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Coleridge's Interpretation of Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

I

COLERIDGE'S interpretation of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is probably still the single most influential source of critical topics and judgments about Wordsworth's text, but, as James V. Logan has observed, "it is the disintegration of Wordsworth's Preface that the reader chiefly remembers from Coleridge."¹ Though most attempts to explicate the Preface start from Coleridge, few acknowledge that he was out to refute, rather than to clarify, Wordsworth's argument. Coleridge thought that the controversy over Wordsworth's poetry stemmed not so much from the poems as from the Preface, believing that certain flaws in the poems might not have been taken seriously but for Wordsworth's announcement that they were deliberate. In search of the true grounds for characterizing the value of Wordsworth's poetry, Coleridge found it necessary to remove the obstacle created by Wordsworth's critical theory.²

Coleridge's rhetoric has been so effective that it has not merely refuted the Preface but re-created it. His argument has drawn the bulk of subsequent critical commentary to the question of poetic diction, though that topic is subordinate in Wordsworth, and has even led respectable critics, Wordsworthians and Coleridgeans alike, to mistake the theses it attacks for those Wordsworth defends.³ The many critics who read Wordsworth through Coleridge seem unable to inquire into what the Preface is about without finding something wrong with it.⁴

From time to time critics have questioned Coleridge's interpretation of the Preface, but none has tested its accuracy in detail, perhaps because Coleridge made that task unusually difficult.⁵ Not only has he variously and inconsistently identified the passages to which he ob-

jects, but he has misleadingly distinguished between what the Preface can legitimately be taken to mean and what it probably does mean. Since these difficulties complicate any attempt to pin down his interpretation, they must be examined at the outset.

Coleridge first states that he objects solely to the view "that the proper diction for poetry in general consists altogether in a language taken, with due exceptions, from the mouths of men in real life, a language which actually constitutes the natural conversation of men under the influence of natural feelings" (II, 29). Having announced this program of debate, however, he immediately begins discussing Wordsworth's views, not on the language of poetry, but on appropriate poetic subjects. This unannounced head not only provides him with plenty to object to but leads him to "the point, to which all the lines of difference converge as to their source and centre . . . that poetry as poetry is essentially *ideal*, that it avoids and excludes all *accident*; that its apparent individualities of rank, character, or occupation must be *representative* of a class; and that the *persons* of poetry must be clothed with *generic* attributes . . ." (II, 32–33). However, in the next summary of his objections, Coleridge does not mention this point. Instead he introduces still another issue, presenting it as if it had been before us from the beginning:

Here let me be permitted to remind the reader, that the positions, which I controvert, are contained in the sentences—"a *selection of the REAL language of men*;"—"the *language of these men*" (i.e. men in low and rustic life) "*I propose to myself to imitate, and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men.*" "*Between the language of prose and that of metrical composition, there neither is, nor can be any essential difference.*" It is against these exclusively that my opposition is directed.

(II, 41)

Here for the first time Coleridge objects to the passage about the language of prose, but soon this objection also gains prominence: by the next chapter it has become "the most important [point]; its examination having been, indeed, my chief inducement for the preceding inquisition" (II, 45). If, instead of trying to reconcile these claims, we simply combine them, we can see that, out of the whole scope of Wordsworth's argument, Coleridge confines his attack and his interpretation to Wordsworth's choice of low and rustic subjects, his ideas of language in general and of "the real language of men," and his notion of the essential connection between the languages of prose and metrical composition.

Coleridge, however, further complicates any attempt to judge his interpretations by dissociating the views he attacks from those he believes that Wordsworth held. Those who derive their view of the Preface from Coleridge have not observed that he presents his criticisms as applicable not to what Wordsworth must have meant but only to what his words can be taken to mean "according to all the common laws of interpretation" (II, 69). The manner in which Coleridge introduces his first objection emphasizes this distinction: "My own differences from certain supposed parts of Mr. Wordsworth's theory ground themselves on the assumption, that his words had been rightly interpreted, as purporting that the proper diction for poetry in general consists altogether in a language taken, with due exceptions, from the mouths of men in real life, a language which actually constitutes the natural conversation of men under the influence of natural feelings" (II, 29). This statement fails to make clear who *supposes* these parts to be true parts of Wordsworth's theory and by whom his words "had been rightly interpreted." Coleridge himself only *assumes* this interpretation to be correct and, in doing so, leaves open whether or not he *believes* it to be correct. Though one might be led to think he does from his many direct references to Wordsworth's poems, attitudes, and ideas in the argument that follows, he reiterates more forcibly at the end of his argument that the theory he has refuted and the theory Wordsworth held are not the same.

After two involved chapters refuting "certain supposed parts of Mr. Wordsworth's theory" (II, 29), Chapter xix takes up "*the real object*

which, it is probable, Mr. Wordsworth had before him in his critical preface" (II, 69). Here is how the chapter begins:

It might appear from some passages in the former part of Mr. Wordsworth's preface, that he meant to confine his theory of style, and the necessity of a close accordance with the actual language of men, to those particular subjects from low and rustic life, which by way of experiment he had purposed to naturalize as a new species in our English poetry. But from the train of argument that follows; from the reference to Milton; and from the spirit of his critique on Gray's sonnet; those sentences appear to have been rather courtesies of modesty, than actual limitations of his system. *Yet so groundless does this system appear on a close examination; and so strange and over-whelming in its consequences, that I cannot, and I do not, believe that the poet did ever himself adopt it in the unqualified sense, in which his expressions have been understood by others, and which, indeed, according to all the common laws of interpretation they seem to bear. What then did he mean?* (II, 69; italics mine)

