THE
LANGUAGE
OF
WORDSWORTH
AND
COLERIDGE

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FRANCES AUSTIN

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MACMILLAN

Acknowledgements

This book could not have been written without the help of many friends and institutions. I am particularly grateful to the librarians of the University of Southampton and the county libraries at Ringwood and especially Sherborne for dealing patiently with requests for books and articles, and to the staff of the Inter Library Loan Service.

I should like to thank the students who contributed to seminars on Wordsworth and Coleridge, and especially the 'matures' at Bishop Grosseteste, Lincoln (1969), who roused my enthusiasm for *The Ancyent Marinere*, and the Shaftesbury Group (1986) for their encouragement.

It is a great pleasure to acknowledge the help I have received from my former student, Valerie Milling, who has responded so promptly to enquiries about certain books not readily accessible. Dr Bernard Jones has given much time to reading my various drafts and has made many helpful suggestions. Above all, Professor Norman Blake has been tireless in answering questions and generous with encouragement, and not only during the writing of this book. I need hardly say that these people are not responsible for the shortcomings that are inevitable in a short book on so vast a subject.

Grammatical Terminology

Inevitably in a book of this kind grammatical terms must be used. Since many readers may be unfamiliar with even 'traditional' terminology and others may be used to different terms used in the various current grammatical 'models', a few words on the usage here will not come amiss.

The basic terms for the 'parts of speech' – noun, verb, adjective, etc. – have been retained as is the practice of most current models of grammar. For explaining and describing the basic structure of sentences Systemic Grammar has generally been followed, sometimes in a modified form. In Systemic Grammar the clause is divided into four main elements: Subject, Verb, Complement and Adjunct. These are represented by the notation S V C A. Subjects and Complements (the term Complement includes both the Object and Complement of 'traditional' grammar) are often 'realised' by nominal groups. A nominal group is a group of words based round a noun which is called the 'head' of that group. An example is 'the swift flowing river with its swirling eddies', where the 'head' is the word *river*. All nominal groups can be used as the Subject of a sentence. Complements are also 'realised' by adjectives or adjectival phrases when they follow the verb *to be* or other 'copula' verbs such as *seem*. Examples are 'the river is *deep*', 'the lion looked *very fierce*'. Verbs are 'realised' by verbal groups. These may consist of a single verb or a verb preceded by one or more auxiliary verbs. 'John *swam* a hundred yards' is an example of the first kind and 'John *would have been swimming* today but he has a cold' of the second. Note that the verb which conveys the 'main' information (called a 'lexically full' verb) comes last in the group. An Adjunct is essentially anything which does not come under one of the other three headings. There are,

therefore, various kinds of Adjuncts, but the basic one and that to which the notation A refers in this book is an adverb or adverbial group. Examples are 'merrily'; 'with great courage'; and 'beside the stream' in sentences such as 'he sang *merrily*'; 'he fought the lion *with great courage*'; and 'she knelt *beside the stream*'.

It is now customary in Systemic Grammar to discard the term 'sentence' and substitute 'clause complex'. Readers will find both terms used in this book. 'Sentence' seems too useful a term to be rejected completely but at times 'clause complex' is clearer and more precise because it indicates the clause structure of which the sentence is composed and the way in which those clauses are put together.

The term 'expansion' is a technical term. It is normally used to refer to methods of extending the clause (see M. A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Edward Arnold, 1985, pp. 202–16) but here mostly refers to expansion of the nominal group.

One further technical term that may be unfamiliar has been used. This is 'interpersonal', again a term modified from Halliday (see *IFG*, pp. 332–4). It is used for comments of the poet/narrator expressing a personal opinion that occur in the text but are really external to it. Examples are 'I think'; 'it seems'; 'perhaps'; and so on.

