

IS THERE ANY
'ESSENTIAL DIFFERENCE'
BETWEEN
THE LANGUAGE OF POETRY AND THAT OF PROSE?

An Essay by
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In the tradition of literary criticism different approaches have been proposed to answer the question whether there is an essential difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose. And although, according to the “common reader”, the answer should be that there must be a difference, since our literary tradition distinguishes between poetry and prose, the critical approaches and the statements that follow from them are surprisingly opposed to each other. A famous example, which therefore serves as the starting point of my examination, is the controversy between Wordsworth who claims that “there neither is, nor can be, any *essential* difference between the language of prose and metrical composition”¹ and Coleridge who points out that exactly because “a poem contains the same elements as a prose composition the difference . . . must consist in a different combination of them”². The above mentioned “common reader” would instantly take Coleridge’s side in the dispute. The question is, however, whether Coleridge is really contradicting Wordsworth. Is Wordsworth, a poet who consciously decides to write poems, really denying a difference in the combination of language elements in poetry and prose? We have to ask ourselves where the controversy is really situated. It may not, in the first place, lie in the “whether” but in the “where” of a difference, since different “wheres” might lead to different answers to the question whether there is a difference at all.

Wordsworth writes his ‘Preface to the Lyrical Ballads’ to acquaint his readers with “Poems so materially different from those upon which general approbation is at present bestowed.” (PLB 280) His poetry differs in two ways from the one the reader is accustomed to: First of all, Wordsworth experiments with the “object” of poetry. He “choose[s] incidents and situations from common life” for his poems and intends

¹William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Appendix’ (1850), in: William Wordsworth: *Selected Prose*, edited by John O. Hayden, (Penguin Books: London, New York, Ringwood, Markham, Auckland 1988), p. 287, in the following text this preface will be quoted as PLB with pagenumbers in parenthesis

²Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, edited by Nigel Leask, (Everyman’s Library, J.M. Dent & Charles E. Tuttle: London & Vermont 1965, 1997), p. 181-2, in the following text the book is quoted as BL with pagenumbers in parenthesis

to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and . . . to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them . . . the primary laws of our nature, chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement.” (PLB 281-2)

This choice of subject-matter goes hand in hand with the choice of language. Wordsworth rejects the “gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers” (PLB 281) and prefers instead “a selection of language really used by men” (PLB 282). The men he has in mind lead a “humble and rustic life” (PLB 282), thereby “being less under the influence of social vanity” (PLB 282), and their language differs from the “arbitrary and capricious habits of expression” (PLB 282) which can be found in poetry by “simple and unelaborated expressions” (PLB 282), permanence and a more “philosophical” character (PLB 282). It is Wordsworth intention “to imitate . . . and adopt the very language of men” (PLB 285) for his poetry by purifying it “from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust” (PLB 282).

Wordsworth knows that, by using this kind of language and subject-matter, he separates himself from “certain known habits” (PLB 281) of poetry so far that some of his readers “will look around for poetry, and will be induced to inquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.” (PLB 281) In his own judgment “little of what is usually called poetic diction” (PLB 285) can be found in his poems since he makes neither use of “mechanical device[s] of style . . . which Writers in metre seem to lay claim to by prescription” (PLB 285) nor of “extravagant and absurd diction” (PLB 304).

What Wordsworth is saying so far is that as long as we consider the frequent use of certain figures of speech and the more or less constant use of an extravagant phraseology as the essential difference between poetic language and prose language his language is certainly not poetic. For the modern reader, who is accustomed to a completely different kind of poetry, this statement might sound obvious but Wordsworth complains about “a numerous class of critics, who, when they stumble upon these prosaisms, as they call them, [i.e. language that does not differ from prose except by the use metre] imagine that they have made a notable discovery, and exult over the Poet as over a man ignorant of his own profession.” (PLB 285-6) Obviously Wordsworth does not share their opinion. He believes that “the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written” (PLB 286) And he “will go further. It may safely be affirmed, that there neither is, nor can be, any *essential* difference between the language of prose and metrical composition.” (PLB 287) It has to be noted first of all that Wordsworth, in the same sentence in which he denies an essential difference between the language of prose and the language of poetry, states a formal one: he speaks of prose and “metrical composition”. He clearly does not say poetry *is* prose. This indicates on the one hand that certain

