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‘Radical Difference’:
Wordsworth’s Classical Imagination
and Roman Ethos

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.
The University of Auckland, 2008.
The subject of this thesis is the character of William Wordsworth, who is widely held to be both a poet of the imagination, and an ‘exemplary’ Romantic. His greatest poem, *The Prelude* had as its subject matter the growth of his own poetic mind; something that can also be understood as the growth of his ‘imagination’. His friend and fellow poet, later turned philosopher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge developed a novel and romantic understanding of ‘the Imagination’ in the early years of his friendship with Wordsworth. He identified Wordsworth’s genius, as a poet, as the product of a particularly gifted imagination, something he conceived of as an innate ability.

In this thesis I challenge this ‘Romantic’ representation of Wordsworth’s genius, one that has become canonical, largely as a result of Coleridge’s treatment of Wordsworth, Poetry and Imagination in *Biographia Literaria*. In making a more detailed analysis of Wordsworth’s own claims about his identity, his poetic art, and imagination, I develop an argument that proposes a very different ethos to the one still largely considered normative in English Studies. The argument depends on a better recognition of Wordsworth’s Classical Republican sympathies in the 1790s, and the extent to which the example of the famous Roman statesman, orator, philosopher, and poet, Marcus Tullius Cicero captured Wordsworth’s imagination. Contrary to those who would romanticise Wordsworth’s genius, I suggest his best work was the product of a theory of poetry based on principles that defined a very classical ideology.

My argument builds on the work of recent, more detailed, representations of Wordsworth as a historical subject whose ideas were defined by particular historical circumstances, and whose identity developed out of those experiences. In addition to paying more attention to the ‘historical’ Wordsworth, I have also made a detailed analysis of his language, discovering the existence of a particular idiom. Wordsworth’s vocabulary reflects, not only a classical humanist ideology, but also strong Stoic sentiments and an attitude of Socratic, Academic Scepticism. I trace the source of this characteristic idiom back to the influence of Cicero whose works, along with Marcus Quintilian’s *De Institutione Oratoria* defined key aspects of Wordsworth’s poetic theory in the late 1790s and early 1800s.
Dedicated to the Memory
of
Robert Woof
Preface and Acknowledgements

In concluding his study of Wordsworth’s poetic powers in *Biographia Literaria*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge challenged for Wordsworth ‘the gift of imagination in the highest and strictest sense of the word’. Although, as Coleridge’s previous chapters had demonstrated, there were a number of problems with Wordsworth’s mistaken poetic theory, he was rescued from these faults by his ‘imaginative power’. This, enabled him to stand ‘nearest of all modern writers to Shakespeare and Milton’. ‘If’, Coleridge wrote, ‘I should ever be fortunate enough to render my analysis of imagination, its origin and characters, thoroughly intelligible to the reader, he will scarcely open on a page of this poet’s works without recognizing, more or less, the presence and influence of this faculty’ (*BL* Ch XXII).

This thesis challenges Coleridge’s challenge, and aims to free readers of Wordsworth’s poetry from the claims about his imagination made by Coleridge here. Given that Coleridge never did fulfil the promise he had made earlier (in Chapter XIII), to complete his analysis of imagination and make it ‘thoroughly intelligible’, his readers have had to fall back on statements in *Biographia* – incomplete as they are – to assist them in their reading of Wordsworth. This thesis argues that this has led to a substantial misreading of Wordsworth’s imagination, something that I too was trained to do in my undergraduate years. Having, myself, been a pupil at Christ’s Hospital, I was inevitably inducted into the Coleridgean tradition by Reginald Watters, Head of English at the time. The school celebrated Coleridge’s bi-centenary in 1972 with an Exhibition, and a series of lectures given by John Beer, Kathleen Coburn, David Newsome and William Walsh. I was, for many years, a committed Coleridgean, and as an undergraduate in the late 1970s I was a romantic believer in Coleridge’s representation of Wordsworth. Although I attended University in Britain, it was the ‘visionary company’ of North American High Romantic critics, Meyer Abrams, Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman, whose works captured my romantic imagination in my youth. It was only in the mid 1990s, when undertaking research for a Masters thesis, that I later learnt of ‘theory’ and became engaged in the debate taking place in the academy then about the role of history and ideology in the study of the literary.

