

## **THE ROMANTIC SUBJECT AS AN ABSOLUTELY AUTONOMOUS INDIVIDUAL**

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### **Abstract**

This essay deals with the Romantic subject as a philosophical and literary category. Recognizing the diversity and complexity of literary production in the Romantic period, this study does not attempt to treat all the many aspects of this subject, but it instead focuses upon a few: the role of nature, the status of imagination, and the subject's relation to the transcendental reality. In its relation to these issues, the Romantic subject appears as an absolutely autonomous individual, one who finds no satisfaction in claims to transcendental certainty made by any source outside the self, but relies on his immanent powers to achieve the self-awareness that is the only sure access to truth. Special attention is given to the Romantic mystical experience, whereby the subject comes into relation with the transcendental reality. Here what are termed mystical feelings are contrasted with religious feelings proper so as to stress the peculiarities of the Romantic religious experience. In providing a theoretical framework for the religious experience, we have recourse to Rudolf Otto's definition of the »numinous,« which denotes the feeling-response of the subject to the divine aspect of reality. In comparison with the true religious experience, the Romantic type is seen as pseudo-religious, thus confirming the proposed definition of the Romantic subject as a truly autonomous individual. The essay's second part contains an interpretation of selected poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge with a view of extrapolating from them some aspects of the Romantic subject.

### **1. The Romantic Subject as an Absolutely Autonomous Individual**

The Romantic era was a complex and turbulent period with no generally agreed agenda. Its emphases varied considerably with time, place and the lives of individual authors. Literary criticism abounds in theories which try to pin down the movement's defining characteristics. Earlier philosophical, psychological, religious and aesthetic critical approaches have been succeeded in recent years by New historicism (cf. Lui), feminism (cf. Mellor, Delamotte) poststructuralism (cf. McGann 1985, McGann 1993) and many other theories, each following its own criteria and governing principles. In the attempt to define the chief distinguishing feature of Romanticism, critics have often focused upon the particular status and characteristics of the individual as these appear in the literary production of the period, most conspicuously in its poetry. This new understanding of the individual has been associated with a shift in sensibility, an aesthetic of freedom, an emphasis on subjectivity, a commitment to individualism,

and a love of nature, to enumerate a few of its generally recognized characteristics. All of these and many others have been brought together in the inclusive term the Romantic subject. In meaning so many things, this concept has become vague and problematic. As such, it has undergone repeated reconsiderations and reassessments.

The definition of the Romantic subject proposed here will not provide a comprehensive view of this concept nor determine what is most central to it. Instead, it will treat only a few aspects of it, namely the role of nature, the status of imagination, and the subject's relation to the transcendental reality. Special attention will be given to Romantic mystical experience. Here what are termed mystical feelings are contrasted with religious feelings proper so as to stress the peculiarities of the Romantic religious experience. These aspects will be discussed in relation to a possible definition of the Romantic subject as an absolutely autonomous individual.

In Meyer Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, the individual's visionary powers are recognized as defining features of the Romantic subject, who is presented as a legendary poet-prophet who writes a visionary mode of poetry. True to his vocation, the Romantic individual is involved in a long and often unfulfilling quest because he aspires »towards an infinite good envisioned by the poet's imagination« (Abrams 1971: 108). Aidan Day shares Abrams's views of imagination as the visionary capacity to pursue spiritual truths. »Subject, mind, or spirit is given priority over nature and matter, so that the forms of the material world may be read as emblems of a profounder, spiritual reality transcending nature, time and space« (Day 58-59). Extending beyond considerations on British Romanticism, Frederick Garber argues that the concept of the visionary poet who, inspired by nature, follows the path to ultimate truths roots in the typically Romantic quest for personal autonomy which embodies the movement's chief characteristic. »To those who sought for it, an autonomous order of consciousness meant that the mind had created a system which was complete, idiosyncratic and self-subsistent, able to supply all of the major conditions it needed to satisfy itself and to do so endlessly, with no help from the outside« (Garber 1975: 27). The assumption underlying this claim was the fact that the Romantic subject possessed the potential to create an autonomous consciousness. This potential was constituted by a special way of feeling which was commonly termed the poetic imagination. »All the assertions about the value of the autonomous inner life rely on an implied assumption that the imagination is adequate to create forms to the self-sufficient consciousness« (Garber 1975: 28). Similarly, Janko Kos writes that at the centre of the romantic conception of the world there stands an absolutely autonomous individual who seeks to rely exclusively on his or her subjectivity to achieve self-realization (Kos 42).

