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Wordsworth's Poetical Theory: An Explanation and Defense

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WORDSORTH'S POETICAL THEORY:
AN EXPLANATION AND DEFENSE

BY

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth, in the Preface he prefixed to his 1800 edition of the Lyrical Ballads, set down, at some length, his own personal theory of poetry. The Preface falls into two parts. In the first Wordsworth treats only the lyrical ballad, but in the second part he expands his treatment to poetry in general to show that the lyrical ballad did fall within the genus of poetry, and to prove, therefore, that it was a valid form of poetry.

Wordsworth, it appears, was never exactly willing to play the critic. He perhaps would never have written the Preface if he had not been urged to it by his friend Coleridge, with whom he had worked out the theory of the Lyrical Ballads and collaborated in the composition of them. Marjorie Latta Barstow, in her Wordsworth's Theory of Poetic Diction, has a reference to a manuscript in the possession of Mr. T. Norton Longman in which a contemporary of Wordsworth records that the Preface was given to Coleridge after it was completed and corrected by him. Yet

2 Ibid.
Coleridge, in 1817, when he came to treat Wordsworth's poetry and poetic theory, said that on certain points he did not agree with the theory of the Preface; he proceeds not only to criticise the theory, but also Wordsworth's poetic composition, claiming quite pedantically that the theory was not carried out in the greater part of his poetry. Coleridge adds that the few instances in which the theory was followed resulted in bad poetry.

The whole Wordsworth-Coleridge Controversy presents a number of problems. Why, for instance, this sudden change in attitude of Coleridge that he should later condemn what he had earlier urged to be written and approved of when written? Then there is the problem of Wordsworth's poetic theory and practice. Is there such a wide discrepancy between the two as Coleridge would have us believe? And another problem that arises is, what of the theory itself? Is it true? Is it sound? Can it stand by itself? Is it really weak in those places at which Coleridge directs his criticism? All these problems together are, of course, too much for a single thesis. Only one can be handled adequately. Consequently, the present thesis limits itself at the beginning to a treatment of the last problem, the validity of Wordsworth's poetical theory as set forth in his Preface to the Lyrical Ballads.
This thesis, stated in form, is worded thus: the poetical theory of Wordsworth as set forth in his Preface to the Lyrical Ballads is a valid poetical theory; therefore, the objections brought against it by Coleridge are invalid.

Here, too, in this introduction, something should be said of the scope of this thesis. It aims, primarily, at attempting a correct interpretation of Wordsworth's poetical theory. To do this—since one of the most noted and, by the way, most famous characteristics of his theory is revolt—it will be necessary to give a brief history of the poetic tradition Wordsworth was breaking away from; and then become more specific and give examples of the "inane phraseology" of the Neo-Classical period and contrast them finally with examples of the simple diction Wordsworth wished to achieve in his new poetry.

After this, the theory itself will be explained, interpreted, and an attempt made to prove that the poetic truths, found in the fundamental passions common to all men, were the true objects of Wordsworth's poetry, not "low and rustic life" as is so often believed. Low and rustic life as such was only chosen by the poet because in that stratum of society these fundamental passions which make up the body of poetic truth could be found in their truest and most perfect state. Secondly, it will be shown that the speech of common men was not to be
the diction of this new poetry, but their speech purified from whatever might give pain or excite disgust. Such a selection was to result in a *lingua communis*, a language that could be understood by all classes of society and that would be in harmony with the diction of the great poets of the English tradition, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton.

Finally, when all this has been established, the objections of Coleridge against the theory on the points of the rustic as a poetic subject, and the speech of the common man as a poetic diction, will be taken up and explained. Such answers will be given to these objections as will, it is hoped, help toward a more favorable interpretation of Wordsworth’s theory.

In the *Preface*, Wordsworth asserts that there is no real essential distinction between the language of prose and poetry. In revolt against the poetic diction of the Neo-Classical period, Wordsworth knew that his diction would become a good deal like the diction of prose. Therefore, it was to his advantage to show that the media of prose and poetry, in their essence, were alike. Coleridge objected to this assertion, and as a great deal has been made of this dispute in the past, a special chapter will be given to a consideration of this problem at the end of this thesis.
CHAPTER II

THE INANE PHRASEOLOGY

In his appendix to the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth observes that there are two distinct periods in the development of a nation's poetry. In point of time, one is early, or the period of beginning, the other is late. The first is a period of imagination and natural spontaneity in poetic thought and diction; the second is mechanical, a period in which poets rather artificially adapt the poetic diction of their predecessors to their own poetic emotions.

The first poets of a nation write generally "from passions excited by real events; they write naturally and as men, in a selection of language really used by men." They observe life and nature, the various conflicts and harmonies between man and man, or between man and woman. When they come to write their poetry, their inspiration is their own feelings, either real or vicarious. When they come to give expression to their feelings, they express them in the language ordinary men use everyday. If a poet wrote of love, he expressed it in the words which man and maid would use to express it; or, if he wrote of anger, he

2 Ibid., 943.
would use the words a man would use in rage. Figures were used in poetic composition in this period, but they were genuine because struck in the very fire of the poet's inspiration. They flowed naturally from the feeling and so were always in proportion with it.

But quite naturally these figures and the imposition of meter tended to set the language the poet used apart from the language spoken by men, though both in their inception were the same. Later poets found a body of poetry ready for their admiration and also for their emulation. Poetry, they observed, possessed certain sharply delineated characteristics: meter, figure, a common language which had lost its commonness and become dignified by poetic use. These they falsely thought to be the true stuff of poetry, materials a poet ought to use. These later poets, so deceived, but wishing still to emulate the achievements of their predecessors and write as good or better poetry, began to borrow figures and words which possessed a poetic aura and to adapt these mechanically to their own poetic feelings and emotions. Certain figures became traditionally accepted as expressing certain feelings. The sun was always to blush at the appearance of a beautiful woman. The sea became a watery plain or a watery waste. Poetry readers, too, accepted the practice and taught themselves to be pleased and

3 Ibid.
take pleasure in such expressions. Critics, who usually formulate their theories on the practices of poets, at last came forward with a decree that the language of poetry was sui generis, and not the language of the vulgari at all.

This abuse led to certain definite defects in poetry. Original experience and inspiration were discarded. Poets did not have to go to the country for descriptive phrases for scenery, landscape, and the like; nor did they have to study men to learn their subject. All this had been done for them by their predecessors. They had books full of appropriate figures for rural scenery; these same books told them what subjects were to be written about in poetry. They were able to write their pastorals at their rooms in the city, among a couterie of friends, without even having gone out to look at a landscape. Consequently, there is a note of falsity in their poetry. Natural phenomenon are incorrectly described. Figures are improperly adapted to feelings, often are exaggerated and result in bombast. But one poet could hardly hope to borrow a figure from another poet to express properly what he himself felt. To do this a figure must rise spontaneously out of the feeling itself. These later poets, as Coleridge says, had sacrificed both head and heart of their subject matter to a gauzy array of

4 Ibid.
poetic phrases.

To illustrate the difference between the early poetic diction and the later, Wordsworth cites Proverbs, Chap. vi, and Dr. Johnson's paraphrase of it in verse:

"Go to the Ant, thou Sluggard, consider her ways and be wise: which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gath­ereth her food in the harvest. How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep. So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man."

Now from this original pass to what Wordsworth calls Dr. Johnson's "Hubbub of words!:

Turn on the prudent Ant thy heedless eyes
Observe her labors, Sluggard, and be wise.
No stern command, no monitory voice,
Prescribes her duties, or directs her choice;
Yet, timely provident, she hastes away
To snatch the blessings of a plenteous day;
When the fruitful Summer loads the teeming plain,
She crops the harvest, and she stores the grain.
How long shall sloth usurp thy useless hours,
Unnerve thy vigour, and enchain thy powers?
While artful shades thy downy couch enclose,
And soft solicitation courts repose.

6 Wordsworth, op. cit., 943
Amidst the drowsy charms of dull delight,
Year chases year with unremitted flight.
Till Want now following, fraudulent and slow,
Shall sprint to seize thee, like an ambush'd foe.

These same two periods can be pointed out in the history of English poetry. Miss Barstow says the divisions given by Wordsworth and Coleridge for the first period, "The age of our elder poets," runs from Chaucer to Dryden; and the second, "modern times," runs from Dryden to Wordsworth. To the first period belong Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton, and a few minor poets of note, Daniels, Sidney, and others. In the second period are Dryden, Pope, and Waller, principally. Also, as lesser figures, Gray, Goldsmith, Cowper and Collins should be mentioned. Burns and Blake, though coming during this period, are in a class by themselves and will not enter into this consideration at all.

No one who knows Chaucer will dispute his right to a place among the "elder poets." His observation was true, almost too true at times; he wrote about what he felt or experienced, either actually or vicariously, not about thoughts or emotions that were held to be poetic. His medium was the language spoken by common men. "With a well developed literary and courtly medium of French at his command, he had turned to the mongrel vernacular, the real language of his countrymen, and had found an adequate poetic diction in a selection from
that." Spenser did much the same thing. He followed the method of Chaucer and labored to restore a number of natural English words that had been a long time out of usage. As to the usage of common speech as the language of poetry, Spenser, in the person of E. K., has this to say: "It is shameful that his countrymen have so base and bastard judgment of their own natural speech which together with their nurses milk they have sucked, that they would not labor to garnish and beautify it by a development of its native resources." Shakespeare, perhaps, in the language he used in his plays came closer to the ideal than Spenser; at least he omitted many of the archaisms thus bringing his language closer to the quality of that actually in use in his day. And Milton says: "I applied myself to that resolution which Aristotle followed against the persuasion of Bembo to fix all the industry and art I could unite to the adorning of my native tongue; not to make verbal curiosities the end...but to be an interpreter and relater of the best and sagest things among mine own citizens throughout this island in the mother dialect."

7 Barstowe, op. cit., 4.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 5.
10 Ibid., 18.
The first period ends with Dryden and the next begins with him. With him, too, are to be considered Waller and Pope. Nor is it to be supposed that because these poets are placed in the second period the whole of their poetry consists in figures and poetic phrases borrowed from the elder poets. Such was not exactly the case, though there was some borrowing. Nor again is it these poets specifically that Wordsworth accused of using an "inane phraseology." There is much in the poetry of these men which is truly genuine. Wordsworth would be among the first to recognize and acclaim it. Still in these poets—and this is the point that should not be lost sight of—there are certain defects which were seized upon by their followers and imitated in their own poetic practice until their usage did result in the pronouncement of a strict canon regarding poetic diction.

To understand fully the "inane phraseology" of the late eighteenth century some consideration must be given to these faults in Dryden, Waller, and Pope which caused it. Listed categorically they are: 1) an ignorance or an indifference to natural phenomena; 2) the use of personifications of abstract ideas; 3) the use of elegancies and flowers of speech; 4) the making of natural beauty subservient to the beauty of a lady or the glory of a nobleman, or to make natural beauty the result of some lady's physical beauty; 5) the use of antithesis and the heroic couplet.
1) The ignorance of or indifference to natural phenomena, combined with the artistic ambition to do better what poets before them had done.