Students will find that in most books based on Systemic Grammar the Verbal element is marked with a P for Predicator. As V seems more accessible to those unfamiliar with this grammar it has been adopted here. It is used in J. F. Wallwork, *Language and Linguistics* (Heinemann, 1969). Readers may consult Chapter 5 of this book for a quick guide to the structure of the four main elements of the clause. A fuller exposition of Systemic Grammar will be found in Dennis Freeborn's, *A Course Book in English Grammar* (Macmillan, 1987). Halliday's *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (see above) is a much more advanced account of Systemic Grammar written by its leading exponent and it is referred to frequently in the notes. It is of particular use for textual studies and may be of interest to those who wish to pursue the subject further. A very useful introductory book on grammar, that shows the relation of traditional grammar to Systemic Grammar, is N. F. Blake,

Traditional English Grammar and Beyond (Macmillan, 1988). For other explanations of a rather more traditional, although up-to-date, kind, the grammars of Randolph Quirk and his collaborators cannot be ignored. The latest of these is R. Quirk *et al.*, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Longman, 1986). An earlier, somewhat shorter version is R. Quirk *et al.*, *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (Longman, 1972), and a simpler version based on this is R. Quirk and S. Greenbaum, *A University Grammar of English* (Longman, 1973).

Texts and Abbreviations

All poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge taken from *Lyrical Ballads* are quoted from *Lyrical Ballads*, eds R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963, rev. 1965) (*LB*). Wordsworth's successive versions of 'The Ruined Cottage' are taken from *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, ed. James Butler (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U.P.; Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979). References to the origins of 'The Female Vagrant' are based on *The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U.P.; Sussex: Harvester Press, 1975). Other poems by Wordsworth are quoted from *Poetical Works*, eds Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940–9) and the 1805 text of *The Prelude*, eds Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd edn. rev. Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959); also available in Oxford Standard Authors, 1960. The 1800 and 1802 Prefaces to *Lyrical Ballads* and the 1800 Note to 'The Thorn' are taken from Brett and Jones's edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. These may also be found in W. J. B. Owen, ed., *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), and the 1800 Preface in Vol. I of *Prose Works*, eds W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) pp. 118–58. The 1815 Preface to Wordsworth's *Poems* is taken from Vol. III of *Prose Works*, pp. 25–39, abbreviated to *PW*. Wordsworth's letters are quoted from the seven volume edition of Chester L. Shaver, Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill, which divides into The Early Years (*EY*), The Middle Years (*MY*) and The Later Years (*LY*) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967–88). This edition is a revision of Ernest de Selincourt's six volume edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935–8). References to letters are followed by the equivalent volume (where relevant) and page number in de Selincourt's

edition. Poems of Coleridge, other than those printed in *Lyrical Ballads*, are quoted from *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (1975, 1st edn. 1912). Quotations from *Biographia Literaria* (*BL*) are from the Everyman edition (London: Dent 1906, rev. George Watson 1965), to which page references are given. Coleridge's letters are quoted from *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71).

Datings for Wordsworth's poems are mainly based on Mark L. Reed, *The Chronology of the Early Years 1770–1799* (*CEY*) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1967) and *The Chronology of the Middle Years 1800–1815* (*CMY*) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1975).