In advancing his theory, Kos adopts the historical approach, tracing the development of the Romantic subject by giving primary consideration to the subject's attitude towards the transcendental reality. The earliest preliminary of the Romantic conception of the individual was provided by René Descartes, and this was given further philosophical expression by Immanuel Kant in the 18th century. The German classical philosophy and the Enlightenment provided a philosophical articulation of the modernist concept of the autonomous individual. Descartes's revolutionary shift of the paradigm from the objective-external to the subjective-internal opened up the pos-

sibility of a new experience for the human person and his vision of the world. By emphasizing the subjective dimension over the objective one, Descartes called attention to the importance of the innermost self as the essence of the human being. Similarly, by showing that the outside world is independent of the subject's consciousness, Kant emphasised the subjective value of knowledge. Descartes's and Kant's philosophies thus provided the philosophical foundations for the development of the Romantic subject, whose chief characteristic has been identified as the autonomy of consciousness.

It must be stressed, however, that despite the similarities, there are important differences between the modern subject as perceived by Descartes and Kant, and as seen by the Romantics. The latter does not rely on his rational abilities, but rather upon his irrational, emotional qualities. In Romanticism, the modern subject finds in intuitive feeling, sensitivity and beauty the legitimate sources of authority. The freedom to feel confirms the individual in his uniqueness and individuality. Unlike the rational capacities that can be learned and foreseen, emotions are »independent of all that is transsubjective because they originate in the subject, they are the product of the 'self' and are consequently beyond rationality, as they do not apply to external rules and cannot be framed by objective categories and conceptions. The essence of the Romantic subjectivity could be summarized in a new formulation of Descartes's definition: 'I feel, therefore I am' « (Kos 42, translated by M.C.). This very assumption of the aesthetics of feeling provides a preliminary for the development of the concept of the Romantic imagination as the cornerstone of the myth of the absolutely autonomous Romantic subject (cf. Day 49-51, Watson 9-14).

## **2. The Romantic Imagination**

The faculty of imagination, one of the key terms in Romanticism, is defined in the Romantic vocabulary not only as the ability to produce poetry, but beyond that, as a special way of seeing the external world, nature in particular, and relating to it. The definition of imagination is so closely linked to the Romantics' attitude to nature that the two concepts are best discussed in relation to one another.

The majority of the artists and intellectuals at the end of the eighteenth century were famous for their love of nature. They shared a joy in the beauty of the natural world while at the same time rejecting man-made institutions and practices, which they agreed were evil and harmful. The Romantic praise of nature was founded on the belief in the divine origin of creation. In the pantheistic understanding, which was popular among the Romantics, nature was a live, harmonious and self-sufficient system.

In its harmony and integrity, nature was the model for the self-sufficient consciousness. The great majority of the romantics shared a belief in the interchange between the mind and nature (Garber 1977: 193). This philosophy was based on the conviction that the universe and the mind were inherently in accord with one another because they were formed by the same external powers. The mind is able to decipher the language of nature, that is, to respond to sensory impressions from external reality

and to produce illuminating statements about the self. One of the most ardent advocates of this philosophy was William Wordsworth, who believed mind to be capable of a divine interaction with the visible universe, a power he illustrated by the symbol of a holy marriage.