Having refuted the system that Wordsworth inadvertently loosed on the world, Coleridge turns to save the poet himself by acknowledging the good intentions that Wordsworth was unable to embody in his work. He goes on to interpret some of "the controverted passages of Mr. W's. critical preface by the purpose and object, which he may be supposed to have intended, rather than by the sense which the words themselves must convey, if they are taken without this allowance" (II, 77), but this apparently generous gesture, even if it succeeds in dispelling the impression that the view refuted earlier was Wordsworth's (a success it has not had with later critics of the Preface), leaves the impression that Wordsworth was unable to say what he meant and must receive special consideration to be understood at all. Coleridge comes off as the careful refuter of Wordsworth's apparent meaning and the generous restorer of his actual system; Wordsworth appears as either a mistaken theorist or an incompetent writer.

The success of this maneuver depends on our tacit agreement that there are "common laws of interpretation" that can be applied to an author's words without reference to our beliefs or hypotheses about what he had in mind. I find no evidence that Coleridge has discovered or fol-

lowed any such laws in his interpretation of the Preface. The closest he comes even to formulating a law or maxim of interpretation is in his reading of the phrase "from low and rustic life," where he argues that the persons Wordsworth introduces "are by no means taken *from low or rustic life* in the common acceptance of those words" (II, 31). This "acceptation" is considered so self-evident that it is not explained, but that very fact gives us a clue as to the "law" of interpretation operating here and the manner in which it is applied. The assumption is that one meaning of these words is so widespread that all Coleridge's readers will immediately recognize it without his citing it. Wordsworth, however, is assumed to have misunderstood this meaning or to have misapplied the phrase to the subjects of his poems. No other legitimate meaning is allowed for, and no attempt is made to discover what could have possessed Wordsworth to stray so far from the familiar "acceptation." As a method of interpretation this procedure makes it virtually impossible to discover an unusual meaning, or even an alternative "common" meaning, for the phrase, but as a method of refutation it has definite advantages. It allows Coleridge to suggest a "common" meaning that weakens Wordsworth's case and to make the standard of "commonness" the reader's uncritical recognition of that meaning.

Interpretation according to the "common acceptance" of a writer's words is a strategy, not a law, and when it does not serve Coleridge's purposes, he turns to another maxim that does. When he comes to interpret Wordsworth's assertion that "there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition," Coleridge chooses the uncommon way of interpreting the word "essential" and offers the following reasons for his choice:

There are not, indeed, examples wanting in the history of literature, of apparent paradoxes that have summoned the public wonder as new and startling truths, but which on examination have shrunk into tame and harmless *truisms*; as the eyes of a cat, seen in the dark, have been mistaken for flames of fire. But Mr. Wordsworth is among the last men, to whom a delusion of this kind would be attributed by anyone, who had enjoyed the slightest opportunity of understanding his mind and char-

acter. Where an objection has been anticipated by such an author as natural, his answer to it must needs be interpreted in some sense which either is, or has been, or is capable of being controverted. My object then must be to discover some other meaning for the term "*essential difference*" in this place, exclusive of the indistinction and community of the words themselves. (II, 46-47)

Here readers are no longer invited to acquiesce in what they and Coleridge and all persons of common sense think a word means but to rely on what Coleridge and other friends of Wordsworth know about what Wordsworth must have meant. Coleridge interprets this passage, not according to the "sense which the words themselves convey," as he later puts it, but "by the purpose and object, which he [Wordsworth] may be supposed to have intended" (II, 77). The effect, however, is the same whether Coleridge feigns objectivity or intimacy, for the interpretation he arrives at either way sets up a Wordsworth whose arguments can easily be shown to be absurd.

Since we are not given a law of interpretation that validates the distinction between what Wordsworth can legitimately be taken to mean and what he in fact means, we must assess Coleridge's interpretation of the Preface not by any such law but by our best judgment of Wordsworth's intention.

II

The first interpretation Coleridge offers concerns Wordsworth's reasons for choosing his poetic subjects from low and rustic life. Wordsworth writes:

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that

condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended; and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.⁶

Coleridge neither quotes nor mentions the first sentence of this paragraph, in which Wordsworth states his "principal object" in writing the *Lyrical Ballads*, and this omission leads him to misread the reasons Wordsworth offers for his choice of subjects. In the first place, the omission makes it look as though Wordsworth depicts low and rustic life because it is ideal in itself, not because it is useful for his purposes. In the second place, it creates the impression that Wordsworth is explaining why his subjects are as they are, rather than why he finds them suitable. On the one hand, Coleridge presents reasons for denying "the desirable influences of low and rustic life in and for itself" (II, 32), while, on the other, he suggests *causes* other than "occupation and abode" to account for "the thoughts, feelings, language, and manners of the shepherd-farmers in the vales of Cumberland and Westmoreland" (II, 31).