M. A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Edward Arnold, 1985) is abbreviated to *IFG*.

Contents

1 Introduction

Although they almost certainly met at Bristol in the summer of 1795, the close friendship between Wordsworth and Coleridge began in the summer of 1797 when Coleridge 'leaped over a gate and bounded across a pathless field' to Racedown (*LY*, IV, 719 [III, 1263]),[1] the house in Dorset where Wordsworth was living with his sister Dorothy. By this time Wordsworth's youthful adventures in France were well behind him. His involvement with the French Revolution had been complicated by his liaison with Annette Vallon, who became an ardent royalist. When his uncles stopped sending him money he was forced to leave France, leave Annette and his baby daughter, Caroline, and return to England. His disillusionment, first when England failed to support the revolution and then when he realised the full horrors of the atrocities committed by it, pushed him to the verge of mental breakdown. A legacy of £900 from his friend Raisley Calvert allowed him to rejoin Dorothy and regain some peace of mind in the tranquillity of the West Country. Coleridge, too, had virtually finished with his dreams of setting up a democratic republic on the shores of the Susquehanna with a group of friends, including his future brother-in-law, Robert Southey. This project they called Pantisocracy. Unwisely, and finally it seems against his will, Coleridge had been persuaded into marrying Sara Fricker and in 1797 they were settled with their first child, David Hartley, at Nether Stowey in Somerset. Coleridge was a published poet and Wordsworth, encouraged by Dorothy, had decided finally to devote all his energies to composition. Both men, therefore, had done with the earlier follies of their post-student days and were open to new experiences. Perhaps this was why their friendship flourished so rapidly.

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The early years of Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Coleridge (1772–1834) had been both similar and dissimilar. They were orphaned early. Wordsworth's father died in 1783 when he was thirteen and Coleridge's father in 1781 when he was only nine. Wordsworth had also lost his mother before this second catastrophe overtook him. Thereafter their lives followed different paths. Wordsworth remained at his school in Hawkshead and in many ways his life continued unchanged. In 1782, the year following his father's death, Coleridge, however, was packed off to Christ's Hospital in London, where he was desperately unhappy. He did not even return to his native Devon for holidays and remembered the haunts of his early childhood with homesick longing. It was at Christ's, however, that he met his lifelong friend, Charles Lamb.

We are apt to think of both Wordsworth and Coleridge as nineteenth-century poets, which indeed they are. But we tend to forget that their formative years were lived wholly in the eighteenth century. Wordsworth was thirty in 1800 and Coleridge was just two years younger. It is generally held that by the age of thirty a person's linguistic habits are more or less fixed and change relatively little after that. Both men, therefore, had acquired the foundations of their language during the eighteenth century and their early attempts at poetry are firmly in the eighteenth-century tradition. Yet, just before he reached the age of thirty Wordsworth set about one of the greatest linguistic experiments ever undertaken by an English poet. He altered his normal mode of usage and in *Lyrical Ballads*, the joint venture that he began with Coleridge not long after that meeting in 1797, he used a language that was virtually new both to him and in poetry. This deliberate change was to affect all his writing from that time on. Later, in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) Coleridge was to criticise Wordsworth for going too far in the direction of what was considered unpoetic and commonplace, but by then Wordsworth had changed the course of English poetic language. Even Coleridge's poetry written after 1798 cannot be confused with that of his earlier period.

The influence that each poet had on the other has been much discussed and written about. The immediate impression is that Wordsworth's was the greater influence. Certainly, his treatment of Coleridge over *Lyrical Ballads* was somewhat high-

handed to say the least. Coleridge appears to have been the less dominant of the two, lavishing uncritical adulation on Wordsworth until the break in their friendship in 1810. This view, however, has been contested.[2] It is also worth bearing in mind that in 'The Eolian Harp' Coleridge expresses the essential attitude towards life and nature that Wordsworth was later to elaborate so fully in *The Prelude* and which is seen in many of his poems in *Lyrical Ballads*. 'The Eolian Harp' was written in the summer of 1795 before either poet had had any influence on the other. Indeed, Coleridge developed a manner of writing blank verse in his 'conversation' poems which was quite unlike anything written in this form before and which almost certainly influenced the blank verse that Wordsworth wrote after his early play in the form, *The Borderers* (1795–6). The relationship between the two men is so complicated, not only by events and writings at the time but by their later recollections, that it is now virtually impossible to disentangle. Another complicating factor is the part played by Dorothy, who was undoubtedly a great influence on both poets. It must also be remembered that they were both influenced by new attitudes that were emerging amongst their contemporaries and in the elder generation among such men as Godwin. Reaction to earlier eighteenth-century ideas was widespread and they were not as completely original in their own thinking as is sometimes imagined. What is certain is that they stimulated and encouraged each other to the extent that much of the best-known poetry of each was the product of the years of their close friendship.