Men in general are interested in natural beauty. Because of this it has always held an important place in poetry. The sun, the stars, the hills, the flowers have formed a kind of natural background for all poetry. The poets of the first period associated closely with nature, but their successors in the second period were city dwellers and knew nature only at second hand. Often they were tricked into a false description, as for instance in the passage that follows:

All things are hushed as Nature's self lay dead;
The mountains seem to nod the drowsy head.
The little birds in dreams their songs repeat,
And sleeping flowers beneath the night dews sweat.
Even Lust and Envy sleep; yet Love denies
Rest to my soul, and slumber to my eyes. 12

On the whole this description is good. The language is simple, concrete, not too far removed from the speech of common men. But note the second verse, "The mountains nodding their drowsy heads": No one who has ever seen a mountain in the twilight or in the half-light of the stars could enjoy it. It is not

11 Barstow, 40.
true. The mountains are massive, majestic, permanent. Though all the rest of nature should sleep, one feels sure that the mountains would always hold their heads erect and watchful.

2) The use of personifications of abstract ideas as an ordinary device to elevate poetic style.

This usage is familiar to poetry readers. An abstract idea, say humility or pride, is printed with capital letters instead of with small letters. The purpose is to remove it from the realm of abstraction by changing it from an idea to a person or deity. Perhaps the practice in English poetry is a carry-over from the Greeks whose poets personified love and war, making them Venus and Mars, a goddess and a god; they did the same with many other abstractions. As a device, it is legitimate and quite effective when its use arises spontaneously. But to use it arbitrarily results only in abuse. In the poetry of this period it had become an abuse. In the lines of Dryden quoted above there are three instances of this personification:

Even Lust and Envy sleep; yet Love
denies
Rest to my soul, and slumber to my eyes.

13 Wordsworth, op. cit., 936.
It is not the way an ordinary man would talk, so Wordsworth would argue. Ordinarily a man would say: "My flesh desires nothing, I am envious of no one, yet because I am in love I cannot sleep," or some such thing as this. Perhaps such an expression would be better poetry. It would keep poetry in the company of flesh and blood men at least.

3) The use of elegancies and flowers of speech.

A poet wishing to describe an object will do so by observing some new detail, or by seeing a frequently mentioned detail in a new way. Dryden and those who followed him, because of their lack of observation, fell into the habit of describing by using synonyms for the object observed. For instance, Wordsworth, wishing to describe the ocean, writes:

The sea who bears her bosom to the moon,

which is a line of good poetry. Dryden, though, perhaps because he had never looked very closely at the ocean, called it a "Watery desert," and "a watery plain." Wordsworth shows us the ocean in an entirely new aspect; Dryden's "watery" only tells us something about the ocean we have known all along: it is water. He merely used a synonym. He called fish the "finny tribe," which tells nothing new about fish. When he varies the

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Barstowc, 44.
expression to "scaly tribe," he still tells nothing new; he merely hints at his own cleverness.

One of these elegancies, once coined, was used repeatedly by the poet who coined it and was later taken over and used by his successors. Miss Barstowe lists the various usages of the word "watery" which occur in Dryden. Because they are of interest a few of them will be quoted here. For the ocean he has "watery deep," "watery way," "watery reign." The shore is a "watery brink," a "watery strand." Fish are a "watery line," or a "watery race." Sea-birds are "water fowl." The launching of a ship is a "watery war." Streams are "watery floods." Waves are "watery ranks."

4) Making natural beauty and power subservient to the glory of some fair lady or powerful nobleman, or, twisting it a bit, making the cause of natural beauty the beauty of some man or woman.

This usage has come to be popularly known by the tag Ruskin fixed to it, the pathetic fallacy. Nature is made to sympathize with or enter into the feelings of men and woman. A common instance is Nature being made to feel and express

17 Ibid., 44.
18 Ibid., 45.
grief at the death of a beautiful woman or a great man. The
lily drops its head, birds their wings, the heavens weep, the
brows of the hills are furrowed by the heaven's tears. Occasion-
ally, when a woman remarkable for her beauty appears, the
sun is forced to blush and take his light to another land.
Miss Barstowe quotes these lines as being characteristic:

In praising Chloris, moons, and stars, and skies,
Are quickly made to match her face and eyes--
And gold and rubies, with as little care,
To fit the color of her lips and hair;
And, mixing suns, and flowers, and pearls and stones,
Make them serve all complexions at once.

A little reflection on such extravagances of speech will
reveal an intensity of feeling which did not exist in the poet.
He was not swept away with passion, but merely working out
verses with calculation. A beautiful woman or a nobleman were
traditional poetry props. The poet chose one or the other as
a subject and then, supposing he chose the lady, would cast
about him for figures and devices to make her beauty splendid.
Making her beauty exceed that of Nature was an easy device,
effective, and always at hand. Waller, in lines written on
his Dorthea, has her so admired by the flowers that:

19 Ibid., 85.
If she sit down, with tops all tow'r'd her bow'd,
They round about her into arbours crowd:
Or if she walks in even ranks they stand,
Like some well marshalled and obsequious band.

5) The use of antithesis and the heroic couplet. This practice refers especially to the poetry of Pope.

Coleridge says that this sort of poetry has a merit of its own which consists in a just and acute observation of men in an artificial state of society; but he also adds that it has a fault: it shows, because of its displays of wit and logic, no real sympathy with human nature. Even in narrative poems, such as the "Rape of the Lock," "a point is looked for at the end of each second line, and the whole was as it were a sorites, or, if I may exchange a logical for a grammatical metaphor, a conjunction disjunctive, of epigrams....They sacrificed the passion and passionate flow of poetry to the subtilities of the intellect, and to the starts of wit....They sacrificed the heart to the head."

Here is a well known passage from Pope's "Eleisa to Abelard" which will illustrate the point:

20 Ibid., 51.
21 Coleridge, op. cit., 15.
How happy is the blameless Vestal's lot:
A world forgetting, by the world forgot:
Eternal sunshine on the spotless mind:
Each prayer accepted, and each wish resigned;
Labor and rest that equal periods keep;
Obedient slumbers that can wake and weep;
Desires composed, affections ever even;
Tears that delight, and sighs that wait to
Heaven.

It is Miss Barstowe who remarks on Pope's use of antithesis. The lines quoted above in italics are instances of this. The practice consists, principally, in balancing one half of the line against the other: the "world forgetting" is balanced off by the "world forgot." Certainly, this sort of thing has its place, but its repeated use does tend towards artificiality; it is not the way men ordinarily speak.

Such, then, were the defects in the poetry of Dryden, Waller, and Pope which were seized upon by their successors and repeatedly imitated until a diction of "inane phraseology" was produced as the medium for poetry. Things had come to such a pass in the eighteenth century that a diction was decreed to exist which was to be used only in the writing of poetry, implying that it was different from the language of prose. Dr. Johnsons sums up the theory of poetic diction in this way:

Language is the dress of thought; and as the noblest actions or the most graceful action
would be degraded and obscured by a garb appropriated to the gross employments of rustics and mechanics, so the most heroic sentiments would lose their efficacy, and the most splendid ideas drop their magnificence, if they are conveyed by words used only upon low and trivial occasions, debased by vulgar mouths, and contaminated by the inelegant applications. Truth is indeed always truth, and reason is always reason; they have an intrinsic and unalterable value, and constitute that intellectual gold which defies destruction; but gold may be so concealed in baser matter that only a chemist can recover it; sense may be so hidden in unrefined and plebeian words that none but philosophers can distinguish it.

There was, therefore, before the time of Dryden no poetical diction; no system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestic use, and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular arts. Words too familiar or too remote defeat the purpose of the poet. From those sounds which we hear on small or on coarse occasions we do not easily receive strong impressions or delightful images; and words to which we are nearly strangers whenever they occur, draw that attention of the mind to themselves which they should transmit to things. Those happy combinations of words which distinguish poetry from prose had rarely been attempted; we had few elegancies or flowers of speech.  

From reading these two passages of Dr. Johnson's it is not hard to see how far poets of the eighteenth century had wandered from the ideal set up by Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton.

23 Ibid., 420.
Chaucer had turned to the mongrel vernacular of his day, and found a poetic medium in a selection of language from it. Spenser's aim had been to "garnish and beautify" the native tongue of his countrymen which they had sucked in together with their nurses' milk. Milton had united all his art and industry to adorn his native tongue. But these later poets thought ordinary speech too base for poetry, the ordinary language of artisans, mechanics, men of rank and affairs. They concentrated only on the elegancies of diction in their poetry.

It only remains now to show the state of poetic diction in 1796 and in 1797, the years in which Wordsworth began to write his poetry. It is necessary, too, to show it, if the reform Wordsworth introduced is to be understood. Miss Barstowe gives several selections from the poetry of these years which were printed in the Monthly Magazine. They show that the theory as expressed by Dr. Johnson was being religiously followed. These selections are important, more so than others, because they are not included in anthologies of eighteenth century poetry, and because they were most probably read by Wordsworth and directly influenced his reform. Because of all this they will be quoted here.

24 Barstowe, 62, 63.
1

For thee the fields their flowery carpet spread,
And smiling Ocean smooths his wavy bed;
A purer glow the kindling poles display,
Robed in bright effluence of ethereal day,
When through her portals burst the gaudy spring,
And genial Zephyr waves his balmy wing.
First the gay songsters of the feather'd train
Feel thy keen arrows thrill in every vein.

2

Oh, far removed from my retreat
Be Avice and Ambition's feet!
Give me, unconscious of their power,
To taste the peaceful, social hour.
Give me, beneath the branching vine,
The woodbine sweet, or eglantine,
When evening sheds its balmy dews,
To court the chaste, inspiring Muse.

3

See, fairest of the nympha that play
In vernal meadows, blooming May
Comes tripping o'er the plain.
Lo! All the gay, the genial powers
That deck the woods or tend the flowers
Compose her smiling train.

4

Pale visitant of balmy spring,
Joy of the new-born year,
Thou bidst young hope new plume his wing
Soon as thy buds appear.
While o'er the incense-breathing sky
The tepid hours just dare to fly,
And vainly woo the chilling breeze...
An analysis of these selections shows that they are made up of phrases which were pointed out earlier in this chapter as the particular faults of the Neo-Classic poets. In number one, for instance, there is the indifference to natural phenomena; the poet is content to use the inanities of the older poets, such as "flowery carpet," and "eternal day," "genial Zephyr," etc. In number two there is the use of personifications, "Avrice," "Ambition," and "Muse." In number one also and in number three, there are instances of the use of elegancies and poetic flowers, "wavy bed," "balmy spring," and "feather'd train." Still again in number three can be instanced the use of making nature subservient to the beauty of woman, a nymph, but woman all the same:

Lo! All the gay, the genial powers
That deck the woods or tend the flowers
Compose her smiling train.

Again in number one is an instance of the heroic couplet, possessing the characteristic "bump" at the end of each second line. A remark of Coleridge's will sum the whole process up nicely. Modern poets, he says, have sacrificed the true stuff of poetry to the "glare and glitter of a perpetual, yet broken and heterogeneous imagery, or rather to an amphibious something, made up, half of image and half of abstract meaning."  

25 Coleridge, II, 15.
How far removed the poetry of Wordsworth's day was from the pristine simplicity of the "elder poets" is shown by James Beattie, who gives a few simple lines from "Othello" and then translates them into the phraseology of the eighteenth century:

My mother had a maid call'd barbara;  
She was in love, and he she loved proved mad,  
And did forsake her. She had a song of Willow;  
And old thing it was...

