

## COLERIDGE'S VIEWS ON WORDSWORTH'S THEORY OF POETIC DICTION

وجهات نظر "كوليردج" على نظرية "وردزورث" في الالتقاء الشعري

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There is no denying the fact that Wordsworth started a new style of writing but on certain points the critics as well as readers did not agree with him. They raised their voice against him. Among them one man who spoke with shrewdest authority was Coleridge. He was a friend of Wordsworth. He initially agreed with Wordsworth's idea of plain diction but later on he disagreed with his views. After a lapse of 17 years, in 1817, he gave his own views regarding the excellences and defects of Wordsworth's theory in chapters 14,17,18,19,20 and 22 of his *Biographia Literaria*.

According to him Wordsworth undertook a useful task and deserved all the praise for the attempt but still there were certain things that he could not have taken for granted. So he opposed them. As Coleridge says :

*"The positions which I controvert are contained in the sentences" - "a selection of the real language of men", "the language of these men (men in low and rustic life) I propose to myself to imitate and as far as possible to adopt the very language of men." "Between the language of prose and that of metrical composition there neither is nor can be any essential difference". It is against these exclusively that my opposition is directed".<sup>1</sup>*

In view of these statements Coleridge's criticism can be divided under three heads.

(a) As far as the phrase "selection of real language of men" is concerned Coleridge objected the use of the word "real." According to him :

*"Every man's language varies, according to the extent of his knowledge, the activity of his facultie and the depth or quickness of his feelings. Every man's language has first its individualities; secondly, the common properties of the class to which he belongs; and thirdly words and phrases of universal use ..... For real therefore we must substitute ordinary or lingua communis. And this we have proved is no more to be*

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*found in the phraseology of low and rustic life than in that of any other class. Omit the peculiarities of each and the result of course must be common to all..... thelingua communis of every country as Dante has well observed exists everywhere in parts and no whereas a whole."*<sup>2</sup>

(b) Secondly, Wordsworth favoured to adopt the very language of men in poetry. But Coleridge was against this view. According to him common language cannot be adopted for writing poetry because rustics are not educated persons. Thus education makes a great difference between the language of the poet and the common man. Putting emphasis on the need of education Coleridge said in chapter XVII :

*"I am convinced that for the human soul to prosper in rustic life a certain vantage ground is pre requisite. It is not everyman that is likely to be improved by a country life or by country labours. Education or original sensibility or both must pre exist if the changes, forms and incidents of nature are to prove a sufficient stimulant."*<sup>3</sup>

In this context Coleridge made an excellent observation on Dr. Henry More, according to whom even religious books play an important role in educating rustics he said :

*"A man of confined education, but of good parts by constant reading of Bible, will naturally form a more winning and commanding rhetoric than those that are learned, the inter mixture of tongues and of artificial phrases debasing their style."*<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, According to Coleridge, if the peasantry of Wordsworth's Westmoreland and Cumberland spoke a pure and vigorous language, this came not from uninstructed communion with nature but from a spirit of independence and from a solid religious education and acquaintance with *The Bible* and hymn-books. Coleridge accepts that Wordsworth's peasants had religious influence but still he was in doubt whether there was full similarity between the languages of ordinary men and its use in Wordsworth's poetry. As he remarked in Chapter XVIII :

*"We do not adopt the language of a class by the mere adoption of such words exclusively as that class would use, or at least understand; but like wise by following the order in which the words of such men are wont to succeed each other. Now this order, in the intercourse of uneducated men, is distinguished from the diction of their superiors in knowledge and power by the greater disjunction and separation in the component parts of that whatever it be, which they wish to communicate. There is a want of that prospective of mind, that surview, which enables a man to foresee the whole of what he is to convey, appertaining to any one point .....*  
<sup>5</sup>

Further, Coleridge gave an example from the first stanza of *Lyrical Ballads* :

***"In distant countries I have been***

*And yet I have not often seen  
A healthy man, a man full grown,  
Weep in the public roads alone.*

.....  
*Sturdy he seemed though he was sad  
And in his arms a lamb he had.*

"The words here are doubtless such as are current in all ranks of life, and of course not less so in the hamlet and cottage than in shop, manufactory college or palace. But is this the order in which the rustic would have placed the words? I am grievously deceived if the following less compact mode of commencing the same tale be not a far more faithful copy. I have been in a many parts far and near, and I don't know that I ever saw before a man crying by himself in the public road; a grown man I mean, that was neither sick nor hurt," and c. and c. But when I turn to the following stanza in the *Thorn* :

*"At all times of the day and night  
This wretched woman thither goes,  
And she is known to every star  
And every wind that blows :  
And there beside the thorn she sites,  
When the blue day lights in the skies  
And when the whirl wind's on the hill,  
Or frosty air is keen and still;  
And to herself she cries,  
Oh misery! Oh misery!  
Oh woe is me! Oh misery!"*

And compare this with the language of ordinary men, or with that which I can conceive at all likely to proceed, in real life, from such a narrator as is supposed in the note to the poem-compare it either in the succession of the images or of the sentences-I am reminded of the sublime prayer and hymn of praise in Milton."<sup>6</sup>

(c) The third point that remains to be discussed is of great significance. Wordsworth's assertion was that "There neither is nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." To discuss this elaborately was Coleridge's chief intention. First of all Coleridge objects :

*"Prose itself at least in all argumentative and consecutive works differs  
and ought to differ, from the language of conversation; even as reading  
ought to differ from talking. Unless, therefore, the difference denied be*

*that of the mere words, as materials common to all styles of writing, and not of the style itself in the universally admitted sense of the term, it might be naturally presumed that there must exist a still greater between the ordinance of poetic composition and that of prose, than is expected to distinguish prose from ordinary conversation."*<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the difference between the language of the two Coleridge said :