First, however, if we are to understand their use of language, we must look briefly at the literary tradition which Wordsworth and Coleridge inherited. Language cannot be separated from subject and the subject matter of this tradition is therefore important. Two things were central to eighteenth-century poetry: Nature and Man.

The tradition of nature poetry had continued from earliest times, through Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton to the early eighteenth century, and attitudes towards it had changed relatively little. On the whole it was viewed through the classical and pastoral tradition and was generally presented in what seems today an idealised and artificial light. With the eighteenth century, however, nature and the natural landscape began to

be described more realistically. Often the two attitudes, the idealised and the realistic, continued side by side and sometimes even merged in one poem. In the earliest poetry of the century, nevertheless, it was of a landscape that had been 'tamed' by man that the poets wrote. This is clear in Pope's early poem *Windsor-Forest* (1704).[3]

> Succeeding monarchs heard the subjects' cries,
> Nor saw displeas'd the peaceful cottage rise.
> Then gath'ring flocks on unknown mountains fed,
> O'er sandy wilds were yellow harvests spread,
> The forests wonder'd at th'unusual grain . . .   (85–9)

Pope's observation of natural phenomena is as sharp as that of Wordsworth or Coleridge but the reader is always aware of the presence of man and human activities:

> With slaught'ring guns th'unwearied fowler roves,
> When frosts have whiten'd all the naked groves;
> Where doves in flocks the leafless trees o'ershade,
> And lonely woodcocks haunt the wat'ry glade.
> He lifts the tube, and levels with his eye;
> Straight a short thunder breaks the frozen sky:
> Oft, as in airy rings they skim the heath,
> The clam'rous lapwings feel the leaden death.   (125–32)

Another view of nature, however, develops quite early in the century. This is nature wild and untamed. It was established well before the middle of the century and became at times excessive and even violent in expression. Two short extracts will demonstrate this kind of poetry. The first is part of 'Winter' from Thomson's *The Seasons* and shows the elemental expression into which this attitude often moved:

> Then issues forth the Storm, with loud Control,
> And the thin Fabrick of the pillar'd Air
> O'erturns at once. Prone on th'uncertain Main,
> Descends th'Etherial Force, and plows its Waves,
> With dreadful Rift: from the mid-Deep, appears,
> Surge after Surge, the rising, wat'ry, War.

Whitening, the angry Billows rowl immense,
And roar their Terrors. . . . (161–8)

This was published as early as 1726. A description of a tempest
much more acceptable to us today comes in Cowper's *The Task*,
written in 1785, well on into the lifetime of Wordsworth and
Coleridge:

> Mighty winds
> That sweep the skirt of some far-spreading wood
> Of ancient growth, make music not unlike
> The dash of ocean on his winding shore,
> And lull the spirit while they fill the mind,
> Unnumber'd branches waving in the blast,
> And all their leaves fast flutt'ring, all at once. (I, 183–9)

Something of the effect the elements can have on man's
sensibility appears in these lines and this was, of course, typical
of the later part of the century, as the age of 'feeling' took over
from the age of 'reason'.

After the middle of the century there is a surprising dearth
of well-known names on the poetic scene. Of those that do
occur, Goldsmith, Cowper and, considerably later, Crabbe, were
already beginning to show a shift in the focus of their subject
matter that to some extent prefigures the line Wordsworth was
to take. The impact of Burns came from an independent
tradition. All indicate some interest in the effect nature has on
man and his conduct or emotional responses, although in very
different ways. Crabbe painted a far more pessimistic picture
of village life than Goldsmith had done some thirteen years
before. Goldsmith, lamenting the exodus from the countryside,
idealised, although in a more realistic manner than his prede-
cessors, the rural way of life. Generally, however, emotions
were written about in a rather stilted way, almost as if their
names were verbal counters. To us the writers seem to name
the emotion without attempting to recreate it. Thus emotions
usually appear as personifications. Indeed, Collins in his ode
'The Passions', written about 1746, treats them in just this way.
Any subtle or flexible attitude to the way in which people
respond to external forces was outside the range of mid-
eighteenth-century thinking.