This delight in nature was not new but was manifest well before the eighteenth century. The Romantics' original contribution to the understanding of nature was their way of perceiving nature and interacting with it. The Romantics saw nature as mysterious in its diversity and resistant to any sort of classification and interpretation. Due to its peculiarities, nature hardly fits into any man-made categories. The natural world is larger than life, and human beings cannot hope to apprehend the meaning of its appearances. Because natural phenomena are only vaguely and obscurely related to the individual's inner nature, the communication between the two occurs beneath the threshold of consciousness. As such, it cannot be grasped by common reason or expressed in common language but can only be suggested in imaginative or symbolic terms.

The Romantics pondered the ways that mind and nature meet. Although nature is a work of the divine spirit, which is aesthetic and inspiring in its appearances, it is full of inconsistencies, coincidences, irregularities and ambiguities. When confronted with nature, the subject should activate his imagination so as to gather meaning from the chaos of impressions that flood in upon him. The poet must see nature in his own way, through his own eyes, in accordance with his innermost disposition, expectations, questions, needs and longings. In its turn, nature influences the subject's receptive psyche. Between nature and the mind, there is a dialogue, so that the outcome of their emotional intercourse is more a product than the sum of the two. An example of this interchange is provided by Wordsworth's »Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey«. The speaker articulates the interaction between the subject and object in the act of artistic creation. The poet returns to the same scene in nature physically and again in his thoughts, and sees it each time in a different light, according to his changing disposition and the shifting influences of nature. The two act reciprocally; nature influences the consciousness, and the consciousness interprets nature. »Wordsworth returns to the actual landscape, but each time the appreciation of it is deepened and profoundly altered by the intervening sections which describe its effect upon the poet's mind. So the landscape affects the mind, and the mind affects the landscape« (Watson 51)

The poet's task is not merely to reproduce impressions from external reality but also to interpret and even recreate them. The artist is called to bring harmonious meaning out of the chaos of impressions, ideas, feelings and memories that inhabit his or her mind. The power of the mind which makes such reshaping possible was termed the imagination. By the skillful employment of the creative imagination, the artist can reorganize impressions from the external world, conforming them to the structure of the mind. The product of imagination is more an intuitive and highly individual response than a universally acknowledged and recognized statement.

The theory of imagination is a »celebration of subjectivity« (Day 47) in that it reveals great confidence in the powers of the subject's mind in pursuing spiritual truths and achieving self-awareness. It most conspicuously confirms the Romantic subject in

his absolute autonomy. It is from the subject's potential to create »out of himself«, by drawing upon his native capacities, that the true pleasure of imaginative creation derives. The world invented by such an endlessly creating consciousness is the human being's product and thus his possession.

The absolute autonomy of the Romantic subject can be defined as an ultimate trust in one's immanent abilities as a sufficient source for the achievement of self-awareness. A quotation from a letter by John Keats sums up the idea of the Romantic imagination as a perfectly legitimate means to self-awareness: »I am certain of nothing but the holiness of Heart's affection and the truth of Imagination. What imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth - whether it existed before or not« (Page 91).

### 3. The Romantic Pseudo-Religious Experience

In view of the preceding, it is not surprising that this creative power of the imagination was viewed as God-like. For William Blake, imagination is equivalent to God when he operates in the human soul (Watson 10); it allows a sensitive soul to gain an intuitive insight into the very bases of existence. The Romantic hero is a poet-visionary who sets out to find eternal truths, motivated by the longing to experience something absolute, eternal and godly. In this quest, nature plays an important part. The aesthetic qualities of the landscape so praised by the Romantics were believed to be full of theological meaning (Abrams 1973: 99), and the correspondence between a fact of nature and the mind was felt to possess a theological dimension. The divine meaning that inheres in nature was believed to be accessible to a sensitive mind. Objects of nature were viewed as »the sign-language of the absolute« (Abrams 1973: 59) and held to be an actualization of the divine meaning. The individual could apprehend the profounder meanings transcending nature only by contemplating its forms.