In the eighteenth century it would probably have been written thus:

Even now, sad memory to my thought recalls  
The nymph Dione, who with pious care,  
My muched-loved mother, in my vernal years,  
Attended; blooming was the maiden's form,  
And on her brow Discretion sat, and on  
Her rosy cheeks a thousand Graces played.  
O! Luckless was the day, when Cupid's dart  
Shot from a swain's alluring eye  
First thrilled with pleasing pangs her throbbing breast!

...From morn to dewy eve,  
From eve till rosy-finger'd morn appeared,  
In a sad song, a song of ancient days,  
Warbling her wild woe to the pitying winds,  
She sat: the weeping willow was her theme,  
and well the theme accorded with her woe, etc.

26 These two quotations are given as a footnote in James Beattie's *William Wordsworth, His Doctrine and Art in their Historical Relations*, Wisconsin University Press, Madison, 1922, 52.
Observe the simplicity of Shakespeare and contrast it with the bombast of the translation. Shakespeare's language is the language men speak everyday in common conversation. There is proportion between it and the feeling expressed because the language arise spontaneously out of the feelings. In the translation the language is exaggerated; it far outdoes the feeling. The true stuff of poetry has been cast aside for an artificial drapery.

Wordsworth's poetic theory was probably not so much a revolt as it was a return to the simple diction of the "elder poets," Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton, which they had found in a selection from the language of real men. In the following selection from Wordsworth's "Lines Composed Above Tintern Abbey," which is thought to exemplify his object, there is the same simpliceness and naturalness of diction that there is in Chaucer or Shakespeare:

The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves 'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see These hedges-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke Sent up, in silence, from among the trees...
CHAPTER III

POETIC PRINCIPLES IN THE PREFACE

In 1800, when Wordsworth published the second edition of his *Lyrical Ballads*, he included his famous *Preface*, which has become one of the accepted poetical doctrines in the English literary tradition. It was both a poetical theory and an apology for his own poetical practice. In it he stated that it was his purpose to break away from the preceding literary tradition of poetry which treated only fixed and accepted ideas in a diction that had itself become fixed and, from over-use, quite hackneyed and worn out. Instead of these over-worked ideas and the conventional diction in which they were expressed he intended to write poetry about low and rustic life in the very language spoken by common men. Not only did he attempt to justify this theory as applicable to a certain class of poetry, but he seemed to imply, too, that this doctrine would be followed out in all of his poetry, and should be followed out in all poetry.

The strange thing about all this is that when writing his poetry Wordsworth seems to have abandoned his theory altogether. His critics, the most formidable of whom was Coleridge, have all noted the discrepancy, or even the contradiction, between the
language of his theory (the language of rustics from low life) and the all but sublime subject matter and diction of his poetry. They have concluded that he never followed out his theory. They have objected to the wideness of its scope, and while admitting its validity if applied to an unimportant and limited genre of poetry, energetically denied its universal application to all types of poetry.

Still, the rub remains. Wordsworth's genius ranks him high among the English poets. Matthew Arnold goes so far as to say that he was one of the best poets of all times. Certainly, then, Wordsworth knew well what he was about when he wrote his Preface. Or, as might be supposed to have happened, had he set his theory down in the rash exuberance of his youth, he would have, when he became older and more mature in thought, corrected himself and set down his true poetic doctrines. This he never did. What he had written in 1815 he let stand. The Preface was his poetic theory. Yet in practice he seems never to have applied his principles. In scope it still seems much too particular to apply to all poetry. Coleridge says:

...so groundless does this system appear on a close examination, and so strange and overwhelming 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 common laws of interpretation, they seem to bear.

In the very next sentence Coleridge asks the question which must occur to every critic of Wordsworth: "What then did he mean?"

Is it possible that Wordsworth's Preface has been misunderstood? Can it be so interpreted as to show that the principles he laid down were followed out in the writing of his own poetry, and that these same principles are true when applied to poetry in general? Of course there is always this possibility, and in the case of a poet of the reputation which Wordsworth enjoys it seems that it is very probable. In fact, in this particular case, it seems wiser to say that Wordsworth has been misunderstood than to say that he never in practice, or in a few instances only and those poor ones, followed out his theory; or, what is even worse, to go on to say that regarding poetry in general his theory is not true. But, then, what did Wordsworth mean?

In the past the emphasis, in the interpreting the Preface, has always been misplaced. It has been put on the words: "low and rustic life," when in all justice it ought to have been put

--- Coleridge, op. cit., II, 8. ---
Poetic truth, not low and rustic life, was ever Wordsworth's real object, as can be shown from various passages in the Preface. Rustic life was only chosen because in that state Wordsworth thought poetic truth could be found in its most perfect form and be more easily contemplated by the poet. For, by poetic truth Wordsworth understood the elemental feelings and passions of human nature, "the beautiful and permanent forms of nature." He says: "poetry's object is truth, not individual and local, but general and operative not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion." In other places he speaks of poetic truth as the "beauty of the universe," "the native and naked dignity of man," "man and nature essentially adapted to each other and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature." Again he says, "it is the knowledge that cleaves to us as a necessary part of our existence, our natural and unalienable inheritance." Scientific truth is an accidental acquisition, but poetical truth is a knowledge of human nature which everyone has, the poet perhaps in a higher degree; it is this which connects us with our fellow-beings and leads us to sympathize with them. It is because of this that the poet sings "a song in which all

3 Wordsworth, op. cit., 935.
4 Ibid., 938.
human beings join...and rejoice because in the presence of truth which is their visible and hourly companion."

Poetic truth, then, as a body of knowledge, consists in the fundamental passions and feelings of human nature, a knowledge which is universal and common to all mankind. Now these passions and feelings, like human nature from which they spring, grow to maturity and in their growth are subject to the influences of environment. It is quite possible that society and education of the type which tends to sophistication can impair and obscure the natural beauty of these passions and feelings. It was Wordsworth's conviction that this had happened. It was also his conviction that the poets of his day, in adhering to the artifice of set poetic ideas and diction, had gotten away from poetic truth. And that is why he chose low and rustic life. He was convinced that these elemental passions and feelings in this natural state existed more perfectly and more beautifully. Low and rustic life as such was never Wordsworth's real object. He tells us:

Humble 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 coexist 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

Since his object was poetic truth in its pristine simplicity, the old poetic medium or the traditional diction would not serve his purpose. It would never do to clothe these simple truths in the ornate diction of the Neo-Classic poets. He needed a new medium. Where was he to look for it? Where it could best be found, in the language of the common man. Because the elemental human passions existed in this class of people in a pure and simple state, Wordsworth felt that the language they themselves used to express their feelings, to describe their passions, would best suit his purpose. He says:

The language, too, of these men has been adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best parts of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. Accord-

6 Ibid., 935.
ingly, such a language, arising out of the repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophic language than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who think that they are conferring honor upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes...

In the above quotation it is important to observe that Wordsworth says this language will be "purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust." He did not intend to use the language of rustic men as it is generally understood. He did not intend to write in a dialect, nor to use the vulgarisms or the solecisms usually found in rustic speech. It was clearly his intention to purify his language from all dialect and colloquialisms which would tend to make his diction regional. And by doing this he produced a diction, a **lingua communis**, made up of words that would be such as might be used and understood by all men of all types of society wherever the English language was spoken.

Nor, on the other hand, is it to be thought that because of this selection, Wordsworth's poetic diction was to be quite plain, have no figures or metaphors, and be much like the medium employed in the writing of prose. The fear of becoming prosaic did not trouble him very much. He says:

7 Ibid.
A large part of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the meter, be, in no respect, different from that of good prose, but likewise 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. ⁸

This problem will be taken up more in detail in a later chapter. But still it ought to be pointed out here that Wordsworth intended to use figures and metaphors. "If the poet's subject be judiciously chosen," he says, "it will naturally, and upon fit occasion, lead him to passions the language of which...must necessarily be dignified, variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures." This is what Wordsworth intended his poetic medium to be: the language of the common man (first of all), but purified from the defects of dialect and colloquialisms, and dignified and variegated by a judicious use of figures that arise naturally out of the passion of the poet's subject.

What is interesting about the Preface is that Wordsworth, after setting down the object of his poetry as regards subject matter and medium of expression, turns next to a justification of his principles by an analysis of the poet. To give his analysis of the poet here is to reapeat a good bit of what has already been said, but even so it will not be without a purpose,

⁸ Ibid., 936.
⁹ Ibid., 938.
as it will prove, from internal evidence, that the interpretation of his theory given above is legitimate.

He asks first, "What is meant by the word poet?" "What is a poet?" "To whom does he address himself?" He is a man, and like any other man, has feelings and volitions and passions which belong to human nature. He differs from the rest of men in this that his knowledge of human nature is deeper and more complete. He delights more than other men in his own passions and volitions, and rejoices at the spirit of life within him. He likes to contemplate similar actions in his fellows and to draw conclusions. His also is the ability to sympathize with things absent as well as present. He can conjure up in himself passions like those produced by real events. And he has the power of giving expression in language to those thoughts and feelings which by his own choice arise in his own mind without external excitement. When he writes, he writes not for himself or for other poets, but for men.

Such is the poet, such is his work. He is to imitate human passions produced voluntarily within himself and express them in the medium of language for the perusal of all men. Naturally, he would want his passions and feelings, which he was to imitate, to approach as closely as they possibly could to

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Ibid., 937, 938.
the passions and feelings of all men. This he could do by a studied contemplation of his fellows. But he could go further. He could seek out those men especially in whom these passions could be best and most easily contemplated. And who were they? They were the men who lived in low and rustic life. In the imitation of human passions the poet has a difficulty; he has to make the part he imitates conform to the whole. If he is not careful his imitation will be rather mechanical when compared to the natural spontaneity of these same actions and passions in real life. Therefore, his imitation will be more natural, more graceful, if he can bring his own feelings close to those of men who live in low and rustic life because of the simplicity of their feelings. The poet, though, will not copy slavishly; he will select; he will remove what otherwise would be painful or excite disgust in his subject matter.

Having found his object, poetic truth, or the elemental passions of human nature, the poet is next confronted with the problem of finding, on all occasions, a language in which to express or embody these forms which is exquisitely fitted for it and is such as the passions themselves suggest. What to do? Is the poet to be a mere translator, substituting excellencies of another kind for those which are unattainable by himself? That is, is the poet to clothe these forms in the usual figures and phrases which have become accepted as poetic diction, be-
cause he himself is unable to fashion a medium that is more in
harmony with his subject? Wordsworth believed not. The con-
tradiction between the simplicity of poetic truth on the one
hand, and the ornate sophistication of the traditional poetic
diction on the other, could be overcome by using the language
of common men. This language was obviously the best suited for
the expression of poetic truth because, in itself, it was more
pure and more closely connected with the elemental passions of
men.

There was another reason for employing this medium.
Since the poet's object was the passions he had in common with
all men, and since his very thinking and feeling were done in
the spirit of human nature, his language had to be that of all
men. Such a language was the lingua communis, a simple language
formed from the speech of the common man, but purified of dialect
and vulgarisms. Wordsworth was aware, well aware, that none
would object to his using such a medium when he spoke through
his subjects, setting down their words in dialogue. But he
went so far as to maintain that it should be used on all occas-
ions, even when the poet himself spoke, either narrating or giv-
ing an exposition. His reason here is again much the same
as it has been all along: the nature of the object demands a

11 Ibid., 938.
12 Ibid., 938.
13 Ibid., 939.
language which is naturally associated with it when the thoughts and feelings are more properly the poet's own. The poet must not write for himself or for other poets. He must write for men. Why, then, should he use a diction peculiar only to himself or to poets? If he is to be understood by all men, he must express himself as other men express themselves. He must use the language of common men.