*"We should be allowed to say that the style of architecture of Westminster Abbey is essentially different from that of Saint Paul's even though both had been built with blocks cut into the same form, and from the same quarry. Only in this latter sense of the term must it have been denied by Mr. Wordsworth (for in this sense alone is it affirmed by the general opinion) that the language of poetry (i.e. the formal construction or architecture of the words and phrases) is essentially different from that of prose."*<sup>8</sup>

Coleridge said that Wordsworth in arguing that the language of metrical composition is essentially the same as that of prose meant only that poetry and prose have the same vocabulary. According to Coleridge Wordsworth only meant that :

*"A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference, therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object proposed."*<sup>9</sup>

Further, extending his debate, Coleridge said :

*"The question is not whether there may not occur in prose an order of words, which would be equally proper in a poem ; nor whether there are not beautiful lines and sentences of frequent occurrence in good poems, which would be equally becoming as well as beautiful in good prose ; for neither the one or the other has ever been either denied or doubted by any one. The true question must be, whether there are not modes of expression, a construction, and an order of sentences, which are in their fit and natural place in a serious prose composition, but would be disproportionate and heterogeneous in metrical poetry ; and vice versa, whether in the language of a serious poem there may not be an arrangement both of words and sentences and a use and selection of (what are called) figures of speech, both as to their kind, their frequency, and their occasions, which on a subject of equal weight would be vicious and alien in correct and manly prose. I contend that in both cases this unfitness of each for the place of the other frequently will and ought to exist."*<sup>10</sup>

This distinction between prose and poetry is created by the use of metre. How does metre help in creating this distinction? It has also been mentioned by Coleridge. According to him the importance of metre lies in the fact that it holds in check the workings of passions. As he says :

*"First, that as the elements of metre owe their existence to a state of increased excitement, so the metre itself should be accompanied by the natural language of excitement. Secondly, that as these elements are formed into metre artificially by a voluntary act, with the design and for the purpose of blending delight with emotion. So the traces of present volition should throughout the metrical language be proportionally discernible."<sup>11</sup>*

Coleridge thinks that metre is very effective. In his words :

*"As far as metre acts in and for itself, it tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention. This effect it produces by the continued excitement of surprise and by the quick reciprocations of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited, which are too slight indeed to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness, yet become considerable in their aggregate influence. As a medicated atmosphere, or as wine during animated conversation, they act powerfully, though themselves unnoticed."<sup>12</sup>*

Coleridge finds fault in Wordsworth's use of metre and says :

*"The discussion on the powers of metre in the Preface is highly magenious, and touches at all points on truth. But I can not find any statement of its powers considered abstractly and separately. On the contrary, Mr. Wordsworth seems always to estimate metre by the powers which it exerts during (and, as I think, in consequence of) its combination with other elements of poetry. Thus the previous difficulty is left unanswered, what the elements are with which it must be combined in order to produce its own effect to any pleasurable purpose. Double and trisyllable rhymes indeed form a lower species of wit, and attended to exclusively for their own sake, may become a source of momentary amusement, as in poor Smart's distich to the Welch Squire who had promised him a hare :*

***Tell me, thou son of great Cadwallader !***

***Hast sent the hare ?or hast thou swallow'd her?***

But for any poetic purposes, metre resembles (if the aptness of the simile may excuse its meanness) yeast, worthless or disagreeable by itself, but giving vivacity and spirit to the liquor with which it is proportionally combined."<sup>13</sup>

Giving the answer as to why he himself chose to write in metre, Coleridge says :

*"I write in metre, because I am about to use a language different from that of prose."<sup>14</sup>*

Coleridge adds :

*"That the metre itself, the sole acknowledged difference, will occasionally become metre to the eye only. .... When if the poem be in blank verse, this can be effected without any alteration, or at most by merely restoring one or two words to their proper places, from which they had been transplanted for no assignable cause or reason but that of the author's convenience; but if it be in rhyme, by the mere exchange of the final word of each line for some other of the same meanings, equally appropriate, dignified and euphonic."*<sup>15</sup>

The answer or objection in the *Preface* to the anticipated remark "that metre paves the way to other distinctions", is contained in the following words :

*"The distinction of rhyme and metre is voluntary and uniform, and not like that produced by (what is called) poetic diction, arbitrary and subject to infinite caprices, upon which no calculations whatever can be made. In the one case the reader is utterly at the mercy of the poet respecting what imagery or diction he may choose to connect with the passion"*<sup>16</sup>

According to Coleridge next thing to be objected against is an under predilection for the dramatic form in certain poems, from which one or other of two evils results. Either the thought and diction are different from that of the poet and then there arises an incongruity of style; or they are the same and undistinguishable, and then it presents a species of ventriloquism, where two are represented as talking, while in truth one man only speaks.

Through this discussion it is obvious that Coleridge criticised some defects in Wordsworth's theory but only to criticise him was not his aim. As Graham Hough says :

*"If Coleridge's aim had been merely to confute Wordsworth he could have done so simply enough by taking examples from existing poetry..... But it is against Coleridge's nature to proceed in this manner. He prefers to argue from general principles. For he is not writing to contradict or confute, but to do something more serious - to disentangle the essential and important truth from the difficulties created by Wordsworth's less philosophical utterance"*<sup>17</sup>

It is for this reason that he never fails to praise Wordsworth, when he deserves it. For instance he praises Wordsworth's diction because it has :

*"An austere purity of language both grammatically and logically ; in short a perfect appropriateness of the words to the meaning."*<sup>18</sup>

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