Wordsworth, however, does not consider rustic life desirable in itself so much as he finds it desirable for the purpose of representing human passions in unimpeded and unconcealed operation, and what he is trying to do is not, like Coleridge, to prove a thesis about the *causes* of rustics' sentiments and language but to justify his choice of these subjects to exemplify human emotions. In the first place, he tells us, their passions are mature, unrestrained, and emphatically and plainly expressed—all characteristics that make it easier for him to see and to portray in them "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement." In addition, he says that the simplicity of their elementary feelings, that is, their relative artlessness, makes it easier for him to contemplate and communicate those

feelings. Furthermore, their feelings are reflected in manners that have been conditioned by the enduring circumstances of rural living—dependence on the seasons, on weather, on day and night, for example—and they are associated with objects of continuing pleasurable interest to human beings, what Wordsworth calls "the beautiful and permanent forms of nature." Because passions and manners are linked, the poet can express internal states by showing habitual behavior, as Wordsworth presents the "eager industry" of Michael and his wife through the nightly lighting of "the evening star." The association of rustics' passions with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature makes those passions more representative of the universal human passions that it is Wordsworth's express purpose to discover and portray. Wordsworth does not praise low and rustic life for its own sake or try to explain the characteristics he finds there; he explains why what he finds there is useful for his poetic purposes.⁷

Coleridge's interpretation of what Wordsworth means by "language" has been a more frequent focus of critical debate than his interpretation of Wordsworth's choice of subjects. The endless disputes that brought M. H. Abrams to say that Wordsworth's remarks about language are "peculiarly dark and equivocal" began with Coleridge's interpretation.⁸ Most subsequent discussions of what Wordsworth means start either by accepting the alternative meanings Coleridge offers and choosing between them or by stating them and then suggesting a third possibility. According to Coleridge, by "language" Wordsworth may mean either words themselves or the order in which words are used. Under both main heads—the language of low and rustic life and the language of prose—Coleridge offers these same alternatives (II, 44–46) and insists that Wordsworth must have meant not just words but the order of the words as well. Shawcross, in his notes to *Biographia*, argues that Wordsworth means words only (II, 276–77, n. to p. 46, l. 1), while James Heffernan, sixty years later, accepts Coleridge's alternatives and agrees that the order of words is also meant.⁹

Abrams states the most commonly suggested third possibility when he writes, "The total context makes it plain that (despite some wavering

because of ambiguity of the word 'real') Wordsworth's chief concern is not with the single words or the grammatical order of prose discourse, but with figurative departures from literal discourse, and that Wordsworth's main intention is to show that such deviations are justifiable in verse only when they have the same psychological causes that they have in the 'artless' speech of every day" (p. 110). Abrams himself is able to rediscover this meaning in Wordsworth's context, and the alternatives he rejects in arriving at it do not come up there; they arise only in Coleridge's interpretation. Perhaps the darkness and equivocality he associates with Wordsworth's text are most apparent to one who approaches it with Coleridge's terms already in mind.

The most thoroughgoing attempt to escape those terms and to grasp what other meaning Wordsworth may have had in mind is Marjorie Barstow Greenbie's. She anticipates Abrams' suggestion that Wordsworth was thinking about "figurative departures from literal discourse" and argues that the analytical categories of vocabulary and syntax are utterly foreign to Wordsworth's way of thinking. She writes that for Wordsworth "language" means something like "the whole imaginative expression of thought," adding, I think mistakenly, "which, in most cases, mean[s] figures of speech." To support her interpretation she points out that whenever Wordsworth gives examples of what he means by bad poetic language, either in the Preface or in the 1802 Appendix on Poetic Diction, the language he objects to is metaphorical. He objects, she says, not to metaphorical language as such but to metaphors that are emptily conventionalized or that reveal their user's failure to see, or to feel anything about, whatever he describes with them (pp. 134–39).

So far Greenbie would seem to have a clear grasp of the poet's meaning, but when she goes on to suggest that Wordsworth's "language" should be read as "imagery" or "metaphor" she has inferred more than her observations warrant. Inappropriate images or metaphors are what is wrong with poetic diction as Wordsworth sees it, but this does not mean that images or metaphors are all there is to the language of good poets. Indeed, he writes the Preface because he feels he must explain the scarcity of such imagery in his

poems. "Language" for him cannot *mean* imagery or metaphor, though metaphor is one of the important categories into which he divides language. If to use a metaphor is to apply the name of one thing to another that resembles it, then a concept of language in which *metaphor* is one category must include also the category of *names properly applied to things*. Nothing has a significant name and words are empty when the idea of metaphor is cut loose from its moorings in literal speech.

Greenbie quotes the following remark of Hartley's to show what Hartley taught Wordsworth about the "vitally metaphorical" character of language: "Similes, fables, parables, allegories, etc., are all instances of natural analogies improved and set off by art. And they have this common to them all, that the properties, beauties, perfections, desires, or defects and aversions, which adhere by association to the simile, parable, or emblem of any kind, are insensibly transferred upon the thing represented. Hence the passions are moved to good or evil, speculation is turned into practice, and either some important truth is felt and realized, or some error and vice gilded over and recommended."¹⁰ What Greenbie does not see is that, for Hartley, these powers of metaphor depend upon previous knowledge of the thing whose name, now used metaphorically, already carries with it associations derived from its proper application. Wordsworth also learned this from Hartley, whose idea of a "real" language was of a language whose words have "ideas," that is, connections with sensations received from things (Hartley, I, 77).

Wordsworth claims in the Preface to avoid all metaphors except those that result directly from excited states of feeling (those states aroused by powerful things) in order to concentrate his attention on using names themselves with a feeling for the things they mean. When Greenbie says that he admires the language of rustics because a rustic who lives in regular association with the hearth fire and who "compares a feeling to a flame . . . associates a distinct image with the idea of flame," she misses the prior point that a rustic who mentions a *flame* even as a *flame* also associates a distinct idea with it.

With this expansion of Greenbie's view, we can now, without presupposing Coleridge's terms of interpretation, reformulate our question

about whether Coleridge adequately interprets Wordsworth's idea of language. Can a view of language whose primary distinction is between vocabulary and syntax (words and the order of words) be used to interpret a view whose primary distinction is between literal and figurative language? What are the proper domains of these distinctions and how are they related?