formal differences do not seem to count as essential ones. And on the other hand it acknowledges differences although they are not evaluated as essential. When we follow the text of the preface further it becomes even more obvious that poetic language still is in some way different. Wordsworth speaks of a “strict affinity of metrical language with that of prose” (PLB 287) and not of an identity. He only rejects the opinion that what he calls “artificial [i.e. formal] distinctions” should be seen as essential ones so that, in his line of argument, a poet who does not use them can no longer be accused of violating the language of poetry. Instead of reading his famous statement as an expression of the idea that poetry equals prose it can be understood as an assertion that poetry that sounds like prose can still be poetry.

What then is the essential quality of language that Wordsworth finds equally in poetry and in prose? Whenever he discusses language Wordsworth stresses its ability and function to “convey . . . feelings and notions” (PLB 282). The language of men of low and rustic life, for example, is so valuable because it originates from an environment in which, at least according to his theory, “the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint [and] . . . in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.” (PLB 282) The resulting language is “plainer and more emphatic . . . [and] our elementary feelings . . . may be . . . more forcibly communicated;” (PLB 282) Correspondingly “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings . . . modified and directed by our thoughts” (PLB 283). M.H. Abrams points out that it is a common opinion in Wordsworth’s time to regard poetry “as a vehicle of an emotional state of mind”³ As such a vehicle poetry is opposed “not to prose, but to unemotional assertions of fact or ‘science.’ ”⁴ This distinction between science and poetry is grounded “on the difference between expression and description, or between emotive language and cognitive language.”⁵ Consequently, when Wordsworth states that there is no essential difference between the language of prose and the language of poetry their essential similarity can be seen in the fact that they are both able to operate as emotive language.

At the same time it was believed that “poetry originated in primitive utterances of passion which . . . were naturally rhythmic and figurative”⁶. In this respect poetry can be seen as a “spontaneous and genuine . . . expression of the emotional state”⁷ as opposed to a simulated and artificial expression, and this is, in fact, the argument Wordsworth uses for his rejection of the mechanical use of stylistic devices. He emphasizes that “there is no necessity to trick out or to elevate nature” (PLB 289), since “no words, which *his* [the poet’s] fancy or

³M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, (Oxford University Press: London, Oxford, New York 1963, 1971), p. 101

⁴Abrams, p. 101

⁵Abrams, p. 101

⁶Abrams, p. 101

⁷Abrams p. 102

imagination can suggest, will be to be compared with those which are the emanations of reality and truth.” (PLB 289-90) And it is exactly this view of poetry of a genuine expression of emotions which brings Wordsworth back to his claim that the poet has to use the “real language of men”. When “the Poet thinks and feels in the spirit of human passions [h]ow, then, can his language differ in any material degree from that of all other men who feel vividly and see clearly.” (PLB 294)

In an argument with Wordsworth’s above discussed ‘Preface to the Lyrical Ballads’ Coleridge formulates his own statement concerning poetic language and prose language. Therein he is mainly concerned with two aspects of Wordsworth’s explanations: His idea to use the real language of men of low and rustic life for poetry and his claim that there is no essential difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose.