Imagination, in turn, denotes »that part or capacity of the individual mind that is founded in and has the capacity to apprehend the absolute« (Abrams 59). Romantic poets were convinced that the mystical encounter between nature and the mind was common to all people. Yet only the artists possessed the ability to make this feeling conscious. By means of a symbolic language and through the faculty of imagination, the poets could give an intelligible and creative form to their perceptions. With this view of imagination, it is not surprising that Romanticism came to be associated with the revival of mysticism and a return to religion. Some literary critics defined the search for the sacred as the very essence of Romanticism, having especially in mind its pantheistic view of nature. Employing the abstract-typological method, Fritz Strich singled out as the distinguishing feature of Romanticism its longing for the absolute and eternal (cf. Kos 34). Moreover, Romantic poets such as Blake and Wordsworth have commonly been included in anthologies of English mystical poetry, together with Julian of Norwich, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, George Herbert and Henry Vaughan (cf. Day 57, Zaehner 34).

Nevertheless, to call the Romantic experience religious is not only a gross simplification but it also calls into question the above definition of the Romantic subject as an absolutely autonomous individual. The most obvious difference between reli-

gious experience proper and the Romantic search for spiritual truths lies in the latter's rejection of dogmatically established religious practices. However, this is not the most important difference, especially if one adopts a broader understanding of religious experience and not the one defined by traditional confessional regulations. The peculiarity of the Romantic experience is seen in its understanding of the object of the religious experience, which is not a transcendental god beyond experiential and perceptual reality but rather a person's subjective experience. Romantic longing is indeed directed towards something higher and eternal, but the object is no longer an objective authority outside the subject but instead one that has its immanent source of inspiration within the individual's psyche. By means of the Romantic imagination, the subject »creates a higher metaphysical and religious reality of god, cosmos, nature, i.e. transcendence, which allows him to experience the absolute in a religiously-mystical or philosophically-metaphorical form« (Kos 14). A brief explication of the difference between the Romantic and religious experiences will, hopefully, serve to confirm the definition of the Romantic subject as an absolutely autonomous individual, thus questioning the status of the Romantic mystical experience.

In the attempt to define some key characteristics of the religious experience, we have recourse to Rudolf Otto's explication of the religious feelings, which provides a suitable theoretical framework for our purpose. In fact, Otto's categories can easily be compared with the Romantic longing for higher truths because in defining the nature of the transcendental experience, i.e. the human being's encounter with the mystical-divine element within the totality of things, Otto does not have recourse to the methods of theology. Instead, he argues that the religious experience is above all a feeling-response to something supramundane which escapes rational approaches and classifications. Similarly, the Romantic spiritual quest cannot be rationally demarcated; rather, it must be felt and described or somehow represented.

In writing of the religious feeling, Otto coined the term »numinous«. The »numinous« is a category »sui generis«, irreducible to any other. As it is primary datum, it admits of being discussed, but it cannot be defined with any precision. It denotes the »holy« without the moral and rational connotations that are familiarly attached to the term. In this sense, the »holy« is inherent in all religions as their very essence. It is a response to the »numinous object«, which stands as an objective category outside the self.

Such experience is so far removed from the ordinary that everyday language is ill-equipped for specifying it. Otto therefore resorts to indirect means of description. He wants to evoke in the reader the numinous feeling by bringing before him or her all the already familiar emotions which resemble or contrast with it. He speaks of »modes of manifestation,« »the moments«, ideograms of the numinous experience which may engender the feeling-response to the numinous object, but he asserts that in themselves they cannot exhaust its meaning. The core content of the »numinous« is met with in the moments of »tremendum et fascinans«. The moment of »tremendum« is objectified in the feeling of fear and horror. The English »awe«, »awe-filled« and »awesome« come closest to its meaning. This feeling is the primary response of the primeval human and is the starting point for the entire religious-historical development Otto traces. The moment of »tremendum« is deeply interfused with the moment