In acknowledging those who have contributed, especially, to the production of this thesis I am obliged to think back to my Christ’s Hospital education, *not* ‘pent mid cloisters dim’,¹ and to acknowledge a Mr Cornish, an eccentric (to our minds), Australian exchange teacher who taught at Christ’s Hospital for a year. He had the audacity to decide that his ‘O’ Level students should study *Coriolanus* and *The Poems of Keats*, rather than the far more popular choices of *Macbeth* and *Homage to Catalonia*. This introduction to Keats sealed my fate as a Romantic, something that was compounded by Watters’ lessons on Coleridge. Where Coleridge had James Bowyer to contend with, I was inspired by David Newsome’s lectures to the Grecians in which he was drawing on materials

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¹ The school moved out of London at the beginning of the twentieth century, to an impressive and expansive rural setting near Horsham in Sussex, and coincidentally, a mile from Shelley’s birthplace.
from the book he had been working on at the time, *Two Classes of Men: Platonism and Romantic Thought*.

In my current research for this thesis I have been fortunate to have had two years of scholarship funding from the University of Auckland, and I would like to thank my Supervisor, Associate Professor Joanne Wilkes and Professor Michael Neil, for supporting my scholarship application. I have also had funding from the University of Auckland Graduate Research Fund that enabled me to travel to the United Kingdom to present papers at a couple of conferences. It has been a very solitary activity working on a poet who wandered lonely as a cloud in Aotearoa, the land of the long white cloud. Few New Zealanders have much reason to get excited about a long-dead, white, European, male poet who wrote about dancing daffodils. I have, therefore, greatly appreciated the possibilities offered by attending such conferences. Personal circumstances – the extended terminal illness of my father in Britain – led to me visiting Britain annually for a further three years, and I timed those visits to coincide with the summer conference season.

Through participation at several more conferences I was able to discuss my own research with a number of specialists whose works I had been studying, and I was also able to appreciate current debates in literary studies. But although this study had originally included some debate with certain key figures in both Romantic studies and the study of Wordsworth, I had to cut that section, in order to focus on the more important matter of Wordsworth’s theorising. I am however very grateful for the conversations that I was able to have with several scholars, some of whom I can be seen to disagree with here, in their interpretation of Wordsworth, but whose scholarship I have relied on in my own research. I trust that my disagreements will be seen in the light of the argument I offer here, which suggests that their own work relied too heavily on Coleridge’s representation of Wordsworth. I have dedicated this thesis to the memory of Robert Woof with whom I discussed the earlier stages of its development on my several visits to Grasmere. I was especially grateful to Robert for his hospitality, his conversation, and his genuine concern for the matters of the human heart that were so important to Wordsworth. He had also introduced me to Richard Clancey, who was eager to see how my research developed. Sadly these Grasmere acquaintances, and my father, all died before I was able to complete a project that kept expanding in its scope.

I offer particular thanks to John Williams for support and for helping me identify the nature of Wordsworth’s classical republican sympathies; to Theresa Kelley who was able to appreciate where my argument was going and offered her support; to Bruce Graver for telling me to read *Tusculan Disputations*; to James Chandler for a discussion about High Romanticism; to Marilyn Butler for her questions about a paper I presented on Wordsworth’s debt to Thomson; to Pamela Clemit for responding to my queries about Godwin; to Keith Hanley and the Centre for Wordsworth Studies at Lancaster University for offering generous support when I had hoped to get research funding; to Alan Liu for taking time to discuss Wordsworth on a visit to Auckland. Thanks are also due to Nicholas Roe for suggesting I attend the Coleridge Conference, and to Paul Davidson and the organising committee, for the award of a Bursary. The Coleridge Conference, in particular provided the possibility of discussions with a number of distinguished academics, including Paul Sheats – whose
representation of Wordsworth I follow closely here – and Paul Magnuson who, like Robert Woof, was genuinely interested in listening to my argument.

I have also been honoured to have received two Stephen Copley Awards from the British Association for Romantic Studies, to assist me in research at the Wordsworth Trust Library at Grasmere, Bristol University Library and the British Library, and I thank the various BARS committee members over the past few years for their work. Thanks also to the librarians at the above institutions, and especially to Jeff Cowton at the Jerwood Centre. The Wordsworth Trust has been generous in allowing me access to original manuscripts, notebooks, and books from Wordsworth’s library. Thanks are also due to Joanne Wilkes again, this time for her enduring patience in supervising a project that seemed like it would never end.

Lastly I need to thank my family, whose support for my work has been tested to the limit. I thank Susanne and Matthew most especially, for their patience, and my daughter Tara, though no longer at home, has also experienced my ‘absence’. I also thank my sisters Alice and Catherine, my brother James, and my mother Pamela for their support during my visits to Britain. To my father I owe a more serious debt, since his illness served to justify the expense of my annual trips to Britain, which enabled me to add further detail to my research project.
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Abbreviations

BL Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions, S.T.C. Coleridge. Ed. George Watson


In references, page numbers are followed by line numbers.


WR I & II I. Wordworth’s Reading 1770-1799.
II. Wordworth’s Reading 1800-1815
Ed. Duncan Wu