

and knocking down straw men. He knows that readers “will be drawn up short,” and I think *his* psychological sense sparkles everywhere.

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Coleridge's Interpretation of Wordsworth's Preface

To the Editor:

Don H. Bialostosky's article “Coleridge's Interpretation of Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 912–24) admirably demonstrates that Wordsworth's original intention in the Preface must be disentangled from Coleridge's “re-creation” of it in the *Biographia Literaria*, but as a piece of scholarship it seems to me unbalanced and at bottom somewhat invidious. In his conclusion, Bialostosky emphasizes the importance of “match[ing the] two arguments [of Coleridge and Wordsworth] at their fullest strength”; yet in his article he fails to appreciate the significance of Coleridge's argument or at times to see what Coleridge's point of view about Wordsworth really was.

Probably the most general thing we can say about Coleridge's interpretation of Wordsworth's Preface is that it embodies the confrontation between a conservative sensibility and a radical one—Coleridge writing in 1817 at Highgate and Wordsworth in 1800 at Dove Cottage. True, as Bialostosky convincingly argues, Coleridge altered the terms of Wordsworth's argument and so, to a certain extent, “obscured” Wordsworth's original meaning. But in his eagerness to rescue Wordsworth's system from Coleridge's intrusive hands, Bialostosky simply turns the tables on Coleridge and obscures the meaning and intent of *his* criticism.

Coleridge's fundamental standpoint—and the central article of “re-creation” in his criticism of Wordsworth—appears in his substituting for Wordsworth's professed reliance on the “real language of men” the concept of a *lingua communis* as the desirable norm for a poet. Wordsworth turned to “low and rustic life” in order to free his language from that of “Poets, who . . . separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression. . . .” Now Coleridge would no more identify the *lingua communis* with the language of those poets, or with “the standpoint of an urban community,” as Bialostosky puts it (p. 918), than he would with the language of any particular class or community, including that

of “rustic” men. Coleridge's “common language” rests on the kind of understanding that we used to believe was derived from education, and that is why, later in his criticism, Coleridge says that the poet's rules ought to be obtained “by *meditation*, rather than by *observation*.” In Coleridge's time, the “common language” could only with difficulty be identified with the actual language of any class—in his terms, the “ideal” lacked at the same time “existence” (see p. 920)—and it is perhaps for this reason that his position seems so precarious, whereas Wordsworth's turn to the language of a particular class seems a renovating step toward reality. Both the difficulty and the conservatism of Coleridge's position, I think, may be indicated by his resort to a Latin phrase, *lingua communis*, to express the ideal standpoint he had in mind.

Nevertheless, the integrity of Coleridge's position ought to be insisted on. Bialostosky quotes Coleridge's statement that “I cannot, and I do not, believe that the poet did ever himself adopt [his theory of style] in the unqualified sense, in which his expressions have been understood by others” and concludes that, from Coleridge's comment, “Wordsworth appears as either a mistaken theorist or an incompetent writer” (p. 913). In fact, in the continuation to this passage in the *Biographia*, which Bialostosky does not quote, Coleridge explains that in his opinion Wordsworth “suffered himself to express, in terms at once too large and too exclusive, his predilection for a style the most remote possible from the false and showy splendour which he wished to explode.” Coleridge implies, that is, that Wordsworth was not so much mistaken or incompetent as he was an enthusiast, exaggerating his position under the current and pressure of the times. From this point of view, Coleridge's retrospective statement seeks not so much to refute or distort Wordsworth as to restore a balance: it is clear that Wordsworth did not stray so far from the common language as he wished to pretend that he had.

Bialostosky aptly suggests, in his closing paragraph, that the differences between Coleridge's criticism of the Preface and the Preface as we would know it without that criticism take shape from “fundamental[ly] different convictions about the poet's mind and its relation to other minds and the world.” In his article, we get a fair reminder of the original spirit in which Wordsworth attempted to defend his poetic practice. But do we get a correspondingly just appraisal of Coleridge's response?

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