of »fascinans«, forming with it a strange harmony of contrasts. The »numinous« object, in Otto's view, does not appear to the mind only as an object of horror and dread, but also as something that enters, captivates and transports it. This is the Dionysian element in the »numen«. Parallel ideograms on the rational side of the non-rational element of »fascinans« are love, mercy, pity, comfort, compassion, empathy and self-sacrifice. In whatever symbolic form it is aroused in us, it shows that »above and beyond our rational being lies hidden the ultimate and highest part of our nature, which can find no satisfaction in the mere allaying of the needs of our sensuous, physical, or intellectual impulses and cravings.« (Otto 36) The moment of »majestas« is the moment of appreciating the overpoweringness of the »numinous« object. In the human mind it engenders creature-consciousness, i.e. the feeling of the insignificance of every creature before that which is above all creatures. The ideograms associated with the moment of »majestas« are force, strength and absolute transcendence. The ultimate stage of the experience is self-depreciation, the recognition of the personal »I« as something not perfectly or essentially real - even as a mere nullity - and, on the other hand, the valuation of the transcendental objects supreme and absolute. In extreme situations as experienced by some mystics, this feeling leads to the annihilation of the self on the one hand and the omnipresence of the transcendental on the other.

These various elements differ greatly from one another. The common denominator among the contrasting modes of manifestation of the numinous experience is provided by the element of »mysterium«. If the above-explicated terms denote the qualitative element of the »numinous« experience, »mysterium« stands as its form; it denotes the »wholly other«, that which is beyond the realm of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar. Unlike a »problem«, which eludes understanding for a time but is perfectly intelligible in principle, the former remains absolutely and unvaryingly beyond human understanding. Despite its »otherness«, it does not cause distress but arouses an irrepressible interest in the mind. The ideogram associated with it is stupor, that is, amazement, astonishment. The element of the mysterious sets the »numinous« object in contrast not only to everything wanted and familiar, but finally to the world itself, making it »supramondane«.

With a view of Rudolf Otto's definition of the »numinous feelings« we can conclude that by contrast with the religious experience, Romantic mystical visions are only pseudo-religious. Despite some surface similarities, they lack the necessary preliminary for a true religious experience, which is a relative subject who is open to a higher, transcendental order of reality. In the last stage, this openness leads to the annihilation of the self. On the other hand, the ultimate purpose of Romantic mystical ventures is the confirmation of the self in its beauty and sensitivity and, consequently, as the only source of autonomy and authority. By means of his inborn capacities, most emphatically by the faculty of creative imagination, the Romantic subject hopes to penetrate beneath appearances to detect the truth of himself and the world. The mind is a direct manifestation of god's wisdom and can learn a possible meaning of existence without having recourse to institutionally confirmed answers and dogmatically established truths. Instead of accepting sets of values, coherent systems of ideas and principles, the Romantic individual undertakes to create such concepts for himself, drawing primarily on his lived experience. In arriving at these personal values and

principles, the Romantic subject takes over the functions that had once been the prerogative of the deity.

The tendency in innovative Romantic thought ... is to diminish and to great extent eliminate the role of God, leaving as the prime agencies man and the world, mind and nature, the ego and the non-ego, the self and the non-self, spirit and the other, or (in the favourite antithesis of post-Kantian philosophers) subject and object (Abrams 1973: 91).

In Romanticism, the vertical dimension gives way to the horizontal one. The Romantic subject rejects any form of transcendental stability outside the self in order to embrace a "system of reference which has only two generative and operative terms: mind and nature" (Abrams 1973: 90). In so doing, it denies any form of supramundane authority and confirms the self as an absolutely autonomous individual.

#### **4. The Romantic Subject in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Poems "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" (1797) and "Kubla Khan: or, A Vision in a Dream"(1797)**

This chapter contains possible interpretations of two poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The purpose of the interpretations is not to survey the existing critical responses to the selected poems, neither to capture the complexity of the lyrical subject in them, but rather to examine it with regard to the above-discussed issues: the subject's relationship to nature, his view of the poetic imagination and his pseudo-religious experience so as to illustrate the literary category of the Romantic subject.