Wordsworth's analysis of the poet and his function in his poetic art does justify this interpretation of his theory as set down in the Preface. There is another piece of evidence which can be brought forth to argue the validity of this interpretation from external evidence, viz., the poetry of Wordsworth. Will an analysis of his poetry show that his theory, interpreted as it was above, was actually followed out by him in the writing of his poems? Does his practice conform to his principles? If this can be shown, then there should be no doubt at all that Wordsworth's object was poetic truth, and not, as has so long been believed, low and rustic life.

Wordsworth's poetry covers a wide range of subjects. Such poems as "The Brothers," "Michael," "Ruth," "Daffodils," are written about men and women in low and rustic life. Others, such as the famous "Ode on Intimations of Immortality," the sonnets, "The Prelude," are written from the poet's own point of
view, are sublime in tone, and, while fundamentally based on nature, are far removed from the experience of low and rustic life in the ordinary meaning of the phrase. A fair test is to select two pieces, one from each end of this wide range. "Lucy Gray" is representative of low and rustic life, and the thirtieth sonnet, which is named for its first line, "It is a beauteous evening, calm and free," is representative of those higher poems more peculiarly Wordsworth's own. Coleridge thought only poems like the "Idiot Boy" and "The Mad Mother" were representative of low and rustic life. However, they are generally conceded to be inferior Wordsworthian poems and are not, therefore, necessarily representative. Matthew Arnold says they are not defective because of the subject matter, but because they lack inspiration.

These two poems, "Lucy Gray," and the sonnet, will be quoted here. It will be noted that the form or poetic truth in each is one of the elemental human passions and that the diction of both, no matter how lofty it becomes, is still, in its conception, the language of common men.

14 Coleridge, II, 35.
15 Arnold, 169.
She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye;
Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me.\(^6\)

What is the form or elemental passion expressed in the poem? It is grief or loss made quite simple by the simplicity of the subject who excites it—Lucy, the maid who lived unknown by the springs of Dove. The peculiar nature of the grief is hard to determine because it is not clear whether Lucy was just a friend or whether the poet was in love with her. It is a simple and elemental passion, though all will agree. Knowledge of grief such as this, sadly enough, is common to the race of man. And note how well the language conforms to the simplicity of the passion. There is not one word in the whole poem, except perhaps "untrodden", which could not be found, or rather overheard, in Lucy's conversation. In this poem Wordsworth followed out his theory.

\(^6\) Wordsworth, 109.
The sonnet, a later poem, is more lofty in tone, but if the poem is carefully observed the same characteristics as noted above will be found in it.

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a nun
Breathless with adoration: the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the sea:
Listen: the mighty Being is awake
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder--everlastingly.
Dear child! dear girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine;
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year:
And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not. 17

The poetic truth expressed in the sonnet is the awe and trembling reverence a father feels when the quiet of evening makes him realize the presence of Providence that watches over his daughter. There is nothing complex about it. It is within the experience of most men. It could very easily be the thought and emotion of a man from low and rustic life, though of course it need not be. Again, Wordsworth has attained one of the primary feelings of human nature, and the surroundings and the time, the sea and the evening, make it simple and strong. The language too, is simple and in harmony with the idea to which it gives expression. There are no strained figures, such as those that were so common in the poetry of the Neo-Classicists.

17 Ibid., 258.
The word "beateous" in the opening line is the only word that might not be in the speaking vocabulary of the common man, but all the others could easily be there.

In this sonnet, as in the "Lucy" poem, the principles set down in the Preface were followed out. This same sort of faithfulness cannot be argued for the whole of Wordsworth's work. Some of the poems, the famous "Ode" and parts of the "Prelude" for example, do have a distinct philosophical turn; a turn for philosophy is not a characteristic of the common man. However, it will be found that apart from the over-shadowing of philosophic thought, the feelings and emotions in these poems are of the elemental sort associated with unsophisticated rural life.

Internal and external evidence has been given to support this new interpretation. "Now, what do the critics say that show they would approve of it. Matthew Arnold says a poet receives his superiority by his ability to apply his own ideas ("which he as acquired for himself") on man, nature, and human life, abiding, in his application, by the conditions fixed by the laws of poetic truth and beauty. "Wordsworth's superiority arises from his powerful use, in his best pieces, his powerful application to his subject of ideas on man, on nature, and on human life." In another place he has this to say which is also apropos to the subject: "Wordsworth's poetry is great
because of the extraordinary power with which he feels the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and duties; and because of the extraordinary power with which, in case after case, he shows us this joy, and renders it so as to make us share it."

Arnold would agree that Wordsworth, in his better poems at least, did succeed in portraying primary feelings and emotions, and so did follow out his principles of poetic art. He also talks about Wordsworth's poetic language or his poetic style. In comparing it with Milton and Shakespeare, he says there is nothing the least bit distinctive about it; still, he says it is genuinely poetic and elevated:

...the right sort of verse to choose from Wordsworth, if we are to seize his true and most characteristic form of expression, is a line like this from "Michael"--

"And never lifted up a single stone."

There is nothing subtle in it, no heightening, no study of poetic style, strictly so called, at all; yet it is expression of the most truly expressive kind.

. . . . . . . . . .

Nature herself seems, I say, to take the pen out of his hand, and to write for him

18 Arnold, 100.
19 Ibid., 108.
with her own bare, sheer, penetrating power. This arises from two causes; from the profoundly sincere way Wordsworth feels his subject and the sincere and natural character of the subject itself. He can and will treat such a subject with nothing but the most plain, first-hand, almost austere naturalness. His expression may often be called bald, as for instance, in the poem of "Resolution and Independence;" but it is bald as the bare mountain tops are bald, with a baldness which is full of grandeur.

Wherever we meet with the successful balance, in Wordsworth, of profound truth of subject with profound truth of execution, he is unique. 20

To answer the problem Wordsworth critics have found in the seeming contradiction between his theory of poetry and his practice, a new interpretation was ventured at the beginning of this chapter. Simplicity of poetic truth, not low and rustic life, was his object; and a corresponding simplicity in diction, not the language of common men in itself, was the poetic medium he wished to introduce and perfect. Low and rustic life and the language of common men were chosen because in these he could obtain the simplicity of form and diction he was seeking. Internal evidence from the Preface was brought forth to support this interpretation. After it an analysis of the poetry of Wordsworth was given as external evidence to show that the

20 Ibid., 111, 112, 113.
simplicity of form and diction in the actual product of poetic composition was in accord with the interpretation given to his theory, and so could be used as a concrete example of what he really meant by the principles he set down. Lastly, the criticism of Arnold was given in which Arnold stated that Wordsworth's excellence as a poet lay in his ability to express the primary emotions of human nature in a unique simplicity of language. All this being so, the given interpretation seems the more probable one, and in practice Wordsworth does seem to have succeeded with his theory far more than most critics have acknowledged.

There is yet another aspect of the problem which ought to be given some consideration. What of the theory itself? How does it line up with the accepted canons of aesthetics? Are Wordsworth's principles sound? Are they absolute? Is there a foundation for them in philosophy? There is. They can be shown to be in accord with the principles of Aristotle's Poetics.

In Wordsworth's theory, as far as it has been treated in this chapter, though he did not formulate them as such, he did use three principles quite basic to all poetry. First of all, poetry is an imitation; secondly, that which poetry imitates is the actions, the feelings, the emotions of men; and thirdly, there must be a harmony between the subject chosen and the
medium in which it is expressed.

Aristotle said that the genus or common note of all art is imitation. The arts differ one from the other according to the various media they use to produce their imitations; again, the arts which use language as a medium differ one from another by the manner in which they present their object, by narration, drama, or by an expression of the artist's self as in a lyric poem. Imitation for Aristotle did not mean mere copying or representation. Imitation for him meant abstracting a universal form and reembodiying it in individuating shape or external form. Copy is more or less just a photographic representation of all the details involved. Imitation implies a nice selection of attributes which best illustrate the essence of the thing. As an example, take an oak tree. An imitation would select and put down just such details as would give a perfect (that is as perfect as possible) illustration of the essential form of the oak. A copy or photograph, on the other hand, would give you every detail, even the smallest. Consequently, it is art, or rather artistic imitation, which per-
fects nature.

Wordsworth held such a principle. He refers to it in many places in the Preface, though nowhere in the Preface does he

21 Aristotle, Poetics, Lane Cooper, (ed.), Harcourt Brace and
formulate it as clearly as the principle set down above; yet his references are clear enough to exclude doubt that this is what he meant. He says: "...while the poet describes and imitates passions, his employment is in some degree mechanical..."

Again he says: "...situations from common life...were described...as far as possible in a selection of language really used by common men, and at the same time, a certain coloring of the imagination was thrown over them, so that ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect." What is this but to bring out the perfections in things of which nature is incapable? Several times he mentions the principle of selection which is part of the imitative process. In regard to language he says it will be "purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust." In another place when speaking of the feelings he is to imitate, he says: "Here, then, he will apply the principle of selection which has been already insisted upon. He will depend upon this for removing what would be otherwise painful or disgusting in the passion."

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22 Ibid., introduction, xxv.
23 Wordsworth, 937.
24 Ibid., 935.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
The second principle Aristotle sets down is that the imitation is to be not of man, but of an action of man. "Art is an imitation of man in action." His reasons for saying this are quite simple. If art perfects nature, man as a being is not the object of art, nor is his essence, but his essence considered as a principle of activity, that is, his nature. Nature is not known directly but indirectly through its various activities; consequently, it must be the actions of man which are the subjects of art.

Wordsworth, here again, is in agreement. He never speaks of men as being the objects of his poetry, but always of their passions and feelings. He says: "...in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature." "...it will be the wish of the poet to bring his feelings near to the feelings of those persons he describes..." "...the poet is chiefly distinguished from other men...by a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner..." "...poetry is the spontaneous overflow of feeling: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility..."

27 Aristotle, 24.
28 Wordsworth, 935.
29 Ibid., 937, 938.
30 Ibid., 939.
31 Ibid., 940.
This ought to be noted concerning the actions of man, the feelings and emotions, which were the objects of Wordsworth's poetry. When speaking of imitation, Aristotle said the function of the process was to perfect nature, or, in other words, to bring actions of life to their final perfection. But because these actions are never found perfect in this life, how was the poet to know what he was to produce? This is why Wordsworth chose to contemplate common and rustic life. He thought more mature and perfect passions could be uncovered in this state. To bring them to the perfection which is the end of art, he had only to remove from them whatever might give displeasure or excite disgust, and give them, finally, some coloring of his own imagination.

Still another question arises in this regard. Prescinding from these primary feelings and passions, is the common man a suitable subject for poetry? Aristotle would say yes. The primary objects of art for him were human beings in action. It followed from this that the agents were to be represented in imitation as better than they were, or worse, or as they really were. Aristotle explained this division with an illustration: "...to take an illustration from the painters, Polygnotus depicted men better than the average, Pauson men worse than average, and Dionysius men like ourselves." Wordsworth wished to imitate the actions which would be representative of all common
men. The common man would easily fall into Aristotle's third category, men as they are.