The distinction between vocabulary and syntax is in the domain of the grammarian, who views language as the structure in which words are related to one another according to the forms of syntax. The distinction between literal and figurative usages is in the domain of the rhetorician, who is concerned with the way in which a community uses its language in naming and judging things and therefore with the colors and connotations that give words their power to move us. The grammarian can describe the language of a community in terms of the words it habitually uses and the patterns into which it habitually casts them without ever inquiring into what its members mean by the words they use. Coleridge's distinction between words and the order of words belongs in the grammarian's domain. The rhetorician is primarily interested in discovering the meanings a community associates with words and in using those associated meanings to influence its judgments. Wordsworth's attempt to purify the meanings his compatriots associate with their words is a rhetorical enterprise intended to improve the quality of their judgments.¹¹

Each approach to language is intelligible in itself, but it should be clear that any attempt to interpret one in the terms of the other would necessarily lead to darkness and equivocation. Wordsworth is concerned with words, but not with words as the constituents of syntactic patterns. He is not equivocating between *words* in his sense and *words* in Coleridge's; he is interested in words insofar as they carry meanings about the world for a given community. The shadow cast by Coleridge's concept of language has obscured Wordsworth's views, clouding critical discussions of what Wordsworth means not only by language in general but by the real language of men.

The Coleridgean phrase one is most likely to meet in contemporary discussions of "the real language of men" is *lingua communis* (II, 41), a

phrase Wordsworth does not use in the Preface (or, as far as I can discover, in any of his other published writings). Offering this phrase as a substitute for the phrase "real language," Coleridge says that this ordinary, or common, language is to be discovered empirically by eliminating words peculiar to individuals and classes and saving the remaining words, those in "*universal* use" (II, 41): "Omit the peculiarities of each, and the result of course must be common to all" (II, 42).

The consequences of this interpretation for Wordsworth's claim that a real language is to be found uniquely in the language of men in low and rustic life ought to be apparent, and Coleridge insists upon it repeatedly. Men in low and rustic life are in a class that, like any other class, has peculiarities of language specific to it; consequently a *lingua communis* "is no more to be found in the phraseology of low and rustic life than in that of any other class" (II, 41–42). Wordsworth's attempt to make a common language out of a region-bound dialect strikes Coleridge as absurd, and he heightens the appearance of absurdity by subtly shifting the meanings of the terms in which Wordsworth describes his adoption of that language.

Wordsworth says he adopts the language of men in low and rustic life "purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust" (p. 245). Coleridge restates this qualification as "purified from all provincialism and grossness, and so far reconstructed as to be made consistent with the rules of grammar" (II, 38). Consider what this implies about the language Wordsworth has chosen. First, the only peculiarities Coleridge finds in it are undesirable ones. The language of low and rustic men is just like that of refined and cosmopolitan men except that it is provincial, gross, and ungrammatical. This characterization makes it difficult to see what Wordsworth could have found attractive in rustic language. Only a fool would choose a provincial language in order to purge it of its provincialism or choose a gross and ungrammatical one in order to clean it up and straighten it out.

Wordsworth, however, does not say he is purifying low and rustic language of provincialism; he says that he is purifying it of "lasting

and rational causes of dislike or disgust." "Provincialism" is a term applied to rural language when viewed from the standpoint of an urban community that takes its own manners of speech as the norm, and Wordsworth is quite deliberately not taking that standpoint. Lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust must for him be something more than the present prejudices of that fashionable society which calls itself "the world." That is the only community that rejects provincialism as such without giving any more compelling reasons for doing so. Charges of grossness and failure in grammatical construction (which Coleridge sees as failure to abide by the laws of universal logic) could be seen as more lasting and rational objections, and I think that Wordsworth would have attended to them in purifying rustic language. He would not have admitted, however, that such flaws (along with provincialism, or perhaps as the marks of provincialism) are the distinguishing characteristics of that language.

When Coleridge translates "real" language as "common" language, he focuses exclusively on a language's relation to its users and ignores the importance of its relation to the *objects* envisioned by its users. When Wordsworth talks about a real language, I think he places the language's relation to objects first and has in mind the opposite of what Hartley calls a nominal language. In *Observations on Man*, Hartley distinguishes between a real language, in which words are associated with ideas (i.e., with sensations and feelings), and a nominal language, in which words are associated with other words (I, 285). A real language is one whose words call up associations with experiences of things, while a nominal language is one whose words call to mind definitions in terms of other words. A language of either kind might be common to the members of a group or shared in part by diverse groups. The commonness of the language would affect the size of the audience that would know what was meant, but its reality or nominality would affect the quality of what was being communicated.

In fact, Wordsworth *knows* that the real language he is trying to write is not common. If it were, he would not need to write the Preface to his readers to explain why such language is good for them even though it may strike them as

strange. His enterprise is to make a real language *more common*. Whether he is right that such a language is more likely to be found among men in low and rustic life than among his cultivated readers, it is at least not absurd for him to seek his ideal language in the conversations of men who "hourly communicate" with the *objects* they communicate *about*.