##### ***4.1. "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" – On Reading into Nature***

The poem opens with the image of the bower in which the speaker is forced to spend his day while his friends set off for a walk. The arbour is conceived as a prison in contrast to the wide horizons the speaker's friends enjoy on their walk. The narrator 'must remain' (1) in the arbour and this confinement is more than just a physical restriction. While his friends 'wander in gladness' (8), amazed by the beauties of nature, the poet complains that he has 'lost / Beauties and feelings, such as would have been / Most' sweet to my remembrance even when age / Had dimm'd mine eyes to blindness' (3-5). His inability to enjoy natural wonders sets him apart from his friends who are freed from such afflictions. The speaker is not only barred from the large natural horizons, but also from his friend's affections. In his solitude, he succumbs to dooming predictions that he 'never more may meet again' (6) his friends. In his melancholic mood, he ventures into imagining his friends' walk. But the fantastic scenery of the 'roaring dell' (10), lit by sunshine, the slim old trunk thrown across it, the file of weeds that 'nod and drip beneath the dripping edge' (18) only accentuates his loneliness and sharpens his pain. The lime-tree bower of his personality is the harshest barrier to freedom. The next stanza gives a panoramic view of the landscape. The

speaker describes in great detail the walk of the cheerful company. As an omniscient narrator, the poet provides us with a wide range of poetical subjects from the hilly fields and mountains to the sea and its islands. Swiftly, the all-encompassing perspective narrows down to focus on a particular member of the group. The speaker's attention is drawn by one of the members whom the poet refers as the 'gentle-hearted Charles' (29). Apparently, he is enjoying the sights of the landscape most of all. The speaker sees the reason for it in his friend's confinement to the city life where he has 'pined / And hunger'd after Nature, many a year' (29-30). The devilish city, devouring the innocent and pure, possesses all the properties of the Romantic myth. Contrasted with the evil calamities of the city life, nature appears even brighter. A sequence of elevated exclamations pays a touching tribute to nature's wonders. 'Shine I the slant beam of the sinking orb, / Ye purple heath-flowers! Richlier burn, ye clouds! / Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!' (34-36) Carried away by his imaginary visions, the poet comes to identify himself with Charles. Like his friend, he used to feel a strong affinity with nature. He remembers meditating its astonishing sights until perceiving the presence of the Spirit.

The identification with Charles is so strong that the speaker seems to be enjoying through his friend the 'beauties and feelings' (3) the loss of which he claimed at the beginning of the poem. By imagining in his mind his friend's feelings and drawing on his own solitary experience of the hills, the poet's spirits lift up. A sense of spiritual connection with both his friends and nature dawns sweetly, warding off the feeling of solitude. Defying his physical confinement as well as his psychological and social alienation, the poet feels happiness. 'A delight / Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad / As I myself were there!' (45-47) The slow coming of the twilight contributes to the serene feeling of sharing. Visions of the glorious freedom of the wild Quantocks give way to the meditations upon an apparently insignificant patch of land the speaker can see from his bower. The impressive images of the dell, the water-fall, hilly fields and meadows, the sea and the blue ocean are replaced by the descriptions of the poet's temporary home. It is 'the transparent foliage' (48), 'the shadow of the leaf' (52), 'that walnut-tree' (53) that now draw the poet's attention. Gradually, the bower lightens up in peace and friendliness. What was formerly perceived as a prison, is now felt as home.

The image of the bee superbly summarizes the new mood. In its solitude, the bee does not seem to be deterred by the spooky atmosphere of the late twilight when 'the bat / Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters' (58-59). Instead, it endures in singing in the bean-flower. The poet empathically identifies with the solitary bee which leads him to realize that despite his (momentary) isolation he also has a place in nature. Nature is celebrated as a motherly figure which will always welcome 'the wise and pure' (60) and for which 'No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.' (76)

Confident of the righteousness and harmony of the natural order, the poet reconsiders his predicament and resolves that 'sometimes / 'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good, / That we may lift the soul, and contemplate / With lively joy the joys we cannot share.' (66-69) Trials of life in bereaving us of some good or in not fulfilling our hopes open up room for the divine. Curran suggests that the sense of completion is manifested in both the time sequencing and the topography of the poem. (Curran

110) The action line of the poem stretches from midday to dusk. Topographically, we observe a constant series of transpositions from one place to another; from the bower prison to the panoramic freedom of the wild Quantocks, back to the harbour. With the image of the rook an apex of a triangle is formed linking the sequestered poet and his absent friends.