The third principle is the correspondence between subject and medium, or, to put it better, the tone of the language ought to conform to the emotion, being simple when the feelings are simple, lofty when the feelings are lofty or heroic. In the Poetics Aristotle has written nothing which applies specifically to this point. A little reasoning, however, with other principles Aristotle has given us, will establish this sufficiently well. Art, he said, perfects nature. If that perfection which it intends is to be achieved, there must necessarily be a harmony or proportion between the subject and the medium in which it is expressed, else there will be no perfection. The simplicity of a primary emotion could not be brought out by heroic meter and figure; nor, on the other hand, could a heroic subject be expressed in simple meters and simple diction. Simple subjects require simple diction, heroic subjects, heroic diction.

Much has already been said in other places in this chapter about Wordsworth's use of this principle. It is only recalled here to insist on the above as good reasons for his using it. Regarding language, though, there is something else that ought to be mentioned. Aristotle says in this respect that the poet's
idea is to be clear without being mean. The clearest diction is that which is made up wholly of current terms, the ordinary words for things. This will give you a poetic diction, but it will not give you an elevated or majestic diction. It may be mean, that is, it may be too common or tend to become vulgar. To avoid this and achieve "majesty" Aristotle says the poet must use "rare words, metaphors, and lengthened forms." But the poet must not use only these, for a diction composed of only rare words, metaphors, and lengthened forms would result in a riddle. The proper diction is that which is the mean between the two extremes. By use of common or ordinary words diction becomes clear; by use of metaphors, rare words, and lengthened forms it is elevated, becomes majestic.

This middle way or mean was the diction Wordsworth was striving for. He took, first, the speech of ordinary men and purified it, freeing it from dialect and from whatever else he feared might be strange or in bad taste. And yet he intended to use, and he did use figures. He tells us that his diction was to be "variegated, dignified, alive with metaphors and figures." The passion he was imitation, and the inspiration it impelled, would lead him naturally to such figures as were appropriate. The number and intensity of the figures was, in

33 Ibid., 73.
34 Ibid.
its turn, to be in proportion with the emotion which inspired them, few being used when the emotion was simple, many when it was complex and forceful:

And surely, it is more probable that those passages, which with propriety abound with metaphors and figures, will have their due effect, if, upon other occasions where the passions are of a milder character, the style also be subdued and temperate. 35

By rare words Aristotle intended the use of words not commonly used in ordinary speech and also foreign words. Wordsworth would not agree with him here, except perhaps on rare occasions. Nor would he be apt to use many lengthened forms. In the poem "Lucy," quoted on page 38, he used a lengthened form, "untrodden," "She dwelt among untrodden ways," but this usage is rather an exception, the reason being he did not wish to use words which by themselves did not occur in the speech of ordinary men. However, the point is of little importance as it applies more to the Greek language, a good part of which is made up of lengthened forms, than to the English, which has comparatively few.

Having treated at some length Wordsworth's principles regarding the nature of poetry, there remains only to explain what he held regarding the end and function of poetry. What was poetry to do? Was it to be an end in itself, or was it to

35 Wordsworth, 938
achieve its end by acting upon the reader? Poetry, for Wordsworth, was not its own end, but was to produce pleasure. Pleasure is subjective; it is experienced by the reader. Poetry had a function; it was to arouse pleasurable feelings in its readers. He says: "the poet writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a man." 36

Nor, according to Wordsworth, is this function unworthy of the poet or of poetry. It is far otherwise:

Poetry is an acknowledgment of the beauty of the universe, an acknowledgment the more sincere, because not formal, but indirect; it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love: further, it is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure by which he knows, and feels, and moves, and lives. 37

Knowledge or truth is always a source of pleasure. The historian, scientist, physician, all take pleasure in their knowledge, no matter what the difficulties they overcame in acquiring it. The acquisition of poetic truth, the deep and sincere knowledge of human nature, is a source of joy for the poet. This same knowledge produces feelings of pleasure in the reader of poetry.

36 Ibid., 938.
37 Ibid., 937.
because in addition to the fact that he comes to know, which itself would be a cause of pleasure, he has the added realization that this knowledge is true and a part of himself.

The poet’s art is to imitate the feelings and passions of men. Now these, in real life, are usually connected with some pain, especially the passions of grief and loss. How is it that when these are presented in imitation they can arouse feelings of pleasure. Part of it, Wordsworth tells us, is in the very nature of the passion itself, and part is in the poet’s art. Whenever an emotion or a passion is experienced in real life, there is always some sympathy for it on the part of the one who experiences it; and this very sympathy is a subtle cause of pleasure. "We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure: I would not be misunderstood; but whenever we sympathize with pain, it will be found that the sympathy is produced and carried on by subtle combinations with pleasure." These passions, though, which the poet imitates are not real, but only similar to the passions of actual experience; they have their source in the poet’s imagination. These passions, vicariously produced, are pleasurable to the poet, and it is the pleasure which accompanies them which he strives to convey to his readers. "The poet ought to take care...that whatever

38 Ibid., 938.
39 Ibid.
Passions he communicates to his reader, if his reader's mind
be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied by an over-
40
balance of pleasure." There are other sources of poetic plea-
ure which arise from the physical make-up of a poem. There is
the metrical and musical language in which it is composed. And
Wordsworth believed that because this language of his was like
that of common men, his readers would find added pleasure in
its naturalness. Added to these are the pleasurable associa-
tions which meter and rhyme, if used, suggest to the reader. They
recall for him enjoyment he has experienced in the past when
reading poetry. Lastly might be mentioned the use of figures
which, if felicitous, should please the reader with their
aptness.

All this is sound Aristotelian doctrine. Aristotle says
the function or purpose of imitation is to produce pleasure.
Imitation is natural to man, and all men delight in good im-
itations even when the original is painful.

...all men take a natural pleasure in the
products of imitation—a pleasure to which
the facts of experience bear witness; for
even when the original objects are repulsive,
as the most objectionable of the lower animals,
or dead bodies, we still delight to contemplate

40 Ibid., 940.
their forms as represented in a picture with the utmost fidelity. The explanation is the appetite for learning; for among humans the appetite for learning is the keenest—not only to the scholarly, but to the rest of mankind as well, no matter how limited their capacity. Accordingly, the reason why men delight in a picture is that in the act of contemplating it, they are acquiring knowledge and drawing inferences—as when they exclaim: "Why, that is so and so!" Consequently, if one does not happen to have seen the original, any pleasure that arises from the picture will be due, not to the information as such, but to the execution, of the coloring, or some similar cause.  

This reflects back on the wisdom of a statement Wordsworth made earlier. Aristotle said that when the object of imitation is unknown, the pleasure arises from its color or execution. Wordsworth said that the subject of poetic imitation was poetic truth, passions and feelings, knowledge of which was common to all men. Since that is so, Wordsworth is saying that knowledge is always in poetry a source of pleasure. 

Aristotle says the embellished language of poetry, that is figure, rhythm, and music, are also a source of pleasure which is derived from the whole. 

Wordsworth refers to this pleasure which his poetry is to give, and to which all poetry should aspire, as being new.

41 Aristotle, 25. 
42 Ibid., 21.
In saying this he is implying that the pleasure of the traditional poetry against which he was revolting was old and of a different character. The pleasure derived from the older poetry did not come from the recognition of poetic truth by the reader, that is it did not have its source in the feelings and passions imitated by the poet, but arose from a vanity or pride on the part of the reader because he realized that he was being addressed in a language which was peculiar to the poet alone. The cause of pleasure "was the extravagant and absurd diction" used by the Neo-Classic poets. It gave peculiarity and exultation to "the poet's character, and flattered the reader's self-love by bringing him into sympathy with that character." If the reader of poetry did not find himself "in that perturbed and dizzy state of mind, he imagined that he was balked of a peculiar enjoyment which poetry can and ought to bestow."

Besides this immediate purpose of poetry, which is to give pleasure, Wordsworth held there was a mediate or secondary purpose, "a worthy purpose," which was to instruct, purify, and strengthen the affections. This purpose, in his poetry, or in the work of any poet for that matter, was not always intentional, but was always present due to his methods and habits of thinking. He had so regulated his own feelings that he felt

43 Wordsworth, 937.
44 Ibid., 935.
sure there would be found such a purpose in his imitations of them. The mind comes to discover what is proper and true of men. Because the mind directs the feelings, they will come naturally to be associated with what is best and noblest in men. Poetry, being the spontaneous overflow of these same feelings, and the feelings of the poet being of the finest, readers of his poetry will be inlightened, and their own affections purified, strengthened, and disciplined.

This is the work of the poet. Anyone, almost in utter disregard of his education, is capable of being excited by gross stimulants, viz., the pornographic fiction of the present day. But the human mind, being capable also of receiving the finer shades of truth and beauty, can be stimulated without these. The way beings are graded in an order one above another is decided by the ability of each to enjoy in greater or lesser measure what is truly good and beautiful. Since the poet's work is to school men to appreciate this higher beauty and make their perceptions of it more acute, his work is most worthy. It is from this intention of the poet that poetry itself comes to possess a worthy purpose.

This secondary purpose of poetry has been established and admitted by the great critics of all time, though, strange to say, Aristotle has left little concerning this point. He
stated clearly that the primary end of art is pleasure, and some think that implicit in this is the secondary end, that of instruction, though it is only a conjecture. Some critics have confused the primary and secondary purposes of poetry and have put instruction before pleasure. Plato, writing in the Ion, and again in different places in the Republic, before he threw poetry and poets out altogether, seems to hold that the purpose of poetry is to instruct and is, therefore moral. Horace, in his Ars Poetica, makes the same mistake. Sidney and Shelley, in their defenses of poetry, hold that its purpose is instruction. In our own day T. S. Elliot has come forward, saying that art is autotelic, art is its own end. He is not asking for art for art's sake. He is merely saying that art does not have to have a moral function, but it should not go against morality. Jacques Maritain, in his Art and Scholasticism, has very nearly the same thing to say. The end of a work of art is its own particular good, that it be a good in itself; this good which it has does not have to be the same good which is the end of man, but, of course, it should be subordinated to it. The artist, when actually making a work of art, cannot have as the end of his art piece a good which is not in conformity with his ultimate end as a man.

45 Ibid., 935, 936.
All this can be concluded very briefly. Wordsworth's real object in writing his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* was to define and determine the nature of poetic truth, the knowledge of human nature particularly in its primary states; it was never an attempt to make low and rustic life the universal material for all types of poetry. Low and rustic life was chosen because he felt that in that stratum of society he could find his object existing in greater perfection and linked with the permanent and beautiful forms of our nature. The language of common men was chosen because it was best suited as a medium for expressing these primary feelings and passions. In his poetic theory there are five ultimate principles which are common to all poetic art:

1) all art is imitation;

2) the object of art is not man but the actions of man, not man considered in his essence but in his nature as a principle of action;

3) there must always be a proportion or harmony between the object imitated and the medium (language) in which the imitation is expressed;

4) the immediate purpose of poetry is to produce pleasure;
5) the mediate or secondary purpose of poetry is to instruct, strengthen, and purify the affections of the reader.
CHAPTER IV

COLERIDGE'S OBJECTIONS TO THE PREFACE

As was noted in the introduction to this thesis, Coleridge seemed to have concurred with the principles of Wordsworth's Preface when it was written in 1800. Miss Barstowe gives a reference to a manuscript document of the time in which it is recorded that Coleridge read through the Preface and corrected it before it was printed. If he had disagreed with any part of it at the time, it is reasonable to believe that he would have made his objections known to Wordsworth. Still, it may be supposed that because of the close friendship which existed between these two poets in 1800 Coleridge thought it indelicate to mention his objections to Wordsworth. However, when Coleridge came to write his Biographia Literaria in 1816, he had broken his friendship with Wordsworth; indeed, he felt hostile toward him. At that time, prompted by bitterness or sincerity, he wrote out his objections to certain principles in The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads.

