the term "open form" as applied to Whitman's life-poem "Leaves of Grass". There were nine editions of "Leaves of Grass" between the years 1855-1892. Each one was rearranged by the author and new poems were added to it.

Apart from the endlessness of the life-process Whitman looks for other regularities in nature which could be reflected in the poem, e.g., he organizes his poems according to natural patterns, such as that of the ebb and flow of the sea in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" or the birth-to-death cycle in Section 8 of "Song of Myself", or the circular round-the-world voyage in "Passage to India" (the problem of Whitman's poetic language is outside the scope of this paper).

"Leaves of Grass" records every-day American life in the mid-19th century in the widest possible range. Whitman plays in the poem the roles of: a teacher and a companion, a destroyer of the order of the past and a creator of the future society of "love and democracy". He sees America as a magnificent country. In the 1855 Preface he says:

The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem⁸.

The people must rise up to their country:

The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen⁹.

⁸ W. W h i t m a n, 1855 Preface to "Leaves of Grass", [in:] Macmillan Anthology, New York 1974, p. 12.

⁹ Ibid., p. 14-15.

And it is the poet who must bring the people and the land together, stimulate the creative spirit of men and foresee the future shape of the country in order to lead people in the right direction. This is how Whitman describes his own role in the 1855 Preface:

Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall. Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man. [...] He bestows on every object or quality its fit proportions neither more nor less. He is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land. [...] The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into any thing that was before thought small it delates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer [...] he is individual [...] he is complete in itself [...] the others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not. He is not one of the chorus [...] he does not stop for any regulation [...] he is the president of regulation¹⁰.

Whitman's readiness to accept the universe not only without criticism but with the belief that it is as good as it can be is often held against the poet. The roots of this non-selectiveness are in Whitman's faith. His faith, although its origins are in Quakerism, is broader than faith in the religious sense of the word. It consists in accepting reality, i.e., nature and man, as they are, and welcoming them. Life, for Whitman, is equally good in all its expressions, nothing in it is to be condemned, everything is to be accepted and valued if not praised. In "Democratic Vistas" he says that the core of democracy, which he understands as spiritual unity, is the religious element.

For Whitman art and nature are two corresponding components of the life process, which exist simultaneously, and just as it is impossible to exclude anything from nature, so it is impossible to do so in art.

Emerson's actual influence on Whitman is a controversial matter. Some sources say he must have known him while others

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

maintain he had not read Emerson before 1855. Whitman himself is very inconsistent on this point. On the one hand there is his well known expression "I was simmering, simmering, Emerson brought me to a boil", on the other hand, however, he told Horace Traubel in an interview that he had not read Emerson before the first edition of the "Leaves of Grass" came out¹¹. Nevertheless Whitman personifies the model of a poet that Emerson draws in his essay "The Poet". Although isolated among his contemporaries, ("Leaves of Grass" were heavily criticised at the beginning) he stands among partial men for the complete man, the only one who is able to bring all the different aspects of reality together and "articulate" this reality in the form of art; he is "the beholder of ideas and utterer of the necessary".

"Song of Myself" is the poem that best projects and analyses the process of man's journey through the whole outside world and thus puts into practice the American romantic metaphor for the process of creating a work of art. Whitman wants to expose the self to the entire universe in it. He believes that the success of the self in society depends on its ability to grow as large as the society, acknowledging all its values without judging them. Therefore the self assumes throughout the poem an infinite number of identities, as if to manifest that all of them are contained in it. It names everything it encounters and, by naming it, incorporates it in itself. The self is journeying to the ideal state of mind where it will feel united with the entire universe and where it will realize its power. Nothing limits it in this journey. In the "Song of Myself" reality provides the necessary environment for the self to develop in and to come to full realization of itself, i.e., to the full identification with reality in all its possibilities.

Myself moving forward then and now and forever,
Gathering and showing more always with velocity,
Infinite and omnigenous.

(Section 32)¹²

¹¹ R. Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, Cambridge, Mass. 1962, p. 77-78.

¹² W. Whitman, *Song of Myself*, [in:] *Macmillan Anthology*.

We have thus far exhausted trillions of winters and
 summers,
 There are trillions ahead and trillions ahead of them.
 Births have brought us richness and variety,
 And other births will bring us richness and variety.

(Section 44)

In order to convince the reader that it is the whole and the continuity that count, Whitman brings together concepts which have been regarded as opposing since the antiquity. The principal unities he insists on are: that of body and soul, individual and society, man and God, and life and death. The union between soul and flesh is described in Section 5. In the previous section the speaker extricates himself from society, he stands alone, and in that moment of isolation comes to the realization that his body and soul are one.

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not
 abase itself to you,
 And you must not be abased to the other.

(Section 5)

The "other" being of course the flesh. Then an intercourse between the two is described and the feeling of love, peace and satisfaction which comes from the awareness that the self is united and complete extends on to all.

And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
 And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my
 own,
 And that all the men ever born are also my brothers,
 And the women my sisters and lovers,
 And that a kelson of creation is love..

(Section 5)

The unity between individual and society is demonstrated throughout the poem, but it is especially evident in the long epic catalogues (e.g. Section 15 and 33) where by enumerating various members of society, the speaker identifies with them. As the people he names are representatives of all social groups and, furthermore, as there is no order of bringing them into the poem, we may assume that they are chosen at random and that Whitman would accept anyone equally readily.

The president holding a cabinet council is surrounded by
 the great secretaries,
 On the piazza walk three matrons stately and friendly
 with twined arms,
 The crew of the fish-smack pack repeated layers of halibut
 in the hold,
 The Missourian crosses the plains toting his wares and
 his cattle,
 As the fare-collector goes through the train he gives
 notice by jingling of loose change,
 The floor-men are laying the floor, the tinner are tinning
 the roof, the masons are calling for mortar,
 In single file each shouldering his hod pass onward the
 laborers.

