

Language of Poetry and a Discourse between Wordsworth and Coleridge: A Sublime Overview

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Abstract

Criticism reached the height of excellence and became a dominant field of study from the Romantic Period when poets and authors such as William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold urged to interfere into this realm and produced great writings. This tradition continued with T. S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, and so many great poets and authors. 'Criticism' establishes itself as a dominant field of study with the worthy and huge participation of I. A. Richards, William Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, R. P. Blackmur, and Monroe Beardsley. A new term was coined : 'new criticism'. This term was taken from John Crowe Ransom's 1941 essay of the same title. A whole new line up was created and anticipated semiotics, Russian Formalism, dialogism, narrative discourses, and paratexts with the bold and prominent works by Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes and so many influential writers. In this paper, I shall show how William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge differed in their own concepts about what exactly should be the proper language of poetry.

Keywords: Romantic age, Poetry, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Rustic language, Argument, Philosophy., Lyrical Ballads, Biographia Literaria.

Introduction:

The Romantic Age saw how literary celebrities such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and after them, Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater took criticism seriously and produced canonical works. The realm also lists T. S. Eliot as the father-figure of the so-called 'modern' era of poetry and criticism. I shall investigate first how William Wordsworth used his pen for drawing a serious outline of 'criticism' with a touch of poetry. Wordsworth was writing a new kind of poetry that was more to deal with Nature than with human beings, which was to treat higher, rather than supernatural things, in a natural manner. This could be done by using a simple and natural language selected from the language of common people. This meant a revolution against the pseudo-classical theory of poetic diction which argued and established the usage of a refined, accurate and exact kind of language, the artificial (as Wordsworth thought) language of

the city. Wordsworth condemned the usage of artificial language, such as that of the school of Pope as a ‘‘masquerade, of tricks, quaintnesses, hieroglyphics and enigmas’’.

Wordsworth and his Arguments:

Wordsworth suggested that the language must not be separated from the language of men in real life. Figures, metaphors and similes, and other ornamentation must not be used unnecessarily, as was the case with the superficial 18th century poetic diction. In a state of excitement, men usually use metaphorical language to express themselves forcefully. The early poets used only such metaphors and images. Later on, poets used a figurative language that was not a product of genuine passion; they were imposed artificially, in order to show linguistic mastery in most of the cases. A stereotypical and mechanical phraseology became current. The poets must avoid the use of artificial diction both when they speak in their own person and when they speak through their characters. A poet must not use it when he speaks in his own person as it is not real language of men, and he is a man speaking to men, the real common men.

After a thorough study of his Prefaces to the 1798 and 1800 editions of the *Lyrical Ballads*, we can notice that the followings, in a nutshell, are the main recommendations of Wordsworth—

- (i) The language of poetry should be the language really used by men, especially the simple and rustic people living close to Nature. There should obviously be a selection. All the language of the common men must not be put into poetry. Only selected and chosen words used in common parlance can serve the purpose of poetry.
- (ii) It should be the language of men in a state of vivid sensation. It means that language used by people in a state of animation can form the language of poetry. In other words, it should be a lively language expressing living emotions of real, life-like men.
- (iii) It must contain a certain colouring of imagination.
- (iv) There is no essential difference between the words used in prose and in metrical compositions.

S. T. Coleridge’s Argument on Wordsworth:

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was the first critic to pounce upon Wordsworth’s theory of language and exposed its several weaknesses. Coleridge argues that—

- (i) A language so selected and purified, as Wordsworth recommended, would differ in no way from the language of any other men of common sense. After such a selection, there would be no difference between the rustic language and the language of men in other walks of life.

- (ii) Wordsworth permitted the use of metre, and this implies a particular order and arrangement of words. It differs in the poetry of Wordsworth himself. Metre medicates the whole atmosphere, and the language of poetry is bound to differ from that of prose. Coleridge concludes that there is and there ought to be an essential difference between the language of prose and the language of metrical compositions, that is, poetry.
- (iii) The use of metre is as artificial as the use of poetic diction and if one is allowed, it is absurd to forbid the use of the other; both are equally good sources of poetic pleasure.

T. S. Eliot criticized Wordsworth for not applying his theory in all of his poems. Eliot argues that poems such as “Intimation”, “Tintern Abbey”, “Ode to Duty”, “Laodamia” do not follow Wordsworth’s prescription about the language, and language in these poems is richer and more sophisticated than those of the rustic people. They are not written in a selection of language really used by common rustic men.

Wordsworth and Coleridge: Two Legends, one Battlefield:

Although, Wordsworth’s theory of diction has its weaknesses, yet it has its significance too. Wordsworth puts an end to the use of false poetic diction, “the worst of all the diseases which has afflicted English poetry”¹. He relieved poetry of an artificial and unnatural diction through which it had lived its unnatural life of hot-houses for over a hundred years. He certainly did much to bring the language of poetry to its natural beauty and simplicity. Most importantly, Wordsworth’s theory was the first significant step for ‘criticism’ in becoming a ‘genre’ or a field of specialization.

William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote together in their early lives. It was in 1796 that they frequently sat together, and out of their mutual discussion arose the various theories which Wordsworth embodied in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, and which he tried to put into practice in the poems. Coleridge claimed credit of these theories and said they were half the child of its brain. Later on, his views underwent a change, he no longer agreed with Wordsworth’s theories, and criticized them in chapter XVII and XVIII of the *Biographia Literaria*.