Wordsworth wrote his Preface in 1800 to defend a special type of poetry which he called lyrical ballads. Going about his defense logically, he postulated and developed the principles concerning the nature and function of true poetry which

1 Barstowe, op. cit., x
were noted in the previous chapter. These formed a sort of major for his defense: "The nature and function of true poetry is imitation, to give pleasure, etc." He next postulated as a minor: "But such is the nature and function of the Lyrical ballads." His conclusion was: "Therefore, the lyrical ballads are true poetry." His major was sound. Coleridge could not attack it. But Coleridge thought he saw weaknesses in the minor. If he could prove these weaknesses existed, he could invalidate the minor, destroy the syllogism and the theory of the lyrical ballads.

Coleridge objected to the minor in both its theory and its application by Wordsworth in the Lyrical Ballads. In theory he thought the rustic swain and the language the rustic spoke unfit to be the subject and medium of poetry. He thought Wordsworth had realized this because of the discrepancy between his theory and his practice. Wordsworth's country people were not rustics from low life at all, nor did they speak like rustics, nor, for that matter, was the language that formed the poetic medium of these poems the language which rustics from low life used in conversation. Coleridge cites "michael," "The Brothers," "Ruth," and "The Mad Mother" to prove his objections.

2 Coleridge, op. cit., II, 28.
3 Ibid., 34.
This thesis intends only a defense of Wordsworth's poetical theory. Consequently, Coleridge's objections to Wordsworth's practice, or Wordsworth's practice itself, is of no concern, except in so far as it helps to substantiate the theory. The problem to be handled in this chapter is the validity of Wordsworth's minor concerning the nature and function of the lyrical ballad over Coleridge's objections. His objections will be given, explained, and such evidence brought forth against them as will explain them away.

Coleridge objects to the use of rustics from low life as subjects for poetry. He holds that poetry is essentially of the ideal, as Aristotle stated in the Poetics:

I adopt with full faith the principle of Aristotle, 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 the generic attributes, with the common attributes of the class: not with such as one gifted individual might possibly possess, but such as from his situation it is most probable before-hand that he would possess. If my premises are right and my deductions legitimate, it follows that there can be no poetic medium between the swains of Theocritus and those of an imaginary golden age.4

4 Ibid., 33, 34.
The force of his objection is this: it is alright for the swain to be used as a poetic subject, but since poetry is essentially ideal, you must represent your swain as an ideal swain. The swain does not have to stand out above his class, but he must possess all the generic attributes of his class, as do the swains of Theocritus. Wordsworth's theory does not allow for this. Using a bit of realism, he intended to use peasants from low and rustic life, and such a man, according to Coleridge, cannot possibly be representative of his class. He will represent only the crude or more primitive part; the finer qualities, which Theocritus gives his swains, will have to be omitted.

But this is a wrong interpretation of Aristotle. When Aristotle says that poetry is essentially ideal, he means that the universal should be involved in the particular; that the passion or feeling or action represented, though expressed by a particular individual should still be universal in the sense that it is true of the experience of all men. Take, for example, Macbeth. The universal imitated in this play is the passion of ambition. It is expressed in a particular individual, Macbeth. Yet all men who witness the action on a stage, or who read the play privately, find that the ambition is true of themselves and of all men, though it exists in an eminent degree.

5 Aristotle, op. cit., introduction, xxv.
gree in Macbeth. Aristotle did not mean that the individual chosen had to be ideal in the sense that he embodied all the generic attributes and perfections of a particular class. Indeed, he says that men chosen as subjects for poetry may be represented as they really are, or better than they really are, or worse than they really are. This is a complete disjunction. It would certainly include the meanest person from low and rustic life. A swain possessing only the very crudest attributes of his class could be ideal; he would still represent a class as much as did the swain of Theocritus, though it would be a much smaller class. Wordsworth, in choosing such a subject, violated no Aristotelian canon of aesthetics.

Wordsworth chose this particular type of rustic because he believed the feelings and emotions he wished to express in poetry could be found in him in a more perfect state.

Humble 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 state of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity...and may be more forcibly communicated....

Coleridge says: "Not so!" He says the elemental feelings of

6 Ibid., 6.
7 Wordsworth, op. cit., 935.
mankind cannot attain maturity in rural life without education. The labor and penury of country life tend to obscure and destroy these feelings as much as a pseudo-culture and education may obscure and destroy them in a member of a higher class of society. The only man who can come to emotional maturity, who can appreciate his sensations and emotions, who can express them adequately and forcibly, is an educated man.

Wordsworth would be the first to admit that an educated man could more fully appreciate, was more sensitive to human feelings and natural beauty than the rustic. When the educated man was in love, or when he was grieved, his love or grief would certainly be more keen. 

But would he express what he felt exactly as he felt it? Would not his education and refinement tend to make him reserved, to put some check upon his feelings? This would not be true of people in low and rustic life. Having little education or refinement, they would put no checks upon their feelings. The feelings themselves would have developed naturally; there would be no artificiality in them. When a peasant lass was in love, her passion would all be in her eye; she would be unaware that it was there. But would this be true of the young lady from the finishing school? It would be the same with grief. A peasant father sorrowing for his dead son would grieve naturally, with no pretense, with no effort to con-

8 Coleridge, II, 32.
oeel what he felt. But the father who was a gentleman, a
university man, from a higher society, in the same circumstances,
might feel there was need to check himself, to keep dry-eyed.

Mr. J. C. Smith, in his study of Wordsworth, treating
this same point, says:

Wordsworth would scarcely have maintained
that the paternal and fraternal instincts
are stronger in the country than in the town.
But family affections contain other strands
besides mere instinct. There is the closer
intimacy which isolation forces on the rural
household; there is the sharing of common
tasks; and even, in the shepherd's life, the
sharing of common dangers... We may add... the
deep seated love of the small hereditary farm
on which the father toils that he may hand it
on to his sons.... Other virtues, too, content-
ment, neighborliness, charity, could flourish
in the kindly society of the Jales where "Labour
still wore a roseey face," where the laborer was
still a free man, and extreme hunger, penury,
and wretchedness were still unknown. Again,
the love of nature, if not itself one of the
essential passions of the heart, may be so en-
twined with the rustics from the associations
of childhood that it at once strengthens and
is hallowed by them.\(^9\)

Wordsworth's theory called for a realistic portrayal of
the rustic farmer. Coleridge claims he never carried this
theory out in the writing of his poems. His "Michael," "Ruth"

\(^9\) J. C. Smith, A Study of Wordsworth, Oliver and Boyd Ltd.,
London, 1944, 58, 59.
"The Brothers," have all the representative qualities poetry can require. They are members of a known and abiding class; they are on a par with the swains of Theocritus. They are not the real farmer from low and rustic life as anyone who read the above mentioned poems will perceive at once. Wordsworth's practice is not of concern here, but still, since he could not use his theory in his poetic practice, it may be wondered whether any poet could. And if no poet could, then as an a priori theory it would have little value. Coleridge's objection would still carry a good deal of weight.

In our own day, in America, in New England, Robert Frost, a poet of growing fame, adopted this poetic theory for himself. He may have gotten it from Wordsworth. More probably he came by it himself since he is a farmer, and, in a certain sense, from low and rustic life. He may well have intuited the poetic forms in the life around him. Anyway, he has followed his theory out in practice with a good deal of success. The following is a quotation from Frost's "The Self Seeker":

Anne has a way with flowers to take the place
Of what she's lost: she goes down on one knee
And lifts their faces by their chins to hers
And says their names and leaves them where they are...11

Robert Tristam Coffin, in his *New Poetry of New England*, says that one of Frost's chief merits as a poet is that he has, in his poetry, given pictures of the real farmer from low and rustic life:

Frost's profession is people. They are a peculiar breed of people. They really have not got into poetry before. Some of them are surprised to be there now. I know that, for I live in the midst of a lot of them. They hardly suppose even yet that they are poetic timber....They are in their old clothes.... They are at all sorts of work, not merely in a state of being, like Wordsworth's people are so often. 12

Frost finds absolutes in the slight things: a crow's wing shakes snow on him from a limb and that makes up for a lost day....He has stretched out his sympathy to included many neglected designs: tramps on muddy roads, a woodchuck, a roadside stand, old shoes, a woodpile, a gum gatherer, a line-gang, a census taker, a kitchen chimney, brush for peas, a man's slide with a lantern, and against his wishes, down a mountain on an icy night--all these are poems to Frost, because these are parts of life, and parts of life are poetry as much as the whole. 13

More quotations from Frost's poetry and from his critics could be given, were there room for them here. But the few given do show that the theory of the common man as a poetic subject can be put into practice. Perhaps had Wordsworth come a century later, he would have achieved the particular type of success

13 Ibid., 109.
Frost has. But if there had been no Wordsworth in 1800, is it not doubtful whether there would have been a Frost in the present century?

Coleridge's second objection was against the real language of men from low and rustic life as a poetic medium. Wordsworth had said:

The language, too, of these men has been adopted (purified, indeed, from what appear to be its real defects...) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. Accordingly, such a language, arising out of a repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets. 14

I propose to use a selection of the real language of men.... I propose to myself to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men. 15

Coleridge objects to the word real. "I object in the very first instance to an equivocation in the use of the word 'real.'"

From Wordsworth's process of selection, removing provincialisms, etc., would result in a language that did not differ in the least from the general language of men of all classes. "For

14 Wordsworth, 935.
15 Ibid., 935.
'real', therefore, we must substitue ordinary or lingua communis."

As far as this objection goes, it is not an objection at all. For as was shown in Chapter II of this thesis, by a study of the formation of poetic diction, it was Wordsworth's object to return to the language of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. Wordsworth wanted, as a poetic medium, a language that was alive and on the lips of men, the same medium the "older poets" had used. He went to rustic life for his medium because the language of the rustic would be more closely associated with his passions and sensations, and would express them more accurately than would the language of an educated class.

Coleridge also denied that the best part of language was formed from the objects with which the rustic hourly communicated. "I deny that the words and combinations of words with which the rustic communicate is derived from objects with which the rustic is familiar can justly be said to form the best part of language." By the "best part of language" is to be understood a serviceable daily vocabulary in which all the trades and dealings and volitions of ordinary folk are communicated. Coleridge does not think the peasant possesses such a vocabulary:

16 Coleridge, II, 41.
17 Ibid., 41.
18 Cf. Chapter II, especially page 17.
19 Coleridge, II, 39.
For first, if to communicate with an object implies such an acquaintance with it, as renders it capable of being discriminately reflected on, the distinct knowledge of an uneducated rustic would furnish a very scanty vocabulary. The few things and modes of action requisite for his bodily conveniences, would alone be individualized; while all the rest of nature would be expressed by a small number of confused general terms.20

It is true that the language of Wordsworth's poems is not that of men in low and rustic life entirely. It has a unique simplicity, as was pointed out in the previous chapter. The individual words, with a few exceptions, could all be found in the vocabulary of a rustic. But it has to be admitted that their specifici usage is not that of a rustic from the low life Wordsworth intended. Is, as Coleridge says, the vocabulary of a rustic from low life too limited to form a poetic medium? Has Wordsworth postulated an a priori theory of poetic d\_\textit{\textecircumflex{\textae}}ction with no fundament in reality?