(Section 15)

Finally we come to the two most daring identifications: that of man with God and life with death. As it has already been said in this essay, Whitman sees everything as belonging to the universe on equal terms. Therefore it would be difficult for him to accept the idea that God may view or govern the world from a dominant position. The ultimate position in the universe as he sees it is occupied by man who, due to his consciousness, can realize the universal unity of all.

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
 And I have said that the body is not more than the
 soul,
 And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's
 self is.

(Section 48)

However, the transcendentalist God, the Oversoul, understood as the life-force, is for Whitman present in every man and object around him.

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
 I see something of God each hour of the twenty four,
 and each moment then,
 In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own
 face in the glass.

(Section 48)

Throughout the "Song of Myself" the poet evokes the sensation of eternal continuity and infinity. He denies terms such as "beginning" or "end". By calling grass the symbol of society, "the beautiful uncut hair of graves" he puts a stress on the

perpetuation of the human race. He does not regard a particular death as a definite end, just as he does not see a single birth as the beginning.

Has anyone supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just
as lucky to die, and I know it.
I pass death with the dying and birth
with the new wash'd babe,
and am not contain'd between my hat and boots.

Whitman is not afraid of death which, to him, also belongs to the universe, and believes that life is more powerful than death and that it always triumphs.

And as to you death, and your bitter hug of mortality,
it is idle to try to alarm me.
And as to you Life I reckon you are the leavings of many
deaths,
(no doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before).
(Section 49)

"Song of Myself" describes the human mind's gradual process of identification with concepts it is faced with in life. This process begins with the acknowledgement of the human body, then it encompasses the society, and ultimately it strives to comprehend God, the Oversoul, i.e., the universe. This initiation into ever greater concepts (body, society, universe) is the organizing principle of the poem.

It is interesting to note that particular sections of the poem also reflect the natural rhythms, e.g., Section 8 evokes the cycle of human life. It begins with the image of a baby asleep in its cradle. The next image presents a couple of young people, a boy and a girl, and finally there comes an image of death - suicide. Then Whitman gives a whole series of images presenting situations that everyone is confronted with in life: a sick man, "the meeting of enemies", the excited crowd, women giving birth to children, criminals. The phenomenon of human life which, between the extreme points of birth and death undergoes an infinite variety of experiences, is the pattern of this particular section of "Song of Myself".

The most revolutionary of Whitman's poems is "Song of the

Open Road". It invites the reader to do away with everything he has known so far and, resisting all the mundane temptations, such as money, stability or returned love, to enter upon the road to a new life. Here we see Whitman as apostle of a new religion, who tries to convert and baptize his followers. He portrays himself as a powerful giant, ready to "conquer" all and carry the burden of the whole world on his shoulders, free to direct himself and his load wherever he pleases.

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
 Healthy, free, the world before me,
 The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.
 Henceforth I ask not good fortune, I myself am good-
 -fortune,
 Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need
 nothing,
 Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous cri-
 ticisms,
 Strong and content I travel the open road¹³.

He welcomes everyone who wants to follow him: the black, the fellow, the diseased, the eloping couple. He is broad enough for that. And everything seems beautiful to him. Through contact with the open air and earth he wants to make "the best persons" out of all those who go with him. The world may seem incomprehensible to them at first but he promises to show them not how to comprehend reality but how to accept it on the basis of faith in the natural goodness of the world.

The earth is rude, silent, incomprehensible at first,
 Nature is rude and incomprehensible at first,
 But not discouraged, keep on, there are divine things
 well envelop'd,
 I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful
 than words can tell¹⁴.

But those who decide to follow him must openly rebel against everything they have been surrounded by up to the present. They must free themselves from the whole establishment: schools, teachers, preachers, money and lawyers, and take in return the poet's love and the promise of a future world of love and democracy.

¹³ W. Whitman, Song of the Open Road, [in:] Macmillan Anthology, p. 83.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 89.

My call is the call of battle, I nourish active rebellion,
 He going with me must go well arm'd,
 He going with me often goes with spare diet,
 poverty, angry enemies, desertions.
 Camerado, I give you my hand!
 I give you my love more precious than money,
 I give you myself before preaching of law,
 Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
 Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?¹⁵

The ambition of this paper has been to point out that the significance of the poetic "oeuvre" of the American romantic poetry consists in: the realization and acceptance of the uniqueness of America, the persistent search for the meaning of the American reality and, at the same time, a search for the appropriate artistic expression of it. As Charles Feidelson argues in his book "Symbolism and American Literature", both the awareness of the fact that the American condition is unique, and formal experimentation aiming at expressing this otherness, are the most vital components of the American literary tradition going back to Puritan literature. However, the degree with which they came into view in the first half of the 19th century exceeds that of the previous epochs and solidifies, if not establishes, the foundation of American poetry.

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POJĘCIE FORMY ORGANICZNEJ
 W-AMERYKAŃSKIEJ POEZJI ROMANTYCZNEJ

Romantyzm amerykański przejął pojęcie formy organicznej dzieła literackiego od romantyzmu angielskiego. R. W. Emerson i W. Whitman nie zaakceptowali jednak Coleridge'owskiego terminu "forma organiczna" bez przystosowania go do potrzeb i warunków, w jakich powstawała amerykańska literatura romantyczna. Niniejsza praca ma za cel opisanie amerykańskiej koncepcji formy organicznej i porównanie jej z angielską.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 94.