“This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” pays a tribute to the meeting between nature and the mind. The two are involved in a fruitful and constructive dialogue. Natural scenes which the poet enjoys, indirectly, in his imaginary visions and, directly, around himself, fill him with gladness. In imaginatively contemplating them, he recognizes the world as a perfectly harmonious place and finds his own role in it. Spiritually illuminated, he experiences a sense of unity with the external reality and overcomes the initial feeling of alienation.

#### *4.2 “Kubla Khan: or, A Vision in a Dream” – On the Poet As A Prophet*

The poem opens with the image of a magnificent dome, built at the spring of the sacred river Alph which descends from the height, runs through obscure caverns and flows into the ‘sunless sea’ (5). The landscape through which the winding river forces its five-mile long way is an enchanted and sacred place with ‘gardens bright’ (8), ‘sinuous rills’ (8), ‘incense-bearing’ (9) trees and ancient forests. However, it is also a savage place, symbolized by the image of a woman crying for her demon-lover. The image of the river’s peaceful journey from the first stanza gives way to the image of a majestic fountain that bursts out of the centre of the earth with great energy. The earth breathes in ‘fast thick pants’ (18) while forcing out of itself huge pieces of hail.

In the following lines we read about the dome’s shadow which is falling half-way along the river. Once again, the speaker’s attention is drawn by the pleasure-dome. Overwhelmed by its majestic presence, he calls it ‘a miracle’ (35-36). Its mysteriousness derives from the fact that the building consists of caves of ice which bathe in the sun-light.

The third part of the poem is a recollection of the poet’s vision of an Abyssinian maid playing music. The poet associates the girl’s music with the vision of the pleasure dome. Inspired by the monarch’s architectural exploit and the girl’s performance, he dreams about creating himself something equally extraordinary and awe-inspiring.

The poet’s wish to create ‘that dome in air’ (46) clearly alludes to the artistic creation of poetry. The image of the crazy and frightening man with floating hair and sparkling eyes, whom people from all around the world come to glorify in holy dread (50-54), echoes the Romantic myth of the poet-prophet. The speaker envisions himself as the celebrated God-like figure. He is convinced to possess all the potentials to become one if only he could recall the maiden’s tune within himself so deeply that the music would possess the whole of him. In such a state he could create something as grandiose as the pleasure-dome.

The image glances back to the description of the pleasure-dome as the mysterious place, merging sunlight with ice. According to Knight, this majestic architectural jewel unveils a new dimension of human existence, transcending the one symbolized

by the river. (Knight 92) The flow of the river from its painful yet glorious birth to its obscure and frightening outflow symbolizes human existence in its totality. The maze suggests uncertainty, movement, wanderings of the everyday life. The pleasure-dome, on the other hand, overlooks temporal horizons. Its joining together opposing elements (ice and sun) suggests that it has overcome any sort of antinomy of fundamental oppositions like that between life and death, creation and destruction, light and darkness, transcending, thus, the conflicting aspects of existence.

The speaker associates the artistic creation with the pleasure-dome, which reveals the status of the poetic creation in *Kubla Khan*. Like the pleasure dome, the poet overlooks the turbulent aspects of existence because he was granted insight into the ultimate truths. He “glimpses that for which no direct words exist: the sparkling dome of some vast intelligence enjoying that union of opposites which to man appears conflict unceasing and mazed wandering pain between mystery and mystery.” (Knight 95) As such, he is worshipped as the messiah, the enlightened one.