Not exactly, for Robert Frost, as did others, Robert Burns and the writers of the Old Testament for example, has found the vocabulary of the rustic is not as poor as Coleridge thought. He has written poems in the real language of the New England farmer. He purified it of provincialisms, and his language as a result is a sort of lingua communis; still, it has something peculiar to the New England farmer. The two following selections

20 \textit{Ibid.}, 39.
from Frost's "The Code" and "A Time to Talk" will show what is meant by a common language with a rustic flavor:

When he couldn't lead, he'd get behind
And drive, the way you can, you know, in mowing--
Keep at their heels and threaten to mow their legs off.

When a friend calls me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don't stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven't hoed,
And shout from where I am, "What is it?"
No, not as there is time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall for a friendly visit.

In the above quotations there is nothing which would offend a reader's taste; nor is there any word the reader might not use in conversation or writing. Still, the reader feels, or should feel (for it was Frost's intention that he should) that every word in these poems was right out of the mouth of a New England farmer.

Robert Tristam Coffin, in his *New Poetry of New England*, has a few things to say about the use of real language of farmers as a poetic medium. Some quotations from his book are set down here to show that Wordsworth's theory, though he himself

21 Frost, 78.
Talk has always been a feeder of poetry. Witness the old ballads' folk style. There is such a thing as oral literature, and it is all around us....I haven't listened to talk of Main fishermen and farmers all these years for nothing. I know that everyday speech is full of fire and music. Weather saws, proverbs of every kind, figures of speech, metaphors and similies, even--what are those fearful names?--synecdoches and metonymies--are coming out every minute when a man is resting from mowing or plowing, or from pulling a lobster pot. The man doesn't know it of course. It would scare him to death if he did. This is literature in the making. A poet's ear can hear poems there....

And that's the best place to look for life going on, in people who do not know they are being recorded and who let life come out of their lips. If they know you are taking down what they are saying, they will stop talking. There is a good deal of living going on in what people say, in spite of what Hemingway and other artists in two-dimensional talk maintain. There is often an exquisite pattern of reward and retribution, a pattern of morality, being born there where people meet and exchange words. This can happen even among common people.

The second of these last quotations goes back to what Wordsworth said in his Preface. He said there that he chose low and rustic life because the elementary passions of men could be more easily studied in that society and were expressed more forcibly by the members of that society. Mr. Coffin wrote: "The best place to

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23 Coffin, 79.
24 Ibid., 85.
look for life going on is in people who do not know they are being observed. There is poetry born where people meet and exchange words, even among common people."

In conclusion, then, Wordsworth's minor is valid. It stated that poetry written about the common man in a selection of the real language these men spoke had the characteristics of true poetry. Wordsworth himself, by his poetic practice of this principle, did not prove its validity, but Robert Frost, in his poetry on the New England farmer did. Consequently, Coleridge's objections to Wordsworth's minor are invalid.
CHAPTER IV

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN PROSE AND POETRY

The problem of this chapter is the difference between the language of prose and that of metrical composition. It is an old problem. Aristotle mentions it in his *Poetics*. The difference between prose and poetry is obvious; it is noticed immediately by the eye and by the ear. The problem has arisen by trying to determine the kind of difference. Is it an essential difference, or is it only accidental? That is to say, is the language of prose entirely different from that of poetry, or are they merely different aspects of the same thing? Essence is the principle of individuation. If the language of poetry has one essence, and the language of prose has another entirely different from that of poetry, then, clearly, one is not the other. They are essentially distinct as man an animal. But if they differ only accidentally, then, in essence they are the same, as the white man and the Negro are both, in their essences, men, differing one from the other only by the accident of color.

Wordsworth, treating of this problem in his *Preface*, held that the difference between the language of prose and that of metrical composition was only accidental. "It may be safely affirmed that there neither is, nor can be, an essential difference between the language of prose and that of metrical composition."
between the language of prose and that of metrical composition. Coleridge argues that there is an essential distinction between these two media.

Before going further into the problem it would be good to make clear just exactly what Wordsworth understood by the word "prose." By prose, in connection with this problem, he meant that type of composition in which, as a medium, poetic truth was imitated. Poetic truth was explained in Chapter III as the thoughts, feelings, passions which are the common knowledge of all men. The type of prose Wordsworth had in mind had the same subject or object of imitation as poetry. In a footnote to the Preface he said a more suitable distinction would have been between poetry and matter-of-fact or scientific composition.

It must be remembered, too, that in Wordsworth's day there was, if not an essential distinction, at least a more marked distinction between the language of prose and that of metrical composition. Later poets by borrowing from their predecessors, had caused a body of traditional words, and phrases, and figures to be set aside for poetic composition alone. Because this body of language was used only for poetry, the distinction between it and the language of prose would be much more clearly marked. Informal prose on the other hand, the familiar essay and the novel, used a medium which was a selection from language as spoken every day by men. This, too, had been the practice of the early poets.
of our language, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. Wordsworth's object was to return to the practice of this older school of poets and write poetry in a selection from the language as it was actually spoken in his day. Consequently, the language of his poetry would naturally approach the language of prose when prose was well written.

Wordsworth's own reason for maintaining no essential distinction between the language of prose and poetry was the affinity he observed to exist between the two:

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.

The subject of both prose and poetry was the same, viz., poetic truth; therefore, the language in which they expressed their subjects must be essentially the same. If poetic composition employed meter, meter could not constitute an essential difference; it could only add an accidental perfection.

2 Wordsworth, 937.
3 Coleridge, op. cit., 47 et ff.
4 Wordsworth, 937.
5 Cf Chapter II.
6 Wordsworth, 937.
Wordsworth came to this conclusion by an analysis of good poetry. He found that large portions of poems even of the most lofty character in no respect differed from prose, "when prose was well written." He went so far as to state that this could be illustrated from passages of all poetical writings, even those of Milton himself. He illustrates the subject in a general way, by quoting a sonnet of Greys:

In vain to me the smiling mornings shine,  
And reddening Phoebus lifts his golden fire;  
The birds in vain their amorous descant join,  
Or cheerful fields resume their green attire.  
These ears, alas! for other notes repine.  
A different object do these eyes require;  
My lonely anguish melts no heart but mine;  
And in my breast the imperfect joys expire;  
Yet morning smiles the busy race to cheer,  
And new-born pleasure brings to happier men;  
The fields to all their wonted tribute bear;  
To warm their little loves the birds complain.  
I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,  
And weep the more because I weep in vain.

The lines in italics, he observes, are the only worthwhile lines in the sonnet and, with the exception of one word, "fruitless," none would be out of place in good prose composition, nor differ from it, except with reference to the meter. This ought to be noted also: the other lines of the sonnet belong to the staid poetic diction of Johnson's theory.

7 Ibid., 936.  
8 Ibid.  
9 Ibid.
After proving that the language of prose and poetry are, in their essence, the same, he himself raises the natural objection to this conclusion. "Why," he asks, "if the language of both are the same, why use meter at all?" He then goes on to give two reasons for using meter.

1) The purpose or function of poetry is to produce excitement coexistent with an overbalance of pleasure; in doing this there is a danger that the excitement may become too powerful, be carried beyond its proper bounds. There is need, therefore, of the presence of something regular to which the mind has become accustomed in its various moods, but less excited states, which will temper and restrain excessive passion. Meter gives this restraint. By employing it, the more pathetic and sympathetic situations can be handled with more propriety. Wordsworth observes that feelings which would be quite mawkishly sentimental in prose are not at all offensive when written in metrical composition.

2) The second reason for using meter is that in itself it gives pleasure. If the poet be unsuccessful in his choice of language and fail to produce the excitement he wishes, or the passion he imitates doesn't produce the excitement it should, the presence of meter may, in a small way, compensate. The

10 Ibid., 939.
reader derives pleasure from the meter of the composition. But
meter can do more towards making up for these deficiencies. Be-
cause the reader is accustomed to reading poetry written in meter,
its presence may cause him to add those feelings of pleasure which
he has gathered from past readings of poetry and come to associ-
ate with metrical composition.

Coleridge objects to all this. He begins his attack on
Wordsworth's position by developing, very philosophically, prin-
ciples for an essential or real distinction. "Essence," he says,
"means the principle of individuation, the utmost principle of
the possibility of anything as that particular thing." He also
adds that it is "equivalent to the idea of a thing, whenever we
use the word idea with philosophic precision." But almost in
the same breath he adds that "essence can also be used to sig-
nify the grounds of contradistinction between two modifications
of the same substance or subject." As an example he gives two
cathedrals, St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey, claiming that be-
cause there is a difference in the two styles of architecture of
these edifices, though both are cathedrals, they essentially dif-
frent. It is on this principle that he proceeds to argue for
an "essential" distinction between metrical composition and
prose.

11 Ibid., 940.
12 Coleridge, II, 47.
But see what he has done! He has fallen from Scholasticism into Cartesianism. He has identified accident with substance. His principle is false. If he followed it out logically, he would be led into all kinds of absurdities. He would have to admit, for instance, that because the white man differs from the Negro because of his color, there is an essential distinction between the two, that one was a man, a rational animal, while the other was not, could not be.

Because he is mistaken in his first principle, his whole argument collapses. It would not be necessary to follow his reasoning further, but lest Coleridge be done an injustice the whole of it will be set down. "Things," he says, "which are identical must be convertible." Poetry is not convertible with prose because it has two characteristics peculiarly its own: meter and a form of metaphor too lofty to be at home in prose composition.

He argues from the origin and effects of meter. In the earliest times poetry was written in meter. Coleridge believes that it arose spontaneously out of the excitement of the passion or emotion which inspired the poet. Meter increases the vivacity of a poem and helps the listener or reader to fix his attention on the piece. Also, meter belongs to the essence of poetic

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 49 et ff.
composition because it helps the poet give his work the "unity" which it requires to be good poetry. Besides all this a tradition has been shaped in which all poetry, since the beginning, has been written in meter.

Coleridge's arguments are good and, for the most part, true. One might question whether it was meter or rhythm that arose spontaneously out of the inspiring emotion. It seems more likely that it would be the rhythm. Aside from this, though, it is true that the first poems were composed in meter, and since then it has become traditional that all poetry be written in meter. Meter lends itself to unity and to the adjustment of the whole; it gives vivacity to the piece and helps the reader to fix his attention upon it. But true as these facts are, are they on that account valid reasons for urging that the language of prose differs essentially from that of metrical composition? 16 Aristotle would not say so, nor Longinus, nor Shelley. The language of both forms of composition are media for imitating poetic truth. One may be more ornate than the other, just as the architecture of St. Paul's may be more ornate than that of Westminster Abbey; but they are not, on that account, essentially distinct. The ornament of St. Paul's is only an accidental perfection; it makes the essence more pleasant to the eye, but

16 Aristotle will be taken up in detail on this question later. Shelley, in his Defense of Poetry, also traces a tradition of prose poetry as well as one of metrical poetry.
does not change it. Meter is only an accidental perfection of language which makes it more pleasing to the ear, but it does not change language in its essence.

Coleridge's second argument is the type or kind of metaphor he considers of too exalted a character to be properly placed in prose composition. He cites an example in the first line of the sonnet quoted by Wordsworth in his Preface and quoted entire early in this chapter:

In vain to me the smiling mornings shine.