Coleridge's final argument against Wordsworth's choice of the language of rustics as the real language of men again combines distortion of the text with a failure to consider the relation of words to things. Following the repetition of his main objection to Wordsworth's choice of the language of rustics as "the real language of men," Coleridge adds in the final paragraph of Chapter xvii, "Neither is the case rendered at all more tenable by the addition of the words, *in a state of excitement*" (II, 42). The implication is, I think, that Wordsworth adds these words to the phrase "the real language of men." It must be noted, before we consider Coleridge's reasons for finding the addition of these words unhelpful, that Wordsworth never adds them to this phrase.¹² They appear instead in the paragraph in which he tells us that it is his purpose to trace in the incidents of common life "the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas *in a state of excitement*" (pp. 244–45, italics mine). This "state of excitement" is that of the minds he studies and represents in his poems. What he says is that he is fitting into metrical language "a selection of the real language of men *in a state of vivid sensation*" (p. 241, italics mine). He expresses the same idea in the 1802 additions to the Preface when he speaks of the language of "men who feel vividly and see clearly" (p. 261).

Coleridge's misreading here may seem inconsequential and inadvertent, but, like other seemingly careless misreadings, it serves to make Wordsworth's position look weaker than it is. Coleridge's reason for finding the phrase "in a state of excitement" unhelpful in qualifying "the real language of men" is that

the nature of a man's words, where he is strongly affected by joy, grief, or anger, must necessarily depend on the number and quality of the general truths, conceptions and images, and of the words expressing them, with which his mind had been previously stored. For the property of passion is not

to *create*; but to set in increased activity. At least, whatever new connections of thoughts or images, or (which is equally, if not more than equally, the appropriate effect of strong excitement) whatever generalizations of truth or experience, the heat of passion may produce; yet the terms of their conveyance must have pre-existed in his former conversations, and are only collected and crowded together by the unusual stimulation. (II, 42)

The process Coleridge describes here takes place exclusively *within* the mind, and all the words and ideas involved are assumed to be present already at the beginning of the "excitement." The "passion" with which he identifies the "excitement" stirs up the existing pool of concepts and terms but does not introduce anything. Notice now that a "state of vivid sensation" need not be equated with such a "state of excitement." Though both "excitement" and "sensation" may be understood in this purely subjective sense, "sensation" is more likely to involve an object that is making an impression on the mind. To speak of a "vivid sensation" would be to refer to an object's making a strong and quite possibly a clear impression, but to speak of a "vivid excitement" would be to refer to a strong and possibly blinding passion. In a state of vivid sensation, a mind might well be experiencing something new, and its inarticulate repetitions of words and phrases might be the sign that it needs a new word or that it is giving an old word a new meaning; they need not be what Coleridge takes them for—the sign of an "unfurnished or confused understanding" trying to hold onto, or to recall, a subject already known to it.

A state of excitement may or may not be the result of vivid sensation; when it is not (and this is the only possibility Coleridge considers), the mind is absorbed within itself; when it is, the mind may be learning about the world. Wordsworth is concerned to avoid the solipsism of the state Coleridge describes and to make his excitement reflect genuinely worthy objects. He writes, "I am sensible that my associations must have sometimes been particular instead of general, and that, consequently, giving to things a false importance, sometimes from diseased impulses I may have written upon unworthy subjects" (p. 268)—the whole discipline of recollection in tranquility is meant to avoid this fault. He is also concerned to avoid false signs of ex-

citement in his language—one of the faults he objects to in his predecessors—through the discipline of looking steadily at his *subject* and reporting only those feelings warranted by vivid sensations. Coleridge's distortion of the meaning intended here overlooks both these disciplines and allows as Wordsworth's only possible meaning the one that he took greatest pains to avoid.

We can now turn from Coleridge's interpretation of "the real language of men" and direct our attention to the last main point that he interpreted—Wordsworth's statement that "there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition" (p. 253, n. 46). Coleridge's emphasis on this assertion has led critics to see it as a thesis statement in the Preface, but we can tell that it is not, both from its place in the essay—at the end of a reply to an anticipated objection in the midst of Wordsworth's argument—and from Wordsworth's failure to build an argument to support it. Instead of defending his statement, Wordsworth amplifies it to make us feel its full force:

We are fond of tracing the resemblance between Poetry and Painting, and, accordingly, we call them Sisters: but where shall we find bonds of connection sufficiently strict to typify the affinity betwixt metrical and prose composition? They both speak by and to the same organs; the bodies in which both of them are clothed may be said to be of the same substance, their affections are kindred and almost identical, not necessarily differing even in degree; Poetry sheds no tears "such as Angels weep," but natural and human tears; she can boast of no celestial Ichor that distinguishes her vital juices from those of prose; the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both. (pp. 253–54)

That his prose has here turned to an elaborate personification cannot have escaped the poet who two paragraphs earlier acknowledges that "except in a very few instances" his poetry presents "no personifications of abstract ideas" (p. 250). The passage itself enacts the kind of essential identity Wordsworth has in mind, showing prose in an impassioned "affection" in an argument that defends poetry's right to give an accurate and unembellished representation of its subject.

