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THE BIRTH OF LITERATURE FROM THE SPIRIT OF ECONOMY

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Abstract

The title of our paper is obviously an allusion to Friedrich Nietzsche's famous book *The Birth of Tragedy (from the Spirit of Music)*. Our aim is to demonstrate, in the most genuine tradition of cultural studies, that literature has been not only influenced by the economy over centuries, but, in great measure, generated by it. Economic mechanisms, at any time and in any place, have determined the so-called *Welt Geist* (*World Spirit*) and are ultimately responsible, among numerous other things, for literature's coming into being. To support this idea, we are going to use a significant case study – the Victorian Novel, a direct outcome, as it will be shown, of the Industrial Revolution. During the years of industrialization (1760-1840), England, the first industrialized country in history, was transformed essentially (we refer to historical, social, political and cultural transformations), all leading to a new understanding of the artistic *mimesis*. Literature should no longer imitate reality (Aristotle's old conviction) but accurately mirror it (the new Victorian belief). An event of such historical magnitude as the Industrial Revolution cannot just be symbolized in works of art but rendered precisely. This is how the pre-modern novel of industrialization was born. The epic genre becomes thus a cognitive instrument rather than merely an entertaining artefact. Harold Bloom's *anxiety of influence* had certainly something to do with it, too. We shall try to explain why. In short, the fundamental structures of the human mindset—what Socrates calls *thymos/thumos* or what Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel identifies as *self-consciousness*—are completely modified by industrialization. The impact on nature and function of the novel is therefore huge. Masterpieces like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848) or Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848) and *Great Expectations* (1861) are "texts

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made in the image" of the Industrial Revolution. Eventually, they demonstrate how literature comes into being, begotten from the spirit of economy, or how philosophy/ideology precedes creation/creativity..

Keywords: *Industrial Revolution; Victorian Novel; self-consciousness; thymos/thumos; anxiety of influence; authority; authorship; death of the author.*

England is the first industrialized country in the world. The process of industrialization lasts for eight decades, from 1760 to 1840, and has come to be related to Victorianism, although Queen Victoria starts her reign only in 1837, basically at the end of the Industrial Revolution. However, the accomplishments of Queen Victoria's 64-year rule (until 1901) – groundbreaking for the British history – rely significantly on the progress brought by industrialization and therefore such an association could be made. In this article, our aim is at expanding the meanings of the overlap between Industrialization and Victorianism to literature and, more precisely, to the novel, since the epic genre solely develops out of proportion during the 19th century in England. To be exact, our claim is that the so-called Industrial Revolution was echoed, during Queen Victoria's reign, by what may be clearly labeled the Epic Revolution. The former, as we shall try to demonstrate further on, represents the absolute cause and origin of the latter. Despite its multiple and complex connotations, industrialization remains an essentially economic phenomenon, encapsulated by the larger area of economy, whereas the epic genre, similarly, illustrates a major aspect of the larger field of literature. Consequently, one might say, based on this (quite convincing) historical example, that economy begets literature. To paraphrase one of Friedrich Nietzsche's famous book titles, we are about to watch the (glorious) birth of literature from the (generous) spirit of economy.

The blooming of the epic genre itself during this period relates directly to the process of industrialization. The novel appears to be the only literary category able to render artistically, in the tradition of the classical act of *mimesis* (Aristotle – *Poetics*), the new reality of the British world, generated by the Industrial Revolution. The mental, emotional and cultural transformations of the Victorian society seem so radical, in the aftermath of industrialization, that the lyrical and the dramatic genre respectively are, technically speaking, too "limited" to provide the necessary artistic *mimesis*. The epic genre, nevertheless, with a remarkable propensity for the "imitation" of reality, fits perfectly in the

new revolutionary context, becoming its unanimously accepted "mirror". Thus, we may easily infer that the celebrated Victorian novel, with an astounding development in 19th century England, is the immediate outcome of industrialization, becoming one of its dependable accessories. Hence, the appearance of so many great prose writers (Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, The Brontë Sisters, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and others), in a relatively short period of time, cannot be considered random. It entails the dynamic of a rigorous economic process with unquestionable historical effects. The complexity of an industrialized society comes to be reflected in the large diversity of epic structures imagined by these authors. The economic life of the whole system extends itself to the artistic mindset of literature, not just influencing it, but, certainly, engendering it.

One of the outcomes of the Industrial Revolution remains the alienation of the individual. *Stricto sensu*, industrialization means the substitution of man by the machine and, consequently, the beginning of the serial production of goods. Psychologically, this entails a loss of control by human beings who have traditionally been educated to think they are the measure of all things and the center of the socio-economic mechanism. The omnipresent and omnipotent engine of industrialization inflicts an acute sense of estrangement in the individual. Social order is gradually reversed, as the old aristocracy gets to be replaced, in the general dynamic of society, by the new bourgeoise, economically, the active working class of the system. We obviously witness here changes of social and cultural identities, a "depersonalization" of previous forms and their "reconstruction" into something new. The same process is echoed in the literary dynamic. One may notice, at this level, a substitution of the old dominating artistic categories, e.g. poetry and drama, by the novel which, albeit successfully present in English literature before the Victorian Age, only now reaches a status of unprecedented visibility, as shown before. The classical writer (the Elizabethan playwright or the Romantic poet) seems to go through a process of alienation, being replaced impetuously by the skillful uncompromising novelist. This sudden change of identity within the artistic existence of the system reflects a direct impact of industrialization (economy) on art (literature).

The anxieties of the industrialized/Victorian man in the reformed world, where the shadows of the past are deconstructed by socio-economic manifestations of the present, tend to beget a similar fear in literature, where

writers of today reject the artistic forms of yesterday (poetry and drama in the case of Victorians), adopting an innovative way of aesthetic expression (the epic genre or the narrative architecture) as a possible rescue from the overwhelming influence of tradition. The Yale professor of literature, Harold Bloom, in a very important book of 20th century critical theory, *The Anxiety of Influence*, uses precisely this term (*the anxiety of influence*) to define such moments of turmoil in the history of art. His claim is that the prestige of the creative genius of the past generates an imaginative inhibition in the artist of the present. To be exact, what he is describing is "an anxiety of influence", i.e. a fear that whatever the new artist may create will be nothing else but a cheap imitation of the work of the artist from the past, due to latter's mesmerizing effect upon the following generations of creators. Bloom refers to the ancient Greek concept of *apophrades*, which means "the return of the dead." That is the return of the dead artists in the creation of the new ones whom they haunt, forcing them into (undesired) imitation and even (unintended) plagiarism. We should not forget the predecessors of the Victorians were Elizabethans and Romantics, in other words, drama and poetry in forms of unsurpassed beauty (whose "influence" Victorians avoid by writing novels).

Let us observe that, if "depersonalization" and "anxiety," at the level of the new Victorian literature, mirror "alienation" and "estrangement," at the level of the industrialized society (in a sense, being determined and even created by them), there are two other phenomena materialized, naturally, into two other concepts – somewhat more sophisticated – which seem to unfold a similar relationship. We refer to "authority" (in the recently emerged industrialized society) and "authorship" (in the Victorian novel). In this case, the two terms are not related just lexically, but also technically. The model of "authority" generated by the Industrial Revolution within the English world is duplicated by the model of "authorship" shaped out in the Victorian epic genre. One must deal with them individually. What sort of authority does industrialization give birth to in the social system? Undoubtedly, one which is more flexible than the ones before, due to the socio-political and economic complexity emerged from the structural changes that occurred between 1760 and 1840. England stopped being an absolute monarchy in 1215 (*Magna Charta*) and became known as a constitutional monarchy in 1688 (*The Glorious Revolution*). Thus, long before the beginning of industrialization, signs of liberalism can be noticed. Nonetheless, it is only with

the Industrial Revolution that the old pyramid-like system of social hierarchy disappears completely. The traditional pyramid tends to concentrate its absolute power at the top, making it inaccessible to the elements from the bottom).

The traditional English society can be imagined in the form of a pyramid which concentrates its absolute power at the top in the symbolic *persona* of the king or the queen. The dominant class within this pyramid is aristocracy. At this upper level of the system *authority* is inherited and not *conquered* by personal merits. The king represents God on earth (from the teachings of the *Old Testament* where we learn that God approves at one point on the suggestion that people should be led by *kings* and no longer by *judges* and *priests*) and his unnatural, violent elimination from the top may push the whole pyramid into chaos. Examples of such situations appear in different Shakesperean tragedies, where kings are killed and substituted by impostors; this happens in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, where Claudius and Macbeth replace violently their monarchs and eventually bring disaster into the social and political order of their countries. Obviously, England offers, during these traditional centuries (and especially during the Elizabethan period), the image of classical Europe. Once industrialization begins, however, the above-described image alters. Industrialization brings *competition* among the rules of socio-economic organization of the system. *Authority* is no longer inherited by birth but *conquered* through personal merits. It is in this way that traditionally lower classes develop by means of their work and their development brings about the reshaping of the classical pyramid. *The pyramid* is transformed into *a circle* where *margins* can have access to *the center*, provided they are good enough to get there. This may be considered a historical revolution.

Politically, this huge transformation in the life of the English society should be linked to the beginnings of the modern democracy in Europe. The Parliament becomes more democratic because of industrialization and opens its door to other social categories. The monarchy is no longer absolute and authoritarian, but liberal and subject to the Parliament. The whole political atmosphere changes in Great Britain in the 19th century. One may say that the principles of the French revolution from the end of the 18th century penetrate the English society at the beginning of the 19th century, by means of industrialization. Economically speaking, Great Britain develops tremendously because of industrialization. Colonialism expands and England attains global

supremacy in the world. It is true, on the other hand, that the transition from *the age of manufacture* to *the age of industrialization* is very painful, with many individual sacrifices and even tragedies. Writers from the first half of the 19th century – like Dickens – will reflect this gloomy atmosphere of change in their novels. Socially, industrialization represents a turning point in the life of England and Europe generally speaking. It marks the birth of a new and powerful class – *the bourgeoisie*. The representatives of this social category are the direct beneficiaries of industrial progress, and they use their financial power to displace *traditional aristocracy* from its positions of authority. Symbolically, the bourgeoisie is part of the "margin" of the social system that moves gradually to the "center" (aristocracy), taking it by force. The struggle between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy (which will lose not only its financial and social authority, but even its titles – bought now, ironically, by *les nouveaux riches*) represents a favorite topic in the Victorian novel, being explored by many authors from Thackeray and Dickens to Eliot and Hardy.

The circle of power constituted at the top appears irreplaceable to the circles of submission from the bottom. One may remember, for instance, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* to understand the transformation provided by the Industrial Revolution in terms of authority. Hamlet's revenge is seen as a historical necessity. This is why the ghost of the assassinated king shows up at the dawn of a new era: to point out that the system has been corrupted and must be reconstructed, therefore. The pyramid cannot survive without its natural, given order. The same is true for Macbeth. Eliminating Duncan from the top of the natural hierarchy, he places himself in the category of historical outcasts, deserving absolute punishment, in spite of his bravery and possible good administrative skills as a king. For example, Claudius, in *Hamlet*, proves, without any doubt, that he can be an excellent leader, handling, at the beginning of the play, the matter of Norway like an experienced diplomat; yet, because of his rebellion against the inherited establishment, he will have to be taken out. The mindset of the pre-industrial man does not accept compromises. The natural order, preferably a pyramid-like one, must be assimilated and submitted to. One of the effects of industrialization is the reversal of the given system.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel probably described, in most convincing philosophical terms, this transition from the traditional pyramid-like culture to

the modern circle-like one. In his famous book, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he introduces a metaphorical dichotomy which is extremely illustrative in this respect, "the master" and "the servant," in German, *Herr* and *Knecht* respectively. The master, traditionally, has absolute authority in the system, dominating the servant by means of two instruments: "labor" (*Arbeit*) and "fear" (*Angst*). The servant must work hard to survive and is afraid of the authority of the master, hesitating to meditate on the condition of servitude. Moreover, the servant recognizes the authority of the master, though he is not recognized in turn. This represents the classical image of authority. Hegel has the intuition of a huge transformation that is about to occur in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century. He claims that, gradually, "servants" will be expected to develop "a self-consciousness," *i.e.* an awareness of their own identities, which will lead to mutability in the given order. Hence, the master will be easily replaced by the servant. The rigidity of the pyramid is substituted by the flexibility of the circle, and the idea of authority gets to be invested with a new significance. Hegel was anticipated by Socrates (through the writing of Plato) in Book One of *Republic*. Answering a disciple's question at one point, the creator of the maieutic thinking says the human soul, apart from instinct and reason, has another major component called *thymos*.

Thymos refers to "a need for recognition" which, according to Socrates, makes the world function. This inner necessity exists in various degrees. Some people may have more *thymos*, others less, so there are *megalothymos* and *isothymos* types of individuals. Anyway, the desire to be recognized by and in the system determines the flexibility of a given order, redefining the notion of authority. Thus, authority can never be inherited or bestowed on human beings. It is gained through personal merits, through competition. At the foundation of competition lies inevitably "the need for recognition," *i.e. thymos*. In fact, the very angles from which we perceive authority illustrate the transition from traditional England to industrialized England. A transition, to be exact, from the law of heredity to the law of competition, from rigidity to flexibility, from birthright ideology to meritocracy. These are the terms in which the Industrial Revolution reformulates the notion of authority. It is a big leap, one must admit. A completely new mindset emerges, basically, from an economic process. A new culture is born out of the economy and this new culture refers, obviously, to a new way of collective thinking. This phenomenon makes us understand more

properly how literature comes to be generated by economy. The literary counterpart of authority (begotten by it) remains, as mentioned already, authorship. Authorship is similarly "deconstructed" in the Victorian novel.

The God-like author represents an epitome of traditional prose. We speak about the omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient writer who knows all about everything and can do whatever he or she may want with his or her epic world. In the classical narrative, authorship is therefore a symbol of absolute authority. Nevertheless, exactly like the authority from the pre-industrial system, in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, authorship begins to dissipate. The Victorian novel illustrates this perfectly. The traditional omniscient author dies out (in the 20th century, Roland Barthes, in a very influential article, *La mort de l'auteur*, will call the dissolution of authorship "the death of the author"). Who takes then the place of the God-like creator? The answer is simple: the first-person narrator. Narrators are characters (components of the text) autonomous from the writer's whims. They revolutionized the history of the novel, reforming Realism. Narrators have their own subjectivities, their own sensitivity, sensibility, emotional structure and level of knowledge. Because of that, they are unreliable and distort reality. Realism no longer consists of the imitation of the world, but of the transformation of the universe derived from the subjectivity of the narrator. Narrators provide us with the reality of the mind (not with the social reality). They make us see fragments of truth, in accordance with everyday life situations. Admittedly, it becomes more "realistic" to display a limited narrative human perspective than to dwell on an artificially omniscient viewpoint.

The use of the first-person narrator is also determined by the relativism encapsulated in industrialization. The new world generated by the Industrial Revolution does not believe in the absolute truth anymore, developing the conviction that reality cannot be grasped holographically by the human mind. In the 20th century, the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl, will demonstrate in his phenomenology (*Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*) that our perception is restrictive and subjective. The metaphor of "the cube" suggests this clearly. If we look at a cube in space, we see one side, maybe two, of its structure, but never the complete image of the cube. If we want to see other sides, we need to change our position consecutively. Yet, each time we change our position, we get, inevitably, a limited perspective over the cube.

Victorian writers prefigure this philosophical direction by means of their narrators. The Victorian narrator (e.g. Pip in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* or Jane Eyre in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*) is the observer of a metaphorical cube, being unable to give us an overall perception of the reality he/she interacts with. This creates the premises of the self-written text, which is consistent with the dissipated authorship, i.e. with the alienated author. The "text writes itself", turning the *persona* of the author into a major absentee. The loss of the traditional authority in the industrialized socio-economic system comes thus to be duplicated by a loss of traditional authorship in the Victorian novel.

A perfect example is *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. The novel's protagonist (and narrator), Phillip Pirrip – called Pip due to the fact his "infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit" (Dickens 5) than such a strange word –, is placed in a *Bildungsroman* pattern of evolution, which implies, gradually, major psychological and biographic changes. From a 19th century countryside marginal boy, he comes to be a distinguished London gentleman, ready, at the end of the story, to start businesses in remote places of the British Empire. Inevitably, one may think here of Dickens's proneness to autobiography. Certain Dickensian self-referent elements are obviously present, but Pip's formation should not be associated, in any way, with, say, David Copperfield's life trajectory (which reminds of Dickens's significantly!). Although an orphan (like Dickens himself) and exposed to traumatic episodes during the growing-up process, Pip appears as a rather autonomous character with a life and, perhaps more importantly, *an identity* of his own. He is *a narrator* in the modern sense of the notion, i.e. with a personal representation of reality, visibly uninfluenced by the convictions of *the author*. Dickens seems eager to transmit, from the very beginning, the message that there is a (huge) distinction between *the one who writes the story* (himself) and *the one who tells the story* (Pip). The encounter of the child with an escaped convict, at the outset of the novel, plays a crucial part in the configuration of such a distinction. In the symbolic value of this scene may we locate the key metaphor of the whole book, i.e. Dickens's meta-textual core!

Terrorized by his adult sister, Georgiana Maria, a Shakespearean shrew, likewise mean to her good-natured husband, Joe Gargery, Pip prefers to play in the churchyard, close to the graves of his parents and other already deceased siblings. The "preference" – only in appearance a bit awkward – constitutes his

childish form of escapism. One day, in that morbid place, he unexpectedly meets an oddly looking fellow, who the experienced reader immediately identifies, based on the narrator's description itself, as a runaway prisoner. Pip, however, behaves exactly like an inexperienced child (completely independent from the author, let us notice) and does not comprehend the danger he could find himself in, engaging in a dialogue with the intruder. His "perceptive" autonomy will be later amplified by the attitude he adopts during what passes for an "emotional" confrontation with the convict. To scare and make him act according to his intentions (the intruder evidently wants to obtain a file from the child's house to eliminate his fetters and be able to continue his getaway), the escaped prisoner grabs Pip of one of his legs, turning him upside down. Instead of being terrified, the boy takes everything as a game, *observing* (and communicating this detail to us, the readers!) that, consequently, the church in front of him has suddenly turned itself upside down. The subtle meaning encapsulated by the image should not be omitted! Curiously, the tendency of most people would be to decipher here an allegorical summary of the text, which is about to unfold itself, i.e. a metaphor alluding to Pip's future life trajectory.

A critical response of this kind is not, surely, inappropriate. The convict (Abel Magwitch or "Provis," according to a later alias) will change Pip's existence in the same dramatic way he turns the little infant body upside down at the outset of the narrative. His *physical* action now may, indeed, open the door for his, so to say, *metaphysical* actions to transform the protagonist's life in the long run. Nonetheless, the connotations of the episode seem to go deeper. The fact that, during the act of abuse from the part of the intruder, the child *sees* the church turning upside down along with his own body and *tells* us this with perfect ingenuousness means, unconditionally, that everything we are on the brink of reading, learning or discovering in the following pages will be seen (and evaluated, one might add) strictly and unilaterally by the protagonist himself. If, as a child, he unavoidably perceives reality in a childish way, we, the readers, are bound to perceive it precisely in the same form, since we essentially depend on him. In other words, the subjectivity of a character, completely different from the subjectivity of the writer, comes to be placed thus at the heart of the epic construction. The governing consciousness will filter "reality" in the novel, establishing the norms by which we shall assess the authenticity of the whole narrative. Obviously, Dickens validates Pip's position *as a narrator* in *Great*

Expectations, using the exotic image already presented and diminishing his own *authorship*, so to speak, to a minimum. The *author* explicitly hands over, in a (post)modern style, the *text* to the *narrator*.