It is - the epithet to the morning he has in mind. He admits that it is hackneyed, but says that in "smiling mornings" there is a note of personification; because of this the figure belongs to poetry alone. There is another example, and perhaps a better one, of this same thing in Wordsworth's sonnet, "The World is too Much With Us:"

The sea who bears her bosom to the moon.

This has the same note of personification that "smiling mornings" has. Coleridge maintains that if all lines of this type were struck from the whole body of poetry, from Homer to Milton, from Aeschylus to Shakespeare, most of what is great and good in poetry would be destroyed.

Ibid., 57.
Again, a good part of Coleridge's assertion can be granted. The particular type of metaphor he mentions does constitute what is best in poetry, and poetry would most certainly suffer if it were removed. But on the other hand, is this type of metaphor to be excluded from prose? Is it out of place in prose? Cannot as many examples be quoted from prose works as from works of metrical poetry? Every reader has found them in prose and has been pleased, not disturbed, by their being there. In the very paragraph in which Coleridge argues against their use in prose, (and the prose of the *Biographia Literaria*, because of its function, is matter-of-fact or scientific, not the kind which expresses a poetic truth,) he uses the type of metaphor forbidden to prose. He says: "...when the torch of ancient learning was rekindled, so cheering were its beams...." "So cheering were its beams" is quite as good a figure of this kind as "smiling mornings."

Such are Coleridge's reasons for an essential distinction between the language of prose and that of metrical composition. He was shown to be wrong in the principle on which he based his distinction. Also, it was shown that meter and metaphor were not such by nature that they would constitute an essential difference in the language of metrical composition. It only remains now to introduce an authority to support Wordsworth's position against that of Coleridge. The one brought forth here is again Aristotle.
In the Poetics Aristotle makes imitation the common genus of all the arts. Their specific differences are the various media in which the imitations are made. The medium of the plastic arts would be paint. They would be like all other arts because of their common note, imitation, but they would differ from their others because of their medium; they would differ from poetry whose medium is words. Aristotle says that there is an Art whose medium of imitation is language alone, whether the language be metrical or non-metrical. If it be metrical, it may be in one of several verse forms, but it belongs under the common medium. "There is," he says, "no common term inclusive of this Art whose medium is language; consequently the two terms, prose and poetry, are used. Lane Cooper, translator and commentator on the Poetics says that the German dichtung would be (or is for the Germans!) the common term corresponding to Aristotle's general notion of this type of artistic medium. But what should be noted immediately is that Aristotle held no essential distinction between metrical and non-metrical composition. Aristotle observes (what Coleridge also in his day had noted) that people have always connected the name of poet with one who writes in meter. "They talk of 'elegiac poets,' and of

18 Aristotle, 1.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 7.
'epic poets,' of 'hexameter poets' as if it were not the principle of imitation that characterized the art, as if one might call them poets indiscriminately because they wrote in meter. Poets were not the only ones Aristotle saw using meter. Writers on medicine and natural science were using it also. If meter were characteristic of poetry and constituted an essential difference between poetry and prose, then the Iliad of Homer would have to be classified with Empedocles' works on natural science, which were also written in meter. Meter is the only thing common to the two poets. It is not an essential note, but only a customary adjunct of the art of poetry.

In regard to the use of the particular metaphor which Coleridge claimed to belong to poetry alone, Aristotle says that such figures, because they are not ordinary, give distinction to language. They do not change the essence of language. Aristotle divides poetic style into two divisions, low and high. The low consists of the ordinary words and phrases for things; the high of extraordinary, or figurative, words for them. He instances a line from Aeschylus as an example of the low style:

The cancer that is eating the flesh of my foot.

Low style becomes high by the substitution of a figure, or the extraordinary word for the ordinary. The line quoted above be-
comes higher style by substituting the words "feasts on" for "eating"; this substitution was made by Euripides. Aristotle gives several other examples, one, the words of the Cyclops in the Odyssey:

Lo, now, a dwarf, a man of no worth and a weakling.

This is in the higher style. In the lower it would run something like this:

See, now, a small man, feeble and unpersuading.

Aristotle gives another example from the Odyssey:

And place for him [Odysseus] an unseemly settle and a meager table,

and asks us to note how different it would be if written:

And brought him a sorry chair and a small table.

It is the low style that is most often associated with prose, the high that has become associated with poetry. And, indeed, the poet should strive for the high since his space is more limited.

21 Ibid., 4.
22 Ibid., 75.
23 Ibid.
But, following Aristotle, neither one nor the other is out of place in poetry; so neither one nor the other is out of place in prose.

In conclusion, Wordsworth is correct when he says that the language of prose is essentially the same as that of metrical composition. What is common to both is imitation and language as a medium. If meter is used, it does not change the medium; it is only an adjunct or accidental modification of language. It is valuable as a means of restraint for excessive passion and as a means of providing pleasure for the reader by arousing in him associations of past pleasure had from the reading of poetry. Also, it provides a pleasant and regular adornment for the whole. Nor, as Coleridge would argue, does the use of metaphor alter the language of poetic composition; it merely heightens it and gives the reader a deeper insight into things.
The purpose of this thesis was to prove the validity of the poetic principles contained in Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*. This required a refutation of certain objections Coleridge brought against these principles in his *Literaria Biographia*.

Because Wordsworth's *Preface* was a revolt against the poetry of the eighteenth century, particularly a revolt against the poetic diction of this period, the historical development of the poetry and the diction of this time was given in the first chapter. The poetic diction of 1796 consisted of a body of set words, phrases, figures, employed only in the writing of poetry; there was another set of words employed in prose writing and in ordinary conversation. The language of poetry was a language set apart only for poetry. Wordsworth wanted to overthrow the theory of this "inane phraseology" and write poetry in the language spoken by real men, as had Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton before him, in the days when English poetry was young and lovely.

Next, the *Preface* itself was examined. It was found that Poetic Truth, which means the actions, feelings, emotions common to all men, was Wordsworth's real object, not low and
rustic life. Rustic life was only chosen because Poetic Truth could be found in this society in a purer state and could be more easily imitated and more forcibly expressed in the language the rustic spoke. Also, the following general poetic principles were found in the Preface and proved to be philosophically sound by Aristotelian standards: Poetic Art is imitation; Poetic Truth is the object of imitation; the proper medium of poetry is the language actually spoken by men; the immediate purpose of poetry is to give pleasure; the secondary object of poetry is to instruct.

Coleridge objected to extending these principles to include low and rustic life. He denied that the rustic was a fit poetic subject and that poetry could be written in the language the rustic spoke. It was shown that there was nothing in Aristotle that forbid using the rustic as a poetic subject. Wordsworth himself, in his poetry, did not give the realistic picture of the rustic his theory postulated, but the theory was shown to be valid and practical by the poetry of Robert Frost and the comments of Robert Tristam Coffin.

In the last chapter the problem of whether or not there is an essential or real distinction between the language of prose and poetry was discussed. Wordsworth's reasons against such a distinction were given; those of Coleridge for such a distinction were also explained. But Coleridge, as was shown,
began his argument from a false conception of an essential distinction; his argument collapsed. The *Poetics* of Aristotle being brought in as a sort of arbitrator, it was prove that Wordsworth's stand on the question was a valid one; for Aristotle held no essential distinction between the language of prose and poetry.

The conclusion of this thesis, then, is this: the principles set down in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* are all valid, even the minor ones which legislate for a poetry of the common rustic from low life and for an identity of the language of prose and poetry.
One of the interesting points of the Preface is its philosophical development. The metaphysician tells us that all we can know about things are their four causes. This is exactly the way Wordsworth analyses and develops his subject, through the four causes. The formal cause of poetry is poetic truth, some feeling or passion common to all men which is experienced vividly by the poet. His material cause is low and rustic life and the language of common men. Wordsworth discusses, at great length, the poet as the efficient cause of the poem. Lastly, he discusses the purpose of poetry or final cause.

Because Wordsworth devotes a great deal of time to an analysis of the poetic process it ought to be mentioned briefly here. He defines poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity." In life, incidents occur which arouse feelings and passions. Later, the poet recalls these feelings and, as he works them over in his imagination, they become stronger and stronger until they are quite like the original feelings aroused by actual incidents of life. This is something that is within every man's experience. One has only to recall a time when he was extremely angry with another
person and how, hours or days later, the thought of that same person coming to mind, aroused the same anger experienced earlier in almost its original intensity. This is the state in which Wordsworth says the poet composes; but he so orders his composing (as was mentioned before) that the feelings expressed in words carry with them an over-balance of pleasure for the reader. This much achieves the primary purpose of poetry: to give immediate pleasure. The secondary purpose, the purifying and strengthening of the affections, is brought about in this way. The poet, by constant meditation and discipline, has trained himself to consider only the higher, more noble parts of human nature. As it is thought which directs the feelings, and as the poet, by his habits of contemplation has discovered what is best and most true of men, his feelings will naturally be lined with his thoughts. It is only the finest feelings which the poet recollects in tranquillity for his poetic composition. Reading these, the reader is naturally instructed and his own affections and feelings are strengthened and purified.

III

In the study of any philosophic science two objects are always considered: the material object and the formal object of the science. And again, the formal object is always studied from two distinct aspects: the formal object as it is in itself
and the reasoning process by which it is attained. In the terminology of the old schoolmen these two are known as the objectum formale quod and the objectum formale quo.

For example, in the science of Ethics, the material object comprises all the facts the science treats of: the actions of men, the conditions in which the acts are performed, the laws connected with these actions. Its formal object is the particular aspect of the human action which Ethics studies: rectitude. In the study of any human action Ethics is interested only in whether or not the action is moral or correct. Thus its formal object helps to distinguish it as a science from psychology, which also has the same material object (the actions of men), but which is concerned with a different formal object. It wants to know the inner workings of the actions themselves, just how the intellect forms a universal idea, just how the will is able to place a free act. The second aspect of the formal object, the objectum formale quo, is the manner in which the form is studied. In Ethics it is studied with the natural reason alone. This again distinguishes ethics from Moral Theology which has the same material and formal objects. Moral Theology is also concerned with the rectitude of human actions, but its approach is through revelation, not through the intellect.
Applying this to the science of aesthetics, we recall, first, that Wordsworth held in his Preface that the material object of poetry was Poetic Truth, which is nothing else but the actions of men, the same that are studied in Ethics and other sciences. The question is, what is the formal object of poetry? Ethics is concerned with rectitude. With what is poetry concerned? And secondly, how is the formal object perceived?

St. Thomas says that the formal object of poetry is Beauty, id quod visum placet. In the process of imitation the universal is expressed by particular notes which make it shine forth or become splendid; this splendor or shining forth is beauty. Take an example. Suppose the poet writes a poem about evening. He has the sun low in the west, a faint flush of pink across the sky; shadows from the trees and barns and siloes lengthen; the air is still; one birds sing; a man is going home across the evening fields. The reader sees each one of these sensible details, but he intuits something else that isn’t mentioned in the poem. He intuits peace or completion, not mentioned explicitly, but implicitly in the sensible notes set down. That peace or completion is the form of the poem, that which made to shine forth through sensible detail pleases when apprehended by the intellect; it is this that we understand by the word beauty. This is what Wordsworth wished to say when he
said he would throw over ordinary things a faint coloring of the imagination so that they would appear extraordinary.

How is this formal object cognized? St. Thomas says by intuition, that is by a direct perception.
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The thesis submitted by James L. Magner, S.J., has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date

Signature of Adviser