

## Absolute Authority of Literary Criticism and Limited Freedom of Creative Writing: John Keats and Nikolai Gogol as Examples

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### Abstract

The question of the paradoxical relationship and misunderstanding between literary criticism and creative literature is a time-honored one. Throughout many centuries, the creative writer has been viewed as the master of his craft, aware of its secrets and challenges so that it finally comes out as a self-contained entity. The critical faculty is often attributed to the creative writer himself such as Ben Jonson, Philip Sidney, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Matthew Arnold, Dr. Johnson...etc. Only in the last two centuries or so, was there a kind of critical autonomy where the critic could find a niche for him/herself and show his competitive spirit with creative writers. The present paper seeks to show how certain British and Russian critics have played havoc in the lives and writings of John Keats (1795-1821) and Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852). The paper concludes by stating that literary criticism can be subversive and its aftermath might be very catastrophic. Even so, the spark of creativity will always be gleaming and enticing writers to its fascinating and seductive worlds. The paper comprises three parts. The first one is introductory in that it describes the nature of criticism, its rules, and restrictions. Also it refers to critics' conscious or unconscious breaching of these regulations. Review of related literature helps in showing the different approaches and treatment of the current topic. The main argument explores how some literary critics in England and Russia in the nineteenth century played a malicious role in the lives and works of John Keats and Nikolai Gogol through imposing their convictions on creative writers. The conclusion is a final

assessment of this complex relationship between critics and creative writers and how the misconception between the two parties is too wide to be bridged or overcome.

**Key words:** Critic; Creative writer; John Keats; Nikolai Gogol; Endymion

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Creative Writing and Response to Inner Voice and its Costs vs. Literary Criticism, Its Stipulations and the Mutual Misunderstanding Between the Two

In his relatively old but influential book on creative writers and their misfortunes in life (*Calamities of Authors; Including Some Inquires Respecting their Moral and Literary Characters*), Isaac D'Israeli comments on the bitter-sweet craft of the creative writer and the troubles and perils besetting him:

The title of AUTHOR still retains its seduction among our youth, and is consecrated by ages. Yet what affectionate parent world consent to see his son devote himself to his pen as a profession? The studies of a true author insulate him in society, exacting daily labors; yet he will receive but little encouragement, and less rumination [...] Most authors close their lives in apathy or despair, and too many live by means which few of them could not blush to describe. (1812, p.1X).

The postulate of the above-mentioned is indisputable as the destinies of thousands of creative writers in the world in the past or present are concrete and living evidence of the validity of such views. John Keats and Nikolai Gogol

do typify the arguments and views discussed. Though they belong to different cultures, languages and artistic schools, they verify the validity of the main premise of that book, not only in terms of financial sides but also in artistic autonomy and free personal pursuit of one's objectives and priorities. In fact, Gogol is more outspoken and self-confident concerning the fatal role assigned to the creative writer or artist. He writes in one of his letters in a way that predates the Jungian archetypes and shows that opting for the creative world demands a priori full engrossment and disinterestedness. Gogol likens the writer to the "silent monk (who) lives in the world without belonging to it, and his pure unspoiled soul can converse only with God" (qtd. in Andrew 1980, p.88). Gogol's highly idealistic account of the role assigned to the writer overlooks the various pressures and sometimes slanders raised against budding writers like Keats. Moreover, if we recall that Keats suffers from physical sickness (T.B.), his situation is even worse if the verbal slanders of critics are considered. Gogol's problem is less in that his early success entailed certain restrictions he has to abide by even though they run counter to his disposition and priorities. Once he attempts to violate this cocoon, as it were, the outcome will be devastating in the form of attributing to him mental disorders and psychological imbalance.

It is worthwhile to note that criticism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not as diversified and sophisticated as it is nowadays. Even so, it was still a powerful means in the hands of some literary critics who used it with animosity and grudge. In essence, literary criticism cannot match creative writing as the former is dependent on creative writing for its very existence. In this regard, one is apt to recall Charles Baudelaire's insightful comment that:

every poet contains a critic, and that poets make the best critics; he sets an order of priority. Put in a slightly different way, this ordering privileges the work of literature, the primary text, over the secondary text, derivative activity of criticism. (Gregg 1994, p.7)

The real authority, then, belongs to creative literature, no matter how feeble it might be, for the simple reason that it imposes its formidable impact on readers for a long time, "the fever of living would decrease if we read books properly" (Hearth 2008:p. 87). Of course what is meant by 'books' here is the creative ones. The actual and serious agonies and challenges of life cannot be mitigated or eradicated by critical books and analyses. The critical text remains essentially a comment or explication of another text (creative) and as such the secondariness of the critical text renders it a means "not an end in itself" (Nisbet & Rawson, 1997, p.XV1)

Northrop Frye's mythic criticism reminds the reader of the charge often raised against criticism and the critic as a participant in the writing process. He brings to mind the unsupported claim that the critic is simply "a leech who feeds off literature and ruins in his or her analysis" (1957, p.349)The present paper sees the other side of literary

criticism. As the following arguments will show, criticism often functions as an indisputable authority to which creative writers have to submit and abide by without taking into account the creative writers' own interests and conception of how the literary work should be.