Coleridge nowhere quotes or refers to this passage, which is the only evidence in the Preface of what Wordsworth means by "essential difference." Instead, on the pretext of seeking a meaning that is not a "truism," Coleridge sets out "to discover some other meaning for the term '*essential difference*' in this place, exclusive of the indistinction and community of the words themselves" (II, 47). In the difficult passage in which he pursues this object, Coleridge first equates the distinction between existence and essence with that between reality and idea. He then distinguishes essence from substance in terms of form and matter. Here is the passage itself:

Essence, in its primary signification, means the principle of *individuation*, the inmost principle of the possibility of any thing, as that particular thing. It is equivalent to the *idea* of a thing, when ever we use the word, idea, with philosophic precision. Existence, on the other hand, is distinguished from essence, by the superinduction of *reality*. Thus we speak of the essence, and essential properties of a circle; but we do not therefore assert, that any thing, which really exists, is mathematically circular. Thus too, without any tautology we contend for the *existence* of the Supreme Being; that is, for a reality correspondent to the idea. There is, next, a *secondary* use of the word essence, in which it signifies the point or ground of contra-distinction between two modifications of the same substance or subject. Thus we should be allowed to say, that the style of architecture of Westminster Abbey is *essentially* different from that of St. Paul's, even though both had been built with blocks cut into the same form, and from the same quarry. Only in this latter sense of the term must it have been *denied* by Mr. Wordsworth (for in this sense alone is it *affirmed* by the general opinion) that the language of poetry (i.e. the formal construction, or architecture, of the words and phrases) is *essentially* different from that of prose. (II, 47-48)

The first meaning of "essence" and its contrast with "existence" have no bearing on what Coleridge is saying about Wordsworth's meaning. The second meaning is the one he asserts must be Wordsworth's, as though he has eliminated the first and demonstrated that the two meanings he suggests are the only possible ones. Here the appearance of logical procedure is only an appearance. Furthermore, the difficulty of

deciding what Wordsworth means by "essential" (which is only superficially on its way to solution by this arbitrary a priori process) is now complicated by the possible meanings of "substance" in the second definition of "essence." Once more, however, Coleridge acts as though there were only one possibility, offering an example in which substance is equivalent to the material making up a thing and essence is the distinguishing form that the material is given (*OED*, s.v. "substance," sense 6). Thus Wordsworth is interpreted as saying that there is no difference between the forms made of words in prose and the forms made of words in poetry. We have seen that he does not think about language in those terms, but in Coleridge's argument there appear to be no other terms he could have in mind.

To approach Wordsworth's meaning, we must again reject the options Coleridge offers. An essence need not be a principle of individuation or distinction but may be the same thing as substance ("that which receives modifications and is not itself a mode"), within which distinctions are made ("substance," sense 3; "essence," sense 4). In one way of looking at this meaning there is only one essence, or substance (God or Being), of which everything else is a mode or determination, but in another way of looking at it every genus is an essence, in which its species can be seen as modes. In this sense, to say that there is no essential difference between two things would be to say that they are species of the same genus, as poetry and prose are species of language in use or of human utterance. It is some such meaning that Wordsworth has in mind. When he contrasts the essential identity of poetry and prose with the "sisterhood" of poetry and painting, what he is saying is that, compared to the distinction between poetry and painting in their common genus (fine art?), the distinction between poetry and prose in their common genus (verbal utterance) is so small as to be virtually nil. If we perceive the one relationship as sisterhood, the other is virtual identity.

Another possible meaning of "essence" that would fit the metaphorical development of Wordsworth's thought is that distilled extract of a substance to which its peculiar power or effect is due ("essence," sense 9). The references to the blood and tears of prose and poetry, in

which their common vitality is found, suggest this meaning. In my first interpretation, "essential identity" means deriving from the same substance; here it means possessing the same power from the same inner source. Because Wordsworth's development of his meaning is figurative, there is no reason why both senses may not apply. Indeed, the two meanings are consistent, for the claim of the second is that both poetry and prose get their power from a common source, language, that essence with respect to which their differences are mere accidental modes of determination.

In these terms, is the assertion of the essential identity between poetry and prose a truism or a startling truth? Surely it is a truism to say that prose and verse are both written in language, but it is startling to recognize the *power* that Wordsworth attributes to language in both these modes. His paradoxical and extreme statement forces us to recognize that the essence of verse and prose is in that common power rather than in their distinguishing *forms*. The distinction between matter and form in terms of which Coleridge interprets Wordsworth makes sense in itself but makes nonsense out of Wordsworth's idea. Though James Logan has suggested that the difference between Coleridge's interpretation and Wordsworth's meaning is the difference between a precise philosophic meaning and a loose commonplace one (p. 35), it should now be clear that the difference is between two equally precise "philosophies," both of which are reflected in ordinary ways of thinking about language.

Coleridge follows his misinterpretation of "essential difference" with one last misreading of Wordsworth's argument about "the language of prose." He presents Wordsworth's criticism of Gray's sonnet "In vain to me the smiling morning shines" as though that criticism were offered in defense of the assertion that there is no essential difference between the languages of prose and metrical composition; he then calls Wordsworth to task with the following remarks:

An idealist defending his system by the fact, that when asleep we often believe ourselves awake, was well answered by his plain neighbor, "Ah, but when awake do we ever believe ourselves asleep?"—Things identical must be convertible. The preceding passage seems to rest on a similar sophism. For the

question is not, whether there may not occur in prose an order of words, which would be equally proper in a poem; nor whether there are not beautiful lines and sentences of frequent occurrence in good poems, which would be equally becoming as well as beautiful in good prose; for neither the one nor the other has ever been either denied or doubted by any one. (II, 49)

We would never guess from Coleridge's pose as the chastiser of logical error that he is at this very moment treating as identical two distinct arguments in the Preface and calling Wordsworth down for a sophism he does not commit. Wordsworth offers the reading of Gray's sonnet not as evidence for the essential identity between the languages of poetry and prose but as evidence for the contention that "some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose, when prose is well-written" (p. 252). If indeed such an assertion has "never been either denied or doubted by any one," it must only prove that Wordsworth is not above stating a truism in answer to an anticipated objection, for this is the first remark he makes to counter the possibility that his poems will be called prosaic. The assertion about the essential identity of the languages of prose and metrical composition follows (in the 1802 edition from which Coleridge seems to be quoting) in a new paragraph that begins this way: "By the foregoing quotation I have shewn that the language of Prose may yet be well adapted to Poetry; and I have previously asserted that a large portion of the language of every good poem can in no respect differ from that of good Prose. I will go further. I do not doubt that it may be safely affirmed, that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition" (p. 253, n. 46). Wordsworth is making two distinct points where Coleridge sees one. If "things identical must be convertible," things distinct must not be.

