

# REFLECTIONS ON THE PERSISTENCE OF ROMANTIC SUBJECTIVITY IN AESTHETICS AND ART

Agnė Kulbytė<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The aim of the article is to consider the transformations of romantic subjectivity and to discuss the possibility of its persistence. Romantic condition in general is often described as intimately tied to individuality and notions of selfhood. It determined the interpretation of the aesthetic concept of representation – as the foundation of subjective artistic reality. This concept of creativity dropped by postmodern approach was radical irony and self-consume play. On the one hand it seems as the effort to escape from narrow, schematic perception of reality, from the well-established cliché of romantic model of subjectivity. On the other hand the romantic aspirations are still visible in the field of painting – a more traditional form of visual representation, where pure romantic modes are still alive (searching of pure artistic freedom, «reality» of imagination). Such painterly forms, preserving the romantic attitude towards reality, are based on the subjective experience; it is the element, which conditions both the content and the form. Although discordant approaches to the romantic model of subjectivity allow to recognize the connection between different concepts of today painting, provoke questions about the appearance of *postromantic* shapes of creativity.

**Keywords:** romanticism, postmodernism, subjectivity, artistic representation, painting.

The subjective standpoint towards reality is the essential feature of the romantic philosophy and aesthetics, which significantly influenced further modern cogitation and perception of the problems of aesthetics and art. First of all, it is important to define the contours of the concept of *romantic subjectivity*. It can be briefly defined as continuation of the subject's concept, established in the German idealistic philosophy. The creative conception of romantic subjectivity emerges from Immanuel Kant's insights, i.e. the image of reality is basically predetermined by the person, who perceives it, is constructed by the perceiver and is essentially related to him/her. The so called «activity» of the knower is also proven by Immanuel G. Fichte. The subject's category is given prominence herein as the main constituent of the creative

<sup>1</sup> Agnė Kulbytė – Doctoral student in humanities (philosophy) at Lithuanian Culture Research Institute (Vilnius), lecturer in the Department of Painting at the Vilnius Academy of Arts.

model of reality, when the creative relation is impossible or mechanical without this basis of subjectivity.

The modern abstract painting is bound with the conception of romantic subjectivity as well. The emphasis on the subject weakened and even displaced a mimetic conception of art: the work is essentially an expression of artistic powers rather than an image of nature, rules and systems of depiction. The change of painterly representation signifies that the role of the subject becomes “critical” – he can operate with abstract-formal artistic qualities. Namely the theories of today abstract painting highlight the un-vanishing subjective base as an essential element of abstract expression (from Richard Wollheim, Clement Greenberg to Andrew Bowie, Robert Rosenblum, Patricia Waugh). It is opposed against the postmodern «rationalization» of painting action, the formalization of expression that attaches importance to «objective» ways of the reality seeing. In the mentioned above theories, abstraction is called as only conditional «reduction of representation», – that’s subjective base never disappears and painted images even do not lose recognizable properties of real images. This viewpoint is based on the paradoxical insight that highlighting the pure plastic means of pictorial art extends the romantic conception of idealization of the form – giving prominence to visualization and transference of an idea by images. As in the theory of pictorial art by C. Greenberg, the values of *pure painting* (such as a flatness, a colour or a line) have a strong irrevocable dimension of subjectivity and are not only elements perceptible in an empirical way.<sup>2</sup>

The persistence of romantic principles may be seen in various forms of contemporary abstract painting. It is possible to notice main structural peculiarities in the visual artworks since the epoch of romanticism: de-centering of the stable visual system, founding of aesthetics of the fragment, collage images and «incompleteness», searching for ultimate expressivity and various perversions, declarations of non-representation strategies. The attitude of romantic understanding of form and abstract structure is directly bound with the romantic landscape tradition (such researchers as Robert Rosenblum derive it from landscapes painted by Caspar D. Friedrich, Philipp O. Runge, Johan C.C. Dahl, Joseph M.W. Turner, John Constable – up to ones by Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch, Piet Mondrian, Paul Klee and works of today abstract abstractionists)<sup>3</sup>. In the works of abstract expressionists, the spatiality of the images and symbolism of the lines as well as the effect of the color-field seemingly conform to romantic ideas of landscapes, i. e. the ideas of freedom, limitlessness and infiniteness, energy, dynamics, mysteriousness, spontaneity. The concept of organic meditative structure of a picture has grown into «meditations» of the painting action itself – into the concept of an endless creative process (extended by Alberto Giacometti,

<sup>2</sup> Schepen van R.K. Two Hundred Years of Aesthetic Modernism: Criticism, Abstraction and Revolution in Schiller and Greenberg. In: J. Carroll (ed.) *Aesthetics and Modernity*, Bern: Peter Lang 2012, 159–181.

<sup>3</sup> Elger D. (ed.) *The abstraction of landscape: from northern romanticism to abstract expressionism*, Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2007.

Henri Michaux). Here the implication of extreme painting methods and experiments, such as «serialism» or «redublication», that is typical for expression of postmodern painting as well, is disclosed.