Man and man's place in the universe were an ever present concern of eighteenth-century writers, as of thinkers at all times. We have seen that even in Pope's 'nature' poetry man is never far away. But for the most part poets of the first half of the century, including Pope, were concerned with the man in society rather than in the countryside and, moreover, only with the higher and more educated classes of society, who lived in an urban environment. From his imitations of Horace, which are concerned with human behaviour, to his witty, light-hearted satire, *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope depicts life in fashionable circles. Before Goldsmith and Crabbe there was little written about the ordinary humble citizen or the country dweller. Poets were concerned with morals and human conduct. Necessarily, this led to much verse of a satirical nature, which again addressed itself in the main to the higher ranks of society.

A further development during the eighteenth century was an attraction to the 'horrid' or 'Gothick'. This, too, appears surprisingly early in poetry, although we frequently associate it more with novels of the second half of the century, such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* written in 1764–5, and the works of Ann Radcliffe, whose first novel appeared in 1789. An early poetic example comes in Thomas Parnell's 'A Night-Piece on Death', which was not published until Pope edited a selection of Parnell's poems in 1722. The poet himself died in 1718. The following extract is less 'decorated' than many later writings on such themes:

> Now from yon black and fun'ral Yew,
> That bathes the Charnel House with Dew,
> Methinks I hear a *Voice* begin;
> (Ye Ravens, cease your croaking Din,
> Ye tolling Clocks, no Time resound
> O'er the long Lake and midnight Ground)
> It sends a Peal of hollow Groans,
> Thus speaking from among the Bones.   (53–60)

A later example of the Gothick occurs in 1743 in Robert Blair's blank-verse poem 'The Grave', the very title of which suggests the morbid:

Rous'd from their Slumbers
In grim Array the grizly Spectres rise,
Grim horrible, and obstinately sullen
Pass and repass, hush'd at the Foot of Night.
Again! the Screech-Owl shrieks: Ungracious Sound!
I'll hear no more, it makes one's Blood run chill.   (39–44)

The poem continues in this melodramatic way through several hundred lines, although some are considerably better than those quoted. Blair's poem was not, as might be deduced, a poetic version of a 'horrid' novel but a poem of serious religious intent.

Yet another aspect of the poetic environment in which Wordsworth and Coleridge grew up was the revival of the ballad tradition. This movement was an outgrowth of the antiquarianism of the seventeenth century but its effect on literature was not felt until the mid-eighteenth century. Chatterton's forgeries (1763–70) and Macpherson's 'Ossian' (1760, 1762 and 1763), some of which was certainly fabricated, were both part of this mania. In Scotland an important figure was Burns (1759–96), who collected, revised and composed original folk-type songs. Wordsworth referred to both Chatterton and Burns in his poem 'Resolution and Independence', wrote several poems addressed to Burns and even apostrophised 'Ossian'. The most pervasive influence on both Wordsworth and Coleridge was Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). It must be remembered, however, that the *Reliques* is a curiously miscellaneous collection. It consists of genuine old ballads and folksongs, such as the 'Ballad of Chevy Chace' and 'Barbara Allen', a number of compositions by known writers and numerous prose notes giving information about folk traditions. By the late 1790s what may be called 'ballad-fever' was raging through northern Europe. Many 'new' ballads were composed, especially in Germany and these were translated into English and printed in the literary papers of the day, such as *The Monthly Magazine*. Some, such as the ballads of Gottfried Burger (1747–94), were particularly popular in England and had a direct influence on Wordsworth and others. Burger's 'Leonore' (1774) was translated no fewer than five times, one version being by Sir Walter Scott, who, of course, both collected