The artistic creation is not only a theme within the poem, but *Kubla Khan* as such exemplifies poetic imagination. From its genesis we know that the poem was a product of Coleridge's dreams and opium hallucinations. The dream-like and trance-like qualities of the poem are obvious: the poetic subjects drift into each other in an unexpected way, freely and randomly. The images of the river, the dome, the maid and the poet are fused together with no apparent logical connections. They are enigmatic in their references and encourage different interpretations. Coleridge attributed a great deal of significance to dreams. He believed them to contribute to a better and deeper understanding of reality. The dream imagination, in turn, was the privileged form of poetic imagination. “Thus one dream, or one poem, drawn from the very depth of the unconscious mind, might mysteriously hold sway over the tides of one man's entire life, and be a symbol of its permanent meaning.” (Holmes 85)

*Kubla Khan* stems from Coleridge's yearning to experience the transcendental, something invisible, whole, eternal. His wish was best articulated in the latter to Thelwall from 14th October 1797: “I should so much wish, like the Indian Vishnu to float about along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of the Lotus, and wake once in a million years for a few minutes-just to know that I was going to sleep a million years.” (quoted in Mazumder 43) More than just experiencing, Coleridge longed to actually “realize the sublime” (Mazumder 43), to give it a form, to create something grandiose insightful, illuminating. Coleridge would, no doubt, agree with Knight that “poetry, in moments of high optimistic vision, reveals something more closely entwined than that with the natural order. It expresses rather a new and more concrete proportion of life here and now, unveiling a new dimension of existence.” (Knight 93)

However, with *Kubla Khan* Coleridge did not realize his ideal. From the genesis of the poem we know that interrupted by an unexpected visitor, Coleridge could never bring the poem to conclusion. “At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found /.../ that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision /.../ the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast...” (E. H. Coleridge 296) The poem was left unfinished, fragmentary.

The inability of artistic creation is not only the biographical note to the poem, but also the theme within this very poem. Captivated by the maid's song, the poet cries: 'Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song' (42-43). The conditional clause implies an unfulfilled wish. The poet seems to suffer from his inability to body forth his vision.

The subject in *Kubla Khan* is the typically Romantic subject in its unconditional confidence in his prophetic powers. Even though his creative energy is trapped within himself and he suffers from the inability to release it, which, however, does not waver his confidence in its powers. Unlike in the above poems, however, the lyrical subject finds inspiration in his unconscious visions rather than in nature.

The Romantic subject as it arises from the interpretations of the poems is an autonomous individual in many ways. The perennial seeker after a higher truth, he strives to answer the ultimate questions about the self and the universe by contemplating himself against nature. In doing so, he hopes to learn something about himself and the universe and, eventually, discover his place in the world. His optimism and self-confidence rests on his conviction in the harmoniously-ordered natural world which will always welcome the human being. In his trust in the power of consciousness to read into nature, Coleridge echoes Wordsworth's pantheistic views according to which knowledge gathered through the senses leads to a possible meaning of existence, thus paying tribute to the Romantic imagination. From these very premises stems the myth of the visionary poet-prophet, depicted as a God-like figure, eager to recreate through language what he sees in his dream-like visions. The poet's heightened perceptions make him responsive to the mystery of the reality here and now and entitled to express his experience through a work of art.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, with regard to the issues discussed, i.e. the role of nature, the status of imagination, and the subject's relation to the transcendental reality, the Romantic individual appears to be absolutely autonomous. Instead of conforming to some pre-established sets of values, rules and practices he relies on his own immanent powers in achieving self-awareness. Consequently, the so called mystical visions which are often associated with the Romantic subject, cannot be viewed as religious experiences proper. In fact, the preliminary for a religious experience is a relative subject who is open to a transsubjective dimension of reality.

In conclusion it seems to me fitting to refer to the painting "The Wanderer Above The Mist" (1818) by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. The painting represents a male figure standing on the peak of a mountain. The man is viewed from behind and stands gazing at the horizon, apparently mesmerized by the beautiful but also frightening landscape extending at his feet. Like this Friedrich's figure, the Romantic "Wanderer" stands facing the mysteries of the natural world, being both part of it and at the same time in a dominating position. Equipped with visionary powers, he rests peacefully and self-confidently on the peak of awareness.

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