In the second half of the twentieth century in America and Britain, criticism and its different manifestations and trends (structuralism and poststructuralism (deconstruction) were the motivating clue for the emergence of postmodernism in creative literature. A passing reference to the overwhelming influence of Jacques Derrida (1930 -2004) in his native country (France) and American cultural scene is evidence of that. Critic Michael Naas clarifies this point through his reference to the French critic whose reputation was solidified by:

*Of Grammatology, Speech and Phenomena, and Writing and Difference* within the American academy and his work began to be widely disseminated throughout the U.S.[..] By the mid 70s one thus began to speak of a 'Yale School' of literary criticism, a school that would find itself, and Derrida most prominently, at the centre of furious 'debates and [culture] wars around the so-called invasion of 'deconstruction' in America. (2008, p.120)

Never has there been such a laudable discourse about criticism and the formidable impact it left on cultures and academic life. Obviously criticism, thanks to the efforts of critics like Jacques Derrida or Roland Barthes, has the upper hand in the last six decades or so. Creative literature has to concede to the growing influence of criticism and its unmistakable impact on writing and reading alike. This is a time when the scale has tilted to criticism and its stipulations at present and may be in the years to come.

## 1.2 Can Literary Criticism be Entirely Fair?

The problem of literary criticism does not rest merely in its secondariness as an epistemological field. The practitioners of literary criticism often do not abide by its essential guidelines and postulates. Among these and perhaps the most important one is the objectivity and fair and unbiased treatment of literary texts. On the surface, this sounds axiomatic and needs no further elaboration. However, in practice, this is not always the case as will be shown in the following pages. At the moment one needs to recall the fact that even some of the outstanding figures in literary criticism might not be exempt from such pitfalls. Dr. Johnson represents a glaring example of the partisan critic, "A psychologist might detect a trace of guilt consciousness in Dr. Johnson for his partial or malicious criticism, as the case may be in his estimate of the authors in *The Lives*" (Pasad, 2002, p.75).

T.S.Eliots' moral criticism can be at times unrestrained. In both Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence, he sees all sorts of evil forces. However, "in Hardy's short story, 'Barbara of the House of Grebe', he finds a world of pure evil[...] Hardy betrayed a morbid emotion and Lawrence's imagination was that of a spiritually sick

man; his fiction appeals to the sick” (Pinion 1986, p.203). In his discussion, Eliot sets certain criteria for the critic to observe. In his view, “the critic is not to legislate but to inquire and elucidate. To do this, he must wrestle his undertaking away from indulgent and misleading responses” (1997, p.13). His criticism in its entirety does not adhere to such principles.

If Eliot recommends certain regulations and principles which are laudable enough, but when it comes to practical matters, it often takes a different turn. Cambridge critic Leavis stands out as a scholar whose critical yardsticks are not always sound. Often he allows his class origins to affect his judgments. His evaluation of T.S.Eliot’s achievement as a critic is not objective. Eliot’s ‘Tradition and Individual Talent’ appears from the perspective of Leavis as an example of everything that is faulty and imprecise, “an essay, notable for its ambiguities, its logical inconsequences, its pseudo-precisions, its fallaciousness, and aplomb of its equivations and its specious cogency” (qtd.in G. Singh, 1990, p.250). Eliot’s position as critic is underestimated by Leavis. Indeed Leavis does not see any real critical faculty in Eliot’s criticism, an attitude which is hardly shared by Leavis’ peers, “Eliot is not freely a critic at all; in fact, he lacks most of the gifts one thinks of as making a critic. He is a distinguished critic only over an extremely narrow range” (p.250).

Another equally peculiar example is the notorious debate between the scientist-novelist Sir Charles Percy Snow and the Cambridge critic F.R.Leavis. As a scientist, Snow in his Reife lecture of 1959 titled ‘The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution’, advocated a sort of synthesis or intermingling between the findings of science and humanities as the only possible way of progress and keeping pace with the developments in life. In his answer to such arguments F.R.Leavis turns his lecture into outright castigation and aggression. Critic G.S Frazer comments on Leavis’s unexpected reaction and his rude language so that he finds it apt to call that debate “Robespierrian, one of virtue and terror” (Hayman 1976:p.X11). In Leavis’s lecture, all sorts of decency and decorum are absent and the personal and impersonal elements are interlocked. It is an unprecedented and notorious attack, full of contempt and grudge, “It heaped derision on his embarrassing vulgarity [...] Snow is of course, a ----- no, I can’t say that, he is not; Snow thinks of himself as a novelist; he does n’t exist; he doesn’t begin to exist” (Kimball 1994, n.p.) It is this type of indiscriminate Leavite criticism that we are going to come across in many of the following pages. Indeed it is the criticism that speeded up the tragic deaths of both John Keats and Nikolai Gogol, each for reasons of his own.