Another specific feature of romantic subjectivity is the tendency to «go adrift» and to «move away» from reality. The romantic subject's concept seems not to be converged into any construction of the cognitive philosophy. It overpasses it while searching for the conscious, emphatic and authentic individual – new artistic modes and ways of expressing inner self. According to romantics, exaltation and deployment of imagination serve as the possibility of deeper understanding and transition to the primeval experience of reality – fusion with the Ideal (the Absolute). Concentration into the internal world of consciousness and dissociation from the external reality means the aspiration for renewal, which can be called as infinity by the romantics. According to future interpretations of Henri Bergson, such authentic experience of reality is possible only as a result of immersion into subjective «internal» perception of reality and into perception of the current of time. Romanticists praised the ability to explore the deeper alternative possibilities of understanding. It allows cutting oneself adrift from the external world and from the accidental «space of dependence».<sup>4</sup>

This is seen in the same visual structure and the nature of representation in the art work. As the same concept of abstraction points out, it is a depiction that moves us away from usual daily phenomena and points out conditionally perceptible ones, i. e. simulacrum acting in the reality. Romantic contents in abstract painting are identified as generalized purified fixation of a real image, when plastic transformations convey a sensual, mental, visionary form of the reality and the «internal contents» that cannot be depicted or expressed otherwise. The structure of an image of the romantic reality can be metaphorically defined as the multilayer and simultaneously perspective (hierarchic) «space», to which the foreseen distance is introduced, because the imaginary dimension and trespass of the direct reality are present. The romanticists themselves used to perceive such an image of «ideal reality» as the supersensible and super-temporal sphere; it existed as the irreversible intuition of the higher reality. According to Thomas Mitchell, the epoch of romanticism created its own conception of space and opened a completely new understanding of expressive relation with reality.<sup>5</sup> Romantic condition, according to him, is not only as connected with reflections of time (fixing and catching the spontaneous stream of consciousness), but also as imaging of the event, of the definite location and opening its certain semantics (for example, it is expressed by the so called «collage method» in William's Wordsworth's poetry, or in landscape painting by Constable or Turner. The fragments of space manage to register the «time intervals» and changing experiences).

<sup>4</sup> Waugh P. *Practising Postmodernism, reading Modernism*, London: E. Arnold, 1992, 116.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell T.W.J. *The Language of Images*, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, 282–289.

Romanticism, as the artistic strategy, also serves as a certain expression of the creator's «lifestyle»; it proves obviousness of the romantic attitude towards reality – it cannot be «part played» or «temporarily adopted». As reality is being elevated to a certain esthetic level, so the creative subjects, ideas and problems are impossible without existential experience. Though certain romanticists used to negate the art as the over-reality myth, however, the poetic «escape» from the routine used to be perceived by them as the life event, but not only as the simple experience or a result of the specific-artistic activity. The problem of subjectivity highlights the topical issue on amalgamation of different spheres, i.e. the art and everyday life, reality and fiction in the postmodern world. Usually such a diverse image of reality is related to the ideas of romanticism, – it is customary to define the romantic image as the synthetic or eclectic one. As a matter of fact, perception of everything via the leveling «veil» without reduction of certain spheres into the other ones. Romanticists did not care about straightforward linking of different «realities» or about their mechanical separation; it is rather adding of certain shade and proving autonomy of each of them. That is to say, this interplay used to be perceived as an aspiration for a more ideal reality – establishment of its overall.<sup>6</sup> From today's point of view, the romantic artist's standpoint proves impossibility of separation of these spheres. Fictions and imagination fill in the abyss between the subject and reality; but is not, as if, the mystical possibility for them to amalgamate (as it was for romanticists). Generally speaking, it may be called a feature, which proves vitality of romanticism, even if the artists' certain creative works possess other stylistic features or aspirations.

It is an often case, when the contemporary postmodernists reject romanticism especially when they call it «exalted subjectivity». However, it is the ultimate version of its interpretation. According to romanticists, coherence with the higher order, which is determined not only by the subjective efforts, but is the condition of foundation of reality, is only possible. That is to say, the romantic subjectivity expresses not that much the «introvert» effort, but the movement, directed «towards externality» – searching for unity and harmony with the whole. Fictiveness is conditional here, it acts as the power, which changes reality, with the help of which the romanticists are capable to understand the commonness, the surroundings, the every day life. The romantic statements are that everything, which exists in the environment, is perceived not only as the location of accidental experience, but is meaningful intuition, which is newly discovered in the creative work. Besides, the contemporary everyday aesthetics and its predominance in the contemporary art can be grounded by this romantic attitude. Postmodernists constantly aspired to wipe the reality's values off and to externalize the subjective images with the help of simulation. The recreation power, which is related to this unlimited exaltation of the subject's imagination, turns into inevitability of the consumer-oriented culture in the post-modern

<sup>6</sup> Kermode F. *Romantic Image*, London/New York: Routledge 2002, 3–36.

world. The creator indulges himself/herself in the play of exchange of the reality purports, in reflections of the empirical, social and routine reality, recognizable by the subject, but he/she does not react towards the possibility.<sup>7</sup> The creator does not strive for recognition of reality, for comprehension of the network of metaphors and images, for turning them into his/her own, i. e. subjective reality.