III

Given Coleridge's inaccurate interpretations, we would not expect his answer to what he sees as Wordsworth's mistaken views to have any necessary relation to Wordsworth's actual interests or statements. Coleridge sets out to prove

that there are "modes of expression, a *construction*, and an *order* of sentences, which are in their fit and natural place in a serious prose composition, but would be disproportionate and heterogeneous in metrical poetry; and vice versa" (II, 49), a position that, to paraphrase Coleridge, Wordsworth had never denied or doubted. Similarly, though Coleridge proposes an alternative to the rule that compels a writer to "adhere closely to the sort and order of words which he hears in the market, wake, high-road, or plough-field" (II, 63), Wordsworth neither made nor followed that rule (the latter Coleridge recognized, though he took it as a sign of inconsistency rather than as a sign that Wordsworth had something else in mind when he talked about adopting rustic language). We can only be surprised, then, when some of the views Coleridge develops to oppose the views he *attributes* to Wordsworth bear striking resemblance to views Wordsworth actually expressed in the Preface. This oddity deserves examination.

Let us first recall the first formulation of the "rule" for poetry to which Coleridge says he objects: "My own differences from certain supposed parts of Mr. Wordsworth's theory ground themselves on the assumption, that his words had been rightly interpreted, as purporting that the proper diction for poetry in general consists altogether in a language taken, with due exceptions, from the mouths of men in real life, a language which actually constitutes the natural conversation of men under the influence of natural feelings" (II, 29). By the time he reaches the first movement of his peroration against this mistaken view, Coleridge has completed his specific objections to this rule and has begun to object to it simply because it is a rule. He offers his alternative to all rules, including this one, in the following passage:

But if it be asked, by what principles the poet is to regulate his own style, if he do not adhere closely to the sort and order of words which he hears in the market, wake, high-road, or plough-field? I reply; by principles, the ignorance or neglect of which would convict him of being no *poet*, but a silly or presumptuous usurper of the name! By the principles of grammar, logic, psychology! In one word by such a knowledge of the facts, material and spiritual, that most appertain to his art, as, if it have been governed and applied by *good sense*,

and rendered instinctive by habit, becomes the representative and reward of our past conscious reasonings, insights, and conclusions, and acquires the name of TASTE. (II, 63–64)

He goes on to say that a poet will not attempt to distinguish the language of suppressed anger from the language of indulged anger by following a rule that enjoins him to observe angry people but will rely upon the power of imagination that proceeds upon "the *all in each* of human nature . . . [by] *meditation*, rather than by observation." In the remainder of the passage the intuition of the poetic genius replaces meditation or taste as the faculty that distinguishes true from inappropriate poetic language. No externally formulated rules but only "the *rules* of IMAGINATION [which] are themselves the very powers of growth and production" can be used to judge what a poet has made (II, 64–65).

Although Coleridge attributes a clear "intuition" of these "sources of *genial* discrimination" to Wordsworth, he presents them in opposition to Wordsworth's argument. There is, however, no point in the Preface that Wordsworth stresses more than his claim that he has cultivated his taste in subjects and language through meditation on the subjects he has observed and on the language he has used to describe them. Another branch of the critical tradition regarding the Preface emphasizes these claims by featuring Wordsworth's remarks on "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," on "emotion recollected in tranquillity" and on his reliance on his own feelings as his "stay and support."¹³ Coleridge mentions none of these observations. How can a poet characterized by what many consider an overreliance on his own feelings be the same poet whom Coleridge represents as the advocate of mechanical and external rules of composition?

Wordsworth himself takes considerable pains to prevent being misunderstood. Though he insists that his poems have a worthy purpose, he explains that it is not a "distinct purpose formally conceived" but rather one structured into his immediate feelings by his "habits of meditation." The passage qualifying his assertion that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling" explains how his repeated reflection on his feelings has created "such habits of mind . . . that by obeying blindly and mechan-

ically the impulses of those habits" he can produce worthwhile poetry (pp. 246–47). Coleridge, then, merely echoes the Preface instead of correcting it when he admonishes Wordsworth that the true measure of the poet is "such a knowledge of the facts, material and spiritual, that most appertain to his art, as, if it have become governed and applied by *good sense*, and rendered instinctive by habit, become the representative and reward of our past conscious reasonings, insights, and conclusions, and acquires the name of TASTE" (II, 63–64). He does not have to remind Wordsworth that, if he lacked such taste, he would be a "silly or presumptuous usurper of the name" of poet, for Wordsworth says that, if he is mistaken in the belief that his habits of meditation have formed his feelings to reflect worthy purposes, he "can have little right to the name of a Poet" (p. 246). Coleridge does not need to tell him that the poet's works cannot be judged by external rules, for Wordsworth himself reminds his readers that, if they are to overcome the effects of certain arbitrary rules of poetic diction and appreciate what he has written, they must cultivate their taste in poetry (pp. 270–71). He also warns them that even their agreement with his own stated reasons is no substitute for such taste (p. 243). The poet who insists that his trained *feelings* are his "stay and

support" in his choice of language would presumably not be moved to alter his choices merely by someone's claim that men express themselves differently "in the market, wake, high-road, or plough-field."