The disagreement between Coleridge and Wordsworth in respect to the language that should be used in poetry originates from a different attitude to “cultural primitivism”⁸ and the therein implied opposition between civilization or art and nature. While Wordsworth believes that people “who had been happily protected by social barriers from the refinements of civilization and advanced literary art”⁹ possess a language that is most suitable for poetry, Coleridge feels “more than scepticism concerning the desirable influences of low and rustic life.” (BL 203) He cannot separate his notion of a language suitable for poetry from education and civilization and is convinced that “the best part of human language . . . is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself . . . the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man” (BL 210). With the same certainty Coleridge states that

a rustic’s language, purified from all provincialism and grossness, and so far re-constructed as to be made consistent with the rules of grammar . . . will not differ from the language of any other man of common-sense, however learned or refined he may be. (BL 209)

His proposal to the suggestion to use the “real language of men” in poetry is the idea of a *lingua communis* which “is no more to be 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.” (BL 211) At least in this point Coleridge does agree with Wordsworth: the language of poetry should not be taken from a separate stock but from a realm that is common to all.

Coleridge’s objection to Wordsworth’s claim that there is no essential difference between the language of prose and the language of poetry is connected with his interpretation of Wordsworth’s statement. In Coleridge’s opinion the reading that Wordsworth first of all states that poetry that sounds like prose may still be

⁸Abrams, p. 105

⁹Abrams, p. 83

poetry is unlikely. He complains that Wordsworth does not argue for anything when he points out that the lines of a poem might look like prose and parts of prose might be used in poetry, since “neither the one nor the other has ever been denied or doubted by any one.” (BL 219) Here Wordsworth seems to have had another opinion when he wrote his preface.

Coleridge clearly promotes the reading that Wordsworth wanted to say that poetry equals prose when he insists that Wordsworth’s

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 . . . *figures of speech*, . . . which . . . would be vicious and alien in correct and manly prose (BL 219).

We might ask, like Coleridge does earlier, whether Wordsworth would really deny or doubt that there are constructions in poetry and prose which fit either into one or the other category and not into both at the same time. We might also ask why Wordsworth does not make any attempt to prove that constructions like this do not exist. A simple answer might be that he does not try it precisely because it is *not* his “true question” and Coleridge’s interpretation of his statement a misunderstanding. In this case Coleridge might not understand why Wordsworth still insists that there is no essential difference between the language of prose and the language of poetry since, for Coleridge, an essential difference between both is a natural conclusion from the fact that there are expressions which do not fit into poetry and prose simultaneously. In Coleridge’s opinion this conclusion follows from the use of the word “essential”. In the only meaning of the word that makes, according to Coleridge, sense in this context “essence” “signifies the point or ground of contradiction between two modifications of the same substance or subject.” (BL 217) The example he gives to illuminate this definition is chosen as an analogy to the different styles of “architecture” or “construction” Coleridge discovers in poetic and prose language:

Thus we should be allowed to say, that the style of architecture of Westminster Abbey is *essentially* different from that of Saint Paul, even though both had been built with blocks cut into the same form, and from the same quarry. (BL 217)

Coleridge is certain that in this sense of the word essential the “general opinion” affirms “that the language of poetry (i.e. the formal construction, or architecture, of the words and phrases) is *essentially* different from that of prose.” (BL 217-18) But Coleridge still misses Wordsworth’s point. In the introduction it has

already been mentioned that it is not only important to ask whether there is an essential difference between the language of poetry and prose but also where we look for this difference. Coleridge chooses to look at the style of language. When he examines the style of poetry he discovers “elements of metre” and, moreover, notices that the “elements are formed into metre *artificially*, by a *voluntary act*” (BL 219). Metre clearly is a device of the special architecture and construction of poetry. And it is not only one of many devices but an organising one, since a poem should be built as a “whole . . . the parts of which mutually support and explain each other; all in their proportion harmonizing with and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement.” (BL 183) Besides metre and because of the metrical arrangement Coleridge discovers “a frequency of forms and figures of speech” and “a more frequent employment of picturesque and vivifying language, than would be natural in any other case” (BL 219-20). And these organizing and stylistic devices drive Coleridge to the conclusion “that in every import of the word ESSENTIAL . . . there may be, is, and ought to be, an *essential* difference between the language of prose and of metrical composition.” (BL 225) But however big Coleridge might print the word “essential” he and Wordsworth can still be both right at the same time simply because, as pointed out earlier, Wordsworth does not consider style when he compares poetry and prose but the function of language. And while the style of Westminster Abbey and St. Paul is undoubtedly essentially different, they serve equally without doubt the essentially same function: they are both religious buildings that are used as churches. By the same token the function of poetry and prose can be essentially the same, namely expressive and emotive, while their style to achieve this function can be essentially different.