### 1.3 Review of Related Literature

- Whenever there is a reference to Keats’s poetry, the name of the poet Leigh Hunt leaps to mind. Indeed, much of the critical bias against Keats’s ‘Endymion’ might be

attributed to the grudge some reviewers hold against Hunt. Keats became the scapegoat of such attacks. Forman H. Buxton (1854) elaborates on this issue:

Keats and Hunt were congenial spirits, especially in their tastes for books, nature and Greek antiquity.” The lov’d liberates” was Keats’s poetic name for Hunt. They spent much time together in the ‘Vale of Health’ where Hunt’s cottage situated; there were hints of the friendship in many poems exchanged. (p. X11)

- According to more than one reviewer, Keats’s poetry has not been cooked over slow fire so that it might end up as fully mature poetic text. devoid of technical or artistic weaknesses. Forman H.Buxton (1895), for instance, lists these claims about Keats’s pathetic failure to identify the successful starting-point and the right conclusion. This reading does not see anything good and worthwhile:

A great part of the work (Endymion), indeed, is written in the strangest and most fantastical manner that can be imagined. It seems as if the author had ventured everything that occurred to him in the shape of a glittering image or striking expression –taken the first word that presented itself to make up a rhyme, and then made that word the germ of a new cluster of images [...] (p.611)

- Richard Peace (1981) argues that the choice of Gogol’s characterization is well-chosen as the general lack of education allows Gogol to stress the low cultural background of his characters as “His use of an uneducated, or at best semi-literate narrator allows him to place emphasis on the way the story is told, with distortions and lapses, both of understanding and taste” (p. 14)

- Robert Maguire (1994) explains the reasons that drove Gogol to leave Russia and stay for many years in Italy, a move that brings to mind Keats’s long sojourn and eventual death there:

I am going abroad, and there I will rid myself of the anguish that is daily visited on me by my countrymen [...] A prophet has no honor in his own country. I am just troubled by the fact that absolutely all classes of people have risen against me, but it is somehow painful and bad when you see unjustly yourself arrayed against your compatriots [...] (p.92)

- Critic Dimitry Merezkhovsky (1998) comments on the drastic effects of Gogol’s decision of giving up his common way of writing, “when Gogol renounced his artistic achievement in order to exorcise evil from his personal life, he may sadly have made himself more ridiculous than when his art had uplifted the Devil. We have already seen that Vasilii Rozanov had gone so far as to identify Gogol with the Devil.” (qtd. in Weiner, p.144).

- David Herman (2001) contends that the material poverty of Gogol’s countrymen corresponds to the lack of their imaginative and spiritual life which is summed up as follows:

In Gogol, precisely, the lack of inventiveness assures the tranquility of the poor. If a copyist is someone who trades in the words of others and who implicitly lacks his

own---Akaky Akakievich exemplifying ordinary verbal lack at a more advanced level, since his 'own' words more properly belong to other people he poses [...] (p.127)

- Editor John Strachan in 2003 found that Keats's *Endymion* raised ambivalent critical reactions. Some of these are not negative. For instance Charles Lamb views that "the best thing in the volume, ranking it above the odes and 'The Eve of St. Agnes'" (p.X1)

- Literary criticism and reviewing usually has both merits and demerits. Many creative writers tend to view the critical text as encroaching upon the integrity and particularity of their own works. The Nobel Laureate (2017) Kazu Ishiguro can only show his disgust at any reference to a critical review of his own works, "Like many writers, I am very aware of what happens in the book world. When you publish a book, and there's a review somewhere, you rush out, read the review, and, depending on the review, spit on it" (Matthews & Murakami 2009, p.116).

- Weigui Fang finds that literary criticism ought to have certain qualities and criteria so that it can work as a positive force in the writing process, "the best kind of literary criticism thus always gives us more than textual analysis, but makes us understand better and deeper the values of the work in a rich context [...]" (2018, p.185)

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## 2. THE MAIN ARGUMENT

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The two writers to be discussed in this paper (John Keats and Nikolai Gogol) were controversial figures at least when they were alive. There were many misreadings and unjustified claims about their achievements and personal lives which predated those of Leavis. Both lived in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also they chose a brand new path in writing (Keats sought aesthetics and beauty and art-for-art's sake, whereas Gogol was pro realism and scathing satire). Throughout his brief career, Keats did all his best to establish an unattainable reputation, while Gogol succeeded in achieving that goal in no time. For moral and religious reasons, Gogol sought to rid himself of the burden of such false reputation that runs counter to his traditional upbringing and inner religiosity.

### 2.1 Keats's Worshipping of Beauty and Imagination and its Ambivalent Consequences

Keats represents a special case in the history of English romantic literature. In the twentieth century with its plethora of various critical approaches and judgments of his poetry and prose, he has been reassessed and reconsidered. Scholar Edward Hirsch, for instance, finds in his introduction to Keats's poetry that it is highly meditative and evocative, "Sometimes reading Keats's poems late at night, on my own, I still feel as if I am hearing out the beautifully formed cadences of a solitary writer, one of the major Romantic poets, but the Orphic voice of English poetry itself" (Keats, 2002, p.XV11).

The modern or contemporary judgments concerning Keats's poetic works and prose are often tinged with a highly sentimental and lyrical tone which only Keats could stir. Oscar Wilde shows great admiration and affection for the apostle of beauty and romance, "as I stood beside the mean grave of this divine boy, I thought of him as a Priest of beauty slain before his time" (Keats, 2012, p.XXXV1).

The list of Keats's admirers and disciples is endless. The British writers "Arnold and Swinburne were very much influenced by Keats's sensibilities [...]" Gerald Manley Hopkins has great affect with 'the great odes' (Blades 2002, p.:299). Keats's overwhelming popularity and fame in the twentieth century actually combines the local and international as seen through the judgments and views of writers from different parts of the world. These writers include W. Owen, W.B.Yeats and Dylan Thomas, Joseph, Brodsky, Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney (Blades, 2002, p.299).

If Keats is viewed like that in present time, then what made critics and publishers launch a fierce attack against him which only ended in his actual annihilation? Reasons and assumptions are multiple and stem from different cultural and social backgrounds. Even his physical appearance is not excluded from this defamatory account. The following striking list of derogatory epithets are some of the negative judgments chosen by literary critics in responding to Keats's poetry, "Keats was seen as a queer, presumptuous, frenzied and profligate poet and that his language was deemed perverse, impure, disgusting, filthy vulgar, sickening and indecorous" (Al Bayrak, 2019, p.51)

The defense Keats used in confronting such discouraging and even humiliating judgments of his poetic achievement is not a powerful one. His answer centers on his persistence in following up his poetic enterprise, no matter what cost it may entail. As he puts it, "This may be speaking presumptuously, and may deserve a punishment: but no feeling man will be forward to inflict it; he will leave me alone with the conviction that there is not a fiercer hell than the failure in a great object" (1846, p.353).

In the controversy that ensued about the real achievement of John Keats, there were ambivalent voices in seeing the merits and pitfalls of the poet and his type of poetry. As one of his biographers suggests, most of his poems "amid all their beauty, have an adolescent and frequently a morbid tone, making want of manful thew and sinew and mental balance, that he is not seldom obscure" (Rossetti 1887, p. 133).

Another weakness is his peculiar disposition which was manifest in certain unexpected reactions to the exigencies and shocks of life. A reference to one situation will do, "On the occasion of his mother's death, which occurred suddenly in 1810, he hid himself in a nook under the master's desk for several days, in a long agony of grief, and could take no consolation from master or friend" (Milnes 1848, p.16).

## 2.2 The Magazine Reviewers and their Harsh Criticism of Keats's 'Endymion'

The most serious and devastating blow Keats received and from which he never recovered was what the two critics wrote about Keats, as poet and man. In the late summer of 1818 three years before his death, J.G.Lockhart in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine and J.W Crocker in the Quarterly Review undertook the task of crushing Keats altogether by their intolerable and biased criticism. The subject of their merciless attacks was the epic poem 'Endymion' and its celebration of beauty. It was based on a Greek myth about a Latmian shepherd's love for the moon goddess Cynthia. Both critics did not take into account the gigantic and dazzling size of the poem ( more than 4, 000 lines) for too young a poet of Keats's age. Their attack oscillates between the textual and personal, and most of it has nothing to do with the principles already stated in the practice of literary criticism. Their criticism is malicious, vindictive and above all hierarchical. We need to recall the fact that Keats belongs to the lower-middle class. Lockhart, "referred to the rising brood of Cockneys, among whom was Keats, as an apprentice apothecary, was castigated for his presumptuousness in aligning with Wordsworth, the purest, the loftiest and the [...] most classical of living English poets". (Garrett 1987, p. 81).

J.W.Cocker shows in his article that Keats's association with the Cockney School, a term " which may be defined to consist of the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language" (p.80). Indeed Lockhart recommends Keats to abandon his ' poetic mania' and return to his apothecary's shop" (p.80) where he apprenticed surgery. The aggressive and humiliating discourse of both critics is self-evident and reveals, among other things, that criticism can be used as a destructive weapon against the poor and most vulnerable..What is worse, Lord Byron in the 11<sup>th</sup> canto of his famous poem 'Don Juan' mocked Keats and his inability to sustain the verbal attacks of critics:

John Keats, who was kill'd off by one critique  
Just as he really promised something great  
Much as they might have been supposed to speak.  
Poor fellow! his was an untoward fate:  
'T strange the mind, that fiery particle,

Should let itself be snuff'd by an article. (Lord Byron 1841, pp.108-109)

This stanza is full of sarcasm and underestimation not only of Keats's poetry but also his situation as a man who is too frail before the onslaughts of life and people. The comment of the editor of the letters and remains of John Keats argues in terms that are not different from those of Lord Byron's, " Review people have no more right to kill than any other footpads. However, he who would die of an article in a review would have died of something else equally trivial" (Milnes 1858, p.41)

All these psychological pressures exerted on Keats's impressionable mind and oversensitive soul verify the validity of the view that literary criticism can be abusing

and might be manipulated for vicious personal purposes. Indeed reading Emily Lorraine de Montuzlin's essay about the death of John Keats and its causes, we become aware of the new and unexpected turn criticism might take. Criticism does turn into an act of war as seen in Keats's situation. The title of this essay is expressive enough" Killing the Cockneys; Blackwood's Weapons of Choice against Hunt, Hazlitt and Keats". Here we learn that critic Lockhart and his crew employed a whole arsenal of verbal weapons to the end to complete destruction of the Cockney" (Lorech, 2005, p.36).

The problem with Keats and his hostile critics is that the conflict between the two camps is not equal. Professional critics are often equipped with sufficient and cogent tools to make their assaults more painful and torturing for their sickly victim.

Out of the arguments already stated, it is possible to end this section by highlighting Keats's sickness, bullying of critics, colleagues, publishers and abject poverty so that he could not even get married to his love, Fanny Brawne. In his case only writing poetry serves as the means of salvaging his soul in those hectic times preceding his actual death. 'Endymion', the target of the harsh critics, gleams with beauty and imagination:

yes in spite of all,  
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall  
From our dark spirit. Such the sun, the moon,  
Trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon  
For simple sheep; and such are daffodils  
With the green world they live in; and clear rills  
That for themselves a cooling covert make  
'Gainst the hot season; the mild forest brake,  
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms. (Keats 1818, p.4)

It is really ironic that a poem of this fascinating natural depiction of beauty and glamour becomes the indirect cause of Keats's death. Indeed, the psychological agonies he has been subjected to and the campaign of defamation and underestimation turn into a physical injury and instant death. William Christie's judgment is to the point, "The savage criticism on all his 'Endymion' produced the most violent effect on his susceptible mind, the agitation that originated ended in the rupture of a blood vessel in the lungs; a rapid consumption ensued" (2018, p.280). It is really ironic that Keats is doomed to be killed by the thing which he liked most in his life—the written word.

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## 3. NIKOLAI GOGOL

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### 3.1 Gogol, the Writer and Man

Among the points one remembers about John Keats's career is his unfulfilled wish which he kept reiterating in his letters and conversations with his family members, friends and publishers. It is summed up in the statement" I think I shall be among the English poets after my death" (qtd. in Ulmer 2017, p.3). In comparison, Ukrainian

Gogol is free from such worries since he has established his reputation very early among the first-rank Russian writers in his time. In works like the *Government Inspector*, 'The Nose', 'The Overcoat', 'Diary of a Madman' and *Dead Souls*, he distinguished himself as an original writer, capable of presenting the worries, dreams and misgivings of the poor class. Part of the wide reputation he deservedly won is the fact that his mode of writing differs entirely from what has been going on in the first part of the nineteenth century in Russia. It was the great Russian poet Pushkin who had "greeted Gogol's first collection of stories in 1831 when Gogol was only twenty-two years old, as something uncommon as to constitute an event in Russian literature" (Fanger 1979, p.6). What made Gogol's type of literature so significant that even Fyodor Dostoevsky could only acknowledge his famous statement about Gogol's invaluable contribution to Russian literature 'we all came out of Gogol's overcoat'? Of course the reference here is to Gogol's novella that carries the same title 'The Overcoat'. The reason behind such sweeping admiration and popularity of this work was social and moral. Indeed works like these made Gogol appear in the eyes of his readers and critics as "the realist, fighter for freedom, progressive autocracy and the self-growing system, compassionate spokesman for the little man" (Fanger 1979, p.7). There is almost a unanimous consent among scholars and critics that Gogol was one of the pillars of Russian literature like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenyev, Pushkin and Gorky.

It has already been pointed out that Keats's works revolve around the question of beauty and imagination. Gogol's work, in contrast, emphasizes the ignoble and unnamable. In fact he boasted of this type of writings that made him win great popularity and prestige:

People have had a great deal to say about me, attempting to analyze certain sides of my character, but they have failed to define what is essential about me. Pushkin was the only one who perceived it. He always told me that no writer to date has possessed this gift of bringing out the banality of life so clearly, of knowing how to delineate the banality of a banal with such forcefulness [...] (Merezhkovsky 1974, p.58).

As an artist, Gogol is interested in showing the grotesque, bizarre and outlandish. From this angle, one can claim that he is a pioneer of the absurd literature represented by Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee. The essay written by critic Valery Bryusov titled 'Burnt to Ashes' sheds some illuminating light on Gogol's distinct way of presenting his people and objects, "Nothing average or ordinary exists for Gogol: the boundless and limitless are all that he knows. If he is painting a scene from nature, he cannot help but insist that we are looking at something exceptional, something divine" (1974, p.105).

### 3.2 The Shift from the Secular to the Spiritual and Religious

John Keats spent his last years in Italy, died and buried there. The reason is his declining health and his tuberculosis which would have worsened if he'd remained in England and its humid weather. Gogol's stay in Italy between 1831 and 1838 was for different reasons. He was aware that he was respected only among ordinary readers and critics, but the official institution had its own reservations about his literature for the simple reason that it (his literature) hinged on satirizing and debunking the rampant corruption, bureaucracy and double dealing of the establishments. It was in Italy that Gogol began to realize that his type of writing which he kept pursuing throughout his creative career ought to be changed. The reasons for his change were artistic and moral. "Gogol was afraid that people would be influenced adversely by his negative picture of life and sought to concentrate on the other side of his didacticism---the creation of inspiring positive types" (Andrew 1980:87). He realized at a late stage in his life that his mode of writing was against the grain and that it was high time to give it up.

The other reason is domestic: the formidable impact of his mother on his consciousness and the sober visions of afterlife she unknowingly implanted in his subconscious. His mother Marya Ivanovna was a simple-minded woman who unknowingly played a harmful role in his thinking, "She terrified her young son with tales of hell-fire and damnation, leaving indelible scars on an impressionable mind, while superstitiously believes him to be in some sense 'chosen' for higher things" (Worrall 1982, p.3). This uncommon ascetic upbringing was further nourished by the people he met or had contacts with. They left an imprint on his life and consciousness. For example, his closest friend Pushkin reminds Gogol of the necessity of maximizing the spiritual side and minimizing the material and mundane:

Not for life's stir and agitation  
Have we been born to make gain.  
Or war, but rather for sweet sounds  
For inspiration, and for prayer. (Merezhkovsky 1974, p.100)

What Pushkin recommends in this stanza is the necessity of devoting oneself and energy to spirituality and the immaterial concerns and affairs. His relationship with a clergyman, Father Matvey Konstaninovsky, left a great impact on his life as well. Like his mother, he intensified the images of horror awaiting man after death. "This fanatic priest prompted him to burn the manuscript of the second volume of *Dead Souls* Gogol died a few days later at the age of 42, perhaps of intentional starvation, on the verge of madness" (Kuiper 2012:161). All these increased his prayers and his ascetic practices so that he even made a pilgrimage to Palestine. The changes that Gogol underwent while brooding over the shift from

his customary writing to a totally different one, devoted to moralizing and spirituality were accompanied by an unconscious shunning of his daily routine:

In the years of my youth[...] I was full of joy, charmed when I arrived for the first time in an uncommon place; it might be a farm, a poor little district town, a large village, a small settlement; my poor childish eyes always found them many interesting objects [...] Today, I travel through all the obscure villages with perfect indifference. (Phelps 2014, p.25).

Having imbibed and assimilated the recommendations and advices of his mother, companions and respectable clergyman, Gogol's intellectual position has become adamant regarding the new move in his writing. During the last five years while still living in Italy, Gogol took all his readers by surprise in publishing his book, *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* (1847). At the time of writing this book, he was very sick and the book seemed "as only a preparation for a Christian death as well as for his readers whose 'slumbering souls' he hoped to awaken' [...] The comic writer had turned into a presumptuous preacher" (Sirotkina 2002, p.16).

### 3.3 The Critical Controversy

Gogol gradually underwent great psychological and artistic changes in his last years manifested through abandoning realistic and satirical literature and turning to moral and religious preaching. In the meantime, his influential critic Vissarian Belinsky (1811-1848) shifted from great admiration of Gogol's works to bitter disillusionment and apprehension that Gogol is no longer sane. The class stratification that was a stumbling block in John Keats's way, is once again felt in Gogol's situation. Obviously Gogol does not belong to the elite writers like "Prince Peter Vlazemsky, Pushkin and Zhukovsky. Zhukovsky was the only of the three who befriended Gogol" (Kahn et al 208:379). The debate between the two men (Belinsky and Gogol) was seen as a clash between two incompatible and irreconcilable viewpoints where any compromise is beyond reach. Belinsky's fierce attack is the inevitable outcome of an unfulfilled dream and hope of seeing a new literature capable of crystallizing the aspirations and sufferings of the majority of people, "I loved you with all passion with a man bound by ties of blood to his native country, can love its hope, its glory, one of the great leaders on the path towards consciousness, development and progress" (Sirotkina 2002, p.17).

Unable to grasp and rationalize this final move made by Gogol, Belinsky was finally convinced that Gogol went mad. This argument was followed by the attempts of two psychiatrists (N.N.Bazhenor and V.E.Chizh). Both elaborated and popularized the assumption of Gogol's mental disorder. They "offered authoritative confirmation of the prevalent nineteenth century that Gogol suffered from a mental disorder" (Sirotkina 2002, p. 16).

Further evidence was presented in the 21st century by two contemporary researchers who double-checked Gogol's life and works and came to the firm conclusion that there was something wrong with him. They claim that according to an eyewitness, "Gogol experienced hallucinations and often reacted violently. He became paranoid and burned all manuscripts, including the second part of *Dead Souls*. In his final days, he refused his meals and starved himself to death" (Khalil & Jayatunge 2016:n.p.). The question that needs to be posed here is: if Gogol is the psychopath presented in these arguments, why didn't they refer to such views when he published his earlier works? His case as far as the present paper perceives is that they did their utmost best to persuade him to maintain the same constant image they have constantly held about him as their favorite writer in his earlier works. Moreover, in their view, he has no right to veer from or replace his mode of writing which characterized his earlier works. A passing look at the practices and experiences of world writers especially in the West would prove the recurrence of the conviction that the writer has the full right to change. Take the work of the leader of naturalism, Henrik Ibsen, *When We Dead Awaken* (1899) which has few naturalistic elements. Indeed Ibsen's stagecraft "has begun to closely resemble some aspects of Symbolist theatre. The play is structured around two encounters in the first act that lead to two journeys up a mountain" (Gale et al 2010, p.21). There is in this play much biographical information that it is hardly possible to call it a naturalistic work. The objective elements which form the cornerstone of naturalistic theatre are nearly missing.

This applies more or less to the practice of the Nobel-Prize winner, Doris Lessing who, after exploring the potentialities of realistic fiction, "looks forward to the 'new man' about to be born" (*The Small Personal Voice*). It is that sense of anticipation that prompts Lessing to explore beyond the conventional realism that shapes her first novel and to journey into 'space fiction' (Waterman 2006, p.X1).

A final example here would be D.H.Lawrence's poem 'The Ship of Death' in which he mourns his own death and was published posthumously in 1933. Here his traditional concentration on what is physical and sensual is replaced by "several layers of meaning—the personal death which Lawrence is facing when he writes the poem; the physical significance of the death experience for man's life in general, and the mythic dimension suggested by the death journey---all overlap here" (Mackery 1986, p.131)

The above-mentioned examples culled at random from an endless list of writers in different parts of the universe where the author has the full right and justification for any shift in his/her creative career attest to the truth of Gogol's choice. Some extenuating circumstances for the harshness of Belinsky's attacks may be found in the social and cultural circumstances prevalent in Russia at that time when Gogol's type of literature was seen as the right response to Russia's predicament. Even so, the

creative writer's choice represented by Gogol's case is not different, given the urging personal and experiential sides of his life which will inevitably be reflected in his works of art.

It is worth mentioning that part of contemporary Gogol criticism justifies the change in Gogol's writing: "Gogol was a much more complex writer than Belinsky had suggested. This newer criticism has revealed a tormented personality, and it has pointed out that Gogol did not approach primarily as a realist" (Moss 2005, p. 413).

When Gogol took that step, he never predicted these critical reactions which went beyond the writing craft so that they even encroached upon the most sensitive issue in his life: his sanity and mental balance. Death in his situation is the final resort and release from collective lasting pains and torments. Before this inevitable event took place, he succeeded in putting an end to a type of writing that is no longer gratifying his inner needs and wishes. He did that despite all calls for demonizing and raising doubts about his mind and sexual life.

#### 4. I.MAIN FINDINGS OF THE ARTICLE:

- Literary criticism remains mostly subject to preferential and partial judgments.

- Historically speaking, literary criticism has served as a by-product, an offshoot of literature but not belonging to it completely. Throughout different epochs, creative writers have felt that the critic is an individual who lacks the essential faculties of the creative writer and, accordingly, has to accept this second choice: books written on books.

- The picture of literary criticism is neither complete nor conclusive. Such a secondary activity can play a very crucial role in the writing process in drawing the attention of the creative writer to his/her pitfalls which have to be corrected, modified or dropped altogether.