So, one may say, the alienation inflicted by the Industrial Revolution on the English collective mind begets a similar mood in the Victorian novel. The jocular melodrama of the past (created by Swift, Defoe, Richardson or Sterne, to mention just some of the brilliant predecessors of the Victorians) comes to be gradually replaced by tragedy. In a melodrama, the character has the possibility to choose (in a potentially antagonistic evolution of things). In a tragedy, the choice is absent. A tragedy remains essentially a conflict whose opposite elements cannot be reconciled. Such a conflict invariably leads to the annihilation of the character who is trapped between unsolvable contradictions. Thomas Hardy is famous for his dualistically tragic heroes, tormented by the war between flesh and spirit (Jude Fawley in *Jude the Obscure*) or by the clash between appearance and reality (Tess Durbeyfield in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*). Alienation of individuals through the loss of control of the contexts they were previously acquainted with (due to industrialization) will be translated into the loss of psycho-emotional stability in the Victorian novel. Characters cannot handle their own contradictions and fall. Fall may take social and economic aspects, exactly like in everyday life. Hence, *fortuna labilis* seems to be a favorite theme in Victorian literature. William M. Thackeray illustrates it in the highs and lows of his protagonists' destinies (Rebecca Sharp and Amelia Sedley in *Vanity Fair*). Paul Dombey, Charles Dickens's hero, is another good example (*Dombey and Son*).

The so-called "psychological realism" – created by George Eliot, one of the most remarkable female writers during the Victorian period – represents a similar outcome of the industrial alienation and, concomitantly, a source of tragedy. Psychological realism, as the name itself suggests, describes "the psychologically realistic" narrative, i.e. the novel of "true-to-life" psychologies, of characters convincingly imitating and suggesting human nature. The imitation of life, in psychological terms, implies the idea of controversy. The more controversial a character is, from a psychological perspective, the more credible, the more true-to-life that character becomes. In other words, psychological realism eliminates equally heroes and villains, substituting them with real people, all split up between virtues and vices. A "psychologically realistic" character unveils a spiritual symbiosis between the plus and the minus. The clash

between opposites generally tends to describe human values and, consequently, reality. Moreover, it is in the psychological contradiction between good and evil that one should locate the source of the above discussed tragedy (if we imagine tragedy as a tension between two irreconcilable forces, then the psychologically realistic narrative should be viewed as its perfect example, confronting us with the unsolvable struggles between the poles of human nature). George Eliot's masterpieces, *Middlemarch* (Dorothea Brooke) and *Adam Bede* (Dinah Morris) may be regarded as illustrations of the contradictions concealed in us.

Two great historians of English literature, Daivid Daiches (*A Critical History of English Literature*), and Stephen Coote (*The Short History of English Literature*), emphasize, in the chapters they dedicate to the Victorian novel, the indestructible connection that exists between the duality of psychological realism and the duality of tragedy, seeing both as consequences of the social and economic mutations entailed by the Industrial Revolution. The two critics seem to agree implicitly on the fact that literature is born from the spirit of economy, since economy and its historical dynamic define the matrix of artistic changes (among many other transformations). Representatives of cultural studies would never disagree with such a conclusion. It is in the spirit of cultural philosophy to see detailed manifestations of the human mind, at different historical moments (and literature is, undoubtedly one of them), as the result of a set of socio-economic phenomena specific to each moment in question. Yet, in the case of the Industrial Revolution and the Victorian novel, the cause-effect relationship appears to be more complex than a mere situation of "influence," to use again Harold Bloom's celebrated concept. This essentially economic process – industrialization – cocoons, due to its incredible sophisticated inner architecture, a large variety of offsprings that come into being with outstanding energy and force. Among them, the (Victorian) epic genre, which is born, in all its splendor, from a generous Mother, *i.e.* the 19th century English economy.

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BIONOTE

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