Coleridge's refutative interpretation of the Preface has obscured from many subsequent critics not only these apparent agreements between what Wordsworth believes and what Coleridge asserts against him but also the real disagreements between them. If we can approach Wordsworth's Preface afresh and reconstruct the view it is struggling to embody, we will see, I think, that Coleridge had much more interesting reasons for objecting to it than those that he directly addresses to it in the *Biographia*. Differences not only on matters of poetic subjects, language, and meter but also on fundamental convictions about the poet's mind and its relation to other minds and the world will appear when we stop rehashing sophisms about the true sources of rustic language and the real meaning of "essential difference." The issues we discover when we match these two arguments at their fullest strength will, I suspect, be momentous for Anglo-American criticism.

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Notes

¹ *Wordsworthian Criticism: A Guide and Bibliography* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 37–38.

² For Coleridge's statement of the problem see *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols. (1907; rpt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), I, 50–52. His declaration that the problem is solved expresses the same view of his enterprise (II, 95). Subsequent references to the *Biographia* are given in the text, by volume and page number only.

³ See "Wordsworth," in *The English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research and Criticism*, ed. Frank Jordan, 3rd ed. (New York: MLA, 1972), p. 113. Thomas M. Raysor sees Wordsworth's assertion about "the language of prose" as a "main thesis of the Preface" ("Coleridge's Criticism of Wordsworth," *PMLA*, 54 [1939], 498). W. J. B. Owen has more recently tried to account for Wordsworth's argument in terms of a division under the heads of "the real language of men" and "the language of prose" (*Wordsworth as Critic* [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1969], pp. 3–26).

⁴ Coleridge's chapters on Wordsworth have won

praise from his defenders as well as from his detractors and have persuaded most historians of criticism. Raysor calls them "the finest critical essay in English literature" (p. 497), and Norman Fruman finds it necessary, even in the midst of a generally damning essay, to cite them as "by far the best of Coleridge's works" (*Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel* [New York: Braziller, 1971], p. 106). George Saintsbury's view that Coleridge was "one of the finest critics of the world" while Wordsworth had "by no means all, or even very many, of the qualifications of a critic" has been commonly accepted since he first voiced it (*A History of Criticism*, 3 vols. [New York: Dodd and Mead, 1906], III, 206). René Wellek's judgment that Wordsworth "left himself wide open to Coleridge's refutation" is still another reflection of Coleridge's success, especially since Wellek is ordinarily no uncritical friend of Coleridge's (*A History of Modern Criticism*, 4 vols. [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1955], II, 132). Most recently, George Watson has been so convinced that Wordsworth was "badly out of his depth as a critic" that he credits Coleridge

with providing notes for the Preface itself (*The Literary Critics* [London: Chatto and Windus, 1964], pp. 105–06). Watson gets the idea from Coleridge, who called the Preface “half a child of my own brain” in an 1802 letter to Southey (*Letters*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, 2 vols. [Boston: Houghton, 1895], II, 386).

⁵ For some of the questions raised, see Shawcross' notes to his edition of the *Biographia Literaria*; also Arthur Beatty, *William Wordsworth*, 3rd ed. (1922; rpt. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1962), p. 66; Alexander Brede, “Theories of Poetic Diction in Wordsworth and Others and in Contemporary Poetry,” in *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters*, ed. Eugene S. McCartney and Peter Okkelberg (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1931), xiv, 537–56; Marjorie Barstow Greenbie, *Wordsworth's Theory of Poetic Diction* (1917; rpt. New York: Russell, 1966), pp. 7, 134; James Logan, pp. 37–38; and John Crowe Ransom, “William Wordsworth: Notes toward an Understanding of His Poetry,” in *Wordsworth Centenary Studies Presented at Cornell and Princeton Universities*, ed. Gilbert T. Dunklin (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1951), pp. 91–92.

⁶ “Wordsworth's Prefaces of 1800 and 1802,” in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (1963; rpt. London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 244–45. All subsequent page references to the Preface are given in the text. I use the 1802 readings throughout and do not follow Brett and Jones in italicizing the 1802 variants.

⁷ My interpretation of Wordsworth's reasons for choosing low and rustic subjects is in fundamental disagreement with Owen's interpretation (pp. 7–13). Owen,

like Coleridge, omits Wordsworth's statement about his “principal object” from the passage as he interprets it and argues against the views this omission seems to produce.

⁸ *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), p. 110.

⁹ *Wordsworth's Theory of Poetry* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 39–40.

¹⁰ David Hartley, *Observations on Man*, introd. Theodore L. Huguelet (1749; rpt. [2 vols. in 1] Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1966), I, 297.

¹¹ After this essay reached the publisher, I discovered that Gene W. Ruoff arrives at this distinction in terms of the difference between “semantics and syntactics . . . [which] form the primary domain of classical philology, the tradition of language study in which Coleridge's poetics is steeped,” and pragmatics, “the area of meaning which is most crucial in speaking situations” and which is central, as he sees it, for Wordsworth (“Wordsworth on Language: Toward a Radical Poetics for English Romanticism,” *The Wordsworth Circle*, 3 [1972], 204–11). He develops this view of Wordsworth's enterprise into the important thesis that Wordsworth's contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads* “are experiments both in communication and in the idea of community.”

¹² Shawcross notes this but makes nothing of it (II, 276, n. to p. 42, l. 20).

¹³ Abrams and Heffernan, for example, feature these phrases throughout their interpretations and criticisms of the Preface.