- Some literary critics like F.R.Leavis or T.S.Eliot are not content with explicating literary works and showing their good sides or weaknesses. These two outstanding critics tend to mix their judgments of literary works with personal appraisal or depreciation. The reviewers of Keats's 'Endymion' emphasize the personal and even physical appearance of the writer in question. Keats's boyish appearance and Gogol's celibacy serve as good examples of the literary track that criticism might take. Such fault-finding methods are beyond the gracious task of literary criticism.

- In both cases, Keats and Gogol were adamant in following the type of writing they deemed right, irrespective of the objections and harsh judgments of literary critics.

- Although Keats did not concede to the authoritative voice of reviewers and critics, one has to acknowledge the fact that Keats's death was, practically speaking, precipitated by such unfair criticism.

- Gogol's position is worse. He scored overwhelming success in realistic literature, depicting the marginalized people. When he sought to change this literature, he was atrociously attacked by critics and readers to a fatal degree.

- Literary criticism, in most cases, is subjective and far from fulfilling its target of being fair.

- Having said that, it has to be stressed that literary criticism is not always harmful. Many critics are open-minded and have subtle and influential insights that are of great help even to writers themselves as well as readers. Such critics are exempt from the above-mentioned weaknesses as seen in the practices of George Watson, Colin McCabe, Frank Kermode, Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom and Malcolm Bradbury...etc.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to shed some illuminating light on a very controversial issue about the negative, if not subversive, role of literary critics in the careers of writers (Keats and Gogol) and how their pressures have precipitated the deaths of the writers aforementioned. Though their end is similar, the practices and positions of the two writers vary considerably. Keats is a very young and inexperienced man whose life is inextricably dovetailed with death and chronic sickness. His brief life has been embittered by the vindictive critical attacks on his works as well as the poet's cultural background. For all the great extent of pain and suffering as a result of these attacks, he has the guts to answer back some of these verbal assaults:

Praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic in his own works. My own domestic criticism has given me pain without compassion beyond what Blackwood or the Edinburgh Quarterly could possibly inflict" (Keats 1958, p.373)

Despite abusing and insulting judgments, Keats persisted in his pursuit of beauty and imagination driven by the conviction that history one day would give him his due and his name would not be 'writ in water' as his epitaph declares. What Keats faced was the worst type of criticism that transcends the textual and involves itself with Keats's cultural background, social class and even physical appearance. Literary criticism, in Keats's case, proves to be fatal and unethical.

When we turn to Gogol's position and the fierce campaign launched against his writing in his last years, it transpires that there is at least a reasonable and justifiable cause for some of the furious critical attacks. Belinsky and other critics of his school did not approve of the change in Gogol's writing in his final years and saw it as a reactionary move and a descent from the high position to which they uplifted him. By implication, criticism appears here to be similar to what Keats has received and



the pains he has endured. As already suggested, Keats's freedom as a writer and artist is at stake here as the critics and reviewers have exerted their utmost best to virtually annihilate Keats. This is because he sought to inaugurate the trend of art for art's sake, even though his experience is still green. By the way, Keats was an inborn critic as can be seen through his letters to his publishers and members of his family.

For certain psychological and perhaps physical reasons, Gogol resolved to give up the satirical and farcical type of literature which distinguished most of his literary career. Instead, he prefers now the moralizing and enlightening. Just like Tolstoy, he chose to make his final writings as a sort of preaching, spiritual instruction for his compatriots. His controversial book, *Selected Passages*, is the example which he sets for his future writing in his remaining years before his death. This book is a turning point in Gogol's creative career as a writer. Moreover, Gogol proved in refusing to accept the suggestions and notes of literary critics that his decision of turning to another type of writing is conclusive and he will not give any concessions as far as this point is concerned.

If Keats's health has got worse due to the adverse criticism of his reviewers and critics so that within few weeks he died, Gogol's suffering is no less agonizing. He felt that he has to put an end to his life not through suicide but through acts of austerity and self-imposed starvation for more than a week.

To sum up, it is clear that these two writers are different in their literary orientations and their ranks and positions when they were alive. However, their attitudes are similar in their great self-confidence and readiness to sacrifice everything for the sake of their creative writing. Literary critics in both situations did much harm to their victims but their attempts were in vain, given the strong reactions of both Keats and Gogol. They had the stamina to confront these malicious attacks against such distinguished creative writers who kept their literary and cultural enterprises intact. Obviously creative writing has its moments of pride and self-satisfaction so that "if it were now to die, 't were now to be most happy" (Othello, Act 2, Scene 1: lines 174-5) as Shakespeare rightly confirms. Evidently, creative writing sometimes has to pay much for its objectives and free choices. Critics are the ones who sometimes represent the stumbling block in the path of some creative writers.

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