The contemporary exaltation of subjectivism, inherited from romanticism, is the consequence of enormous constraint of the forces, which are antagonistic towards the subject (resistance towards standardization and alienation, which are intruded upon the subject in the social field). It is customarily considered that an artist-romanticist sticks to the position of the «dissociated critic» in the society or performs the rebel's role, reminding constantly about the irreversibly lost ecumenical expectations (for example, the surrealists' attempts to restore the universal functions of art, to draw the art closer to the social problems). In such a way the romantic forms are, as if, pushed forward – in the shape of artistic images or manifestoes; however, it is an often case when manipulation with the state of «effect» and «challenge» is practiced. Meanwhile the natural romantic relation is simply «non-felt» and is perceived as experience of imagination or of aesthetic catharsis, or as discovery of subjective purports.

In his definition of the properties of romantic art works, A. Bowie derives them from the reflections of music art (perception which is essential for romanticists). He states that timelessness and non-intentionality are typical features of a romantic hermetic structure of an art work. According to him, an immediate involvement in the image, i.e. an ability of thinking in certain form (such as sounds, rhythms or colours), is typical for the romantic attitude and prevents from perception of the reality as «from the outside». The language of art is a «subjective language» and it is more rapid and straightforward than verbal referential thinking.<sup>8</sup> Painting also appears from such non-conceptualized understanding of the relation to the reality – often even without any reflections of it.<sup>9</sup> So, the «non-intentional» nature of a romantic work attests that a plastic image is more capacious because it does not reproduce any specific particulars and its purpose does not include representation or adaptation to any challenges of the reality, i. e. it is not bound in fact with imitation of the reality of any level, as a restrictive and limiting attitude. Romantic definition allows to ground that painting is a distinctive way of thinking and may construct universal meanings in an own way, – that painting, in its turn, points out incognizable ideas that cannot be expressed in words and cannot be reduced into another forms of expression.

Such a romantic intention of today's painting may be identified only from the context upon comparing with other phenomena or by watching

<sup>7</sup> Löwy M., Sayre R. *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2001, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Bowie A. *Music, Philosophy and Modernity*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2007, 359.

<sup>9</sup> Bowie, op. cit., 414–415.

from the perspective of time, because it is not demonstrably declared or artificially emphasized. Usually romanticism becomes apparent in art works that cannot be described by any stylistic definitions where romantic category expresses a purely subjective sensation – manifestation of the pictorial world. Unlike postmodern art, the romantic structure of art works does not legitimate itself that seems to be an inevitable peculiarity of functioning of postmodern phenomenon. It has not clearly defined unchangeable principles and is more a «stylistic» structure always involved in endless formation process.<sup>10</sup> Thus, «inconspicuousness and isolation» of the contemporary romanticism are the property, which is partially predetermined by its framework and which burdens its settlement and development as well as predetermines the restrained action. Romantic images and sensations exist, they affect in sensual and visual forms, hypnotize by the art reality itself, but the suggestion of tension between the real world and the one of simulacrum as well as of the subjective images remains undisclosed. Although such attempts take place from time to time, they usually provoke «romantic» feeling, form its allusions, but do not cause any expressed effect.

The category of romanticism loses its primal point when it is artificially bound with purity of pictorial structures (the so called «melancholy» of minimalistic works) or when painterly expression turns into spontaneous action, where display of the same creative material is important. It seems that any elements forgotten and «excluded» by postmodernists may be bound with romanticism. Painting is a way of subjective expression and its perception remained unchanged up to now; no postmodern means and methods can affect it. For a definition of such an attitude, the term of *neoromanticism* would be more suitable, when romanticism is treated as a certain «form of poetical depiction», not a historical style. It is a distinctive «philosophy of form» where the romantic contents present not a declarative idea only. It is strived to use the subjective vision for the fusion of the contents and the materials of the images. The empathy of a pure form, not oriented to embodiment of literary, social or any other contents, becomes the most important. According to painter Mark Rothko, the return of romantic viewpoint in painting should be considered as an expression transcending any image, submerged in painting itself.<sup>11</sup> This attitude substantiates the today aesthetics of non-representative art – it strives to avoid final formulations or statements of reality, «figuring» the images of any changing, unpredictable or transient phenomena.

On summarizing, it may be stated that expression of romantic contents in aesthetics and art is upstaged by the postmodern ideas of depiction and functioning of an art work. Romantic artistic approaches are paradoxically equated with translation of sensual effects, trends of frag-

<sup>10</sup> Livingston I. *Arrow of Chaos: Romanticism and Postmodernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Rothko M. The Romantics Were Prompted. In: Ch. Harrison, P. Wood (eds.) *Art in Theory: 1900–2000*, Oxford Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing Company, 2003, 572.

mentation, effect of theatricality, simulation and destruction that is provoked by the far narrow attitude of anti-subjectivism, consolidated by today technologies and commercial conditions. Only an instantaneous fixation mostly recognizable and susceptible by the creator is possible: «He is an outsider. The picture must be for him, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need»<sup>12</sup>. It allows recognizing the hidden power of romanticism.

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<sup>12</sup> Rothko, op. cit., 572.