In his *Preface*, Wordsworth showed his concern about three major corners, (a) choice of rustic life, (b) choice of rustic language, and (c) diction of poetry. All of these have been objects of Coleridge’s censure. As regarding the first statement, the choice of rustic life and characters, Coleridge points out that not all of Wordsworth’s characters are chosen from low or rustic life. Characters in the poems like “Ruth”, “Michael”, “The Brothers” are not rustic in the usual acceptance of these words. Besides, their language and sentiments do not necessarily arise from their abode or occupation. They are attributable to causes which would result in similar sentiments and language, even if these characters were living in a different place and carrying on different occupations. Two causes are primarily there— (a) independence which raises a man

above servility, and frugal life, and industrious domestic life; and (b) a solid religious education which makes a man well-versed in the *Bible* and other holy books to the exclusion of other books. The admirable qualities we notice in the language and sentiments of Wordsworth's characters result from these two causes, and not from their rural life and occupation, or their contemplation of Nature, even if they lived in a city, they are away from Nature. They would have similar sentiments and similar language, if they were subject to the two causes mentioned by Wordsworth. In the opinion of Coleridge, a man will not be benefitted from life in rural solitudes, unless he has (a) natural sensibility, and (b) suitable education. In the absence of these advantages in rural conditions the mind hardens and a man grows 'selfish, sensual, gross, and hard-hearted'. Coleridge agrees with Aristotle's view that the characters of poetry must be universal and typical. They must represent some particular class, as well as general human nature. He writes—

poetry is essentially ideal, that it avoids and excludes all accident : that its apparent individualities of rank, character or occupation must be representatives of a class; and that the persons of poetry must be clothed with generic attributes, with common attributes of the class; not with such as one gifted individual might possibly possess, but such as from his situation it is most probably beforehand that he would possess.²

Wordsworth's characters are representatives in this sense.

Regarding the second statement of Wordsworth, Coleridge objects to the view that the best language is derived from the objects with which the rustics communicate. First, communication with an object implies reflection on it, and the richness of vocabulary arises from such reflection. Now, the rural conditions of life do not require any reflection, hence the vocabulary of the rustics is poor. They can express only the barest facts of Nature, and not the ideas and thoughts, and universal laws which result from reflection on such facts. Secondly, the best part of a man's language does not result merely from the communication with Nature, but from education, from the mind's dwelling on noble thoughts and ideals of the master minds of humanity. Whatever noble and poetic phrases, words and arrangement of words the rustic people use, are derived not from Nature, but from repeated listening to the *Bible* and other sermons of the holy preachers.

Coming to a detailed consideration of Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction, he takes up his statements one by one, and demonstrates that his views are not justified aptly. Wordsworth asserts that the language of poetry is 'a selection of real language of man' and 'the very language of man'; and that there was hardly any clash between the language of prose and that of verse. Coleridge reports, "Every man's language varies, according to the extent of his knowledge, the activity of his faculties, and the depth or quickness of his feelings. Every man's language has, first, its individualities; secondly, the common properties of the class to which he belongs; and thirdly, words and phrases of *universal* use."³ He also says "No two men of the same class or of different classes speak alike, although both use words and phrases common to them all, because in the one case their natures are different and on the other their classes are different."⁴

This applies much to the language of the rustics, as to that of the men of towns. In both cases, the language varies from person to person, class to class, and place to place. Thus, which of these varieties of language, Coleridge asks, is the real language of men? Each, he replies, has to be purged of its uncommon or accidental features (such as those picked up from family, profession, or locality) before it can become the ordinary language of men. "Omit the peculiarities of each, and the result of course, must be common to all. And, assuredly, the omissions and changes to be made in the language of rustics, before it could be transferred to any species of poem, except the drama or other professed imitation, are at least as numerous and weighty as would be required in adapting to the same purpose the ordinary language of tradesmen and manufacturers."⁵ He declares, 'such a language alone has a universal appeal'. To Wordsworth's contention that there is no essential difference between the language of poetry and that of prose, Coleridge criticizes that there is, and there ought to be, an essential difference between the language of poetry and that of prose. The language of poetry differs from that of prose in the same way in which the language of prose differs, and ought to differ from language of conversation, and as reading differs, from talking. Coleridge gives a number of reasons in support of his view. Firstly, language is both matter of words and the arrangement of those words. Now, words, both in prose and poetry, may be the same, but their arrangements are different. The difference arises from the fact that poetry uses metres, and metres require a different arrangement of words. As Coleridge has already shown, metre is not merely superficial decoration, but an essential, organic part of a poem. Hence, there is bound to be an essential difference between the language, i. e., the arrangements of words, of poetry and of prose.

Conclusion:

Biographia Literaria, originally planned as *Autobiographia Literaria or Sketches of My Literary life and Opinions* is the celebrated and canonical critical work by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The autobiographical thread in the work is slender. Besides a criticism of Wordsworth's poetry, it contains a discussion of the philosophy of Kant, Fichte and Schelling. These German philosophers created tremendous influence in Coleridge's mind. He said that Kant had at once invigorated and disciplined his understanding. He said, "In Schelling... I first found a genial coincidence with much that had foiled out for myself, and a powerful assistance in that I had yet to do."⁶ Coleridge was deeply indebted to them for his theory of imagination and critical philosophy. At the end of Chapter XV of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge praises Shakespeare highly and brings out a comparison between him and Milton. Hence, *Biographia Literaria* is also partly important for Coleridge's analysis of and approach to Shakespeare. This work is significant to show Coleridge as a descriptive as well as impressionistic critic. No work before this in English had brought such mental breadth to the discussion of aesthetic values. Over all, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* was another milestone of 'criticism' in becoming a 'genre'.

References:

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