About a hundred years later the distinction between the expressive or emotive language of poetry and the referential language of science is still maintained in the school of New Criticism, namely by I.A. Richards. But at the same time this distinction is supported by an examination of the formal properties of language.¹⁰

A similar idea that looks like a combination of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s approaches to define an essential similarity or difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose is chosen by the Prague Linguistic Circle and Roman Jakobson. They combine an examination of the functions of language with an analysis of the formal characteristics that belong to each function, and in their opinion the difference between poetry and prose manifests itself in both ways: poetry and prose perform different language functions and therefore possess different formal characteristics.

In contrast to the school of New Criticism as represented by Richards the Prague Linguists and Jakobson do not only distinguish between an emotive or expressive function and a referential function but between six different functions of language. Among these six function is a separate poetic function which is

¹⁰Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth, eds. *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*. (The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London 1994), p. 532

neither confined to poetry nor is “the poetic function . . . the sole function of verbal art”¹¹ but it serves as “its dominant, determining function” (LP 69). Jakobson defines this poetic function as a “set (Einstellung) toward the message as such, a focus on the message for its own sake” (LP 69). As Jonathan Culler points out “by ‘message’ Jakobson does not . . . mean propositional content” since this is the domain of the referential function of language “but simply the utterance itself as a linguistic form.”¹² Correspondingly the Prague Linguistic Circle stresses that the error “of identifying the poetic and communicative languages”¹³ has to be avoided. The poetic function neither serves a predominantly referential nor a predominantly emotive function but is, as Jan Mukařovský explains, a “linguistic form differing from the rest by virtue of the fact that it uses linguistic means to create an esthetic self-orientation and not to communicate.”¹⁴ The poetic function, therefore, does not so much refer to something outside of the text but to the text itself. Or, to use again the words of Jan Mukařovský: “the function of poetic language consists in the maximum foregrounding of the utterance.”¹⁵

Like every other function of language the poetic function is characterized by an “empirical linguistic criterion” (LP 71). Jakobson’s definition of this criterion is that “the poetic function projects the principal of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.” (LP 71) In order to explain this definition he reminds his readers of “the two basic modes of arrangement used in verbal behavior [i.e. speech and writing], *selection* and *combination* . . . The selection is produced on the basis of equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymy and antonymy, while the combination, the built-up of the sequence, is based on contiguity.” (LP 71) The poetic function changes this assignment in the way that “equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence.” (LP 71) Jonathan Culler’s attempt to summarize the meaning and consequence of Jakobson’s definition is perhaps less precise but also less technical and therefore very helpful to illuminate its sense:

the poetic use of language involves placing together in sequence items which are phonologically or grammatically related. Patterns formed by the repetition of similar items will be both more common and more noticeable in poetry than in other kinds of language. (SP 56)

¹¹Roman Jakobson, ‘Linguistics and Poetics’, in ??? (Seminar handout without any hint of the original source), p. 69, in the following text the essay will be quoted as LP with pagenumbers in parenthesis

¹²Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*, (Cornell University Press: Ithaca 1975, 1993), p. 56, in the following text this book is quoted as SP with pagenumbers in parenthesis

¹³The Prague Linguistic Circle, ‘Theses Presented to the First Congress of Slavic Philologists in Prague, 1929’, in *The Prague School: Selected Writings, 1929–1946*, edited by Peter Steiner, (University of Texas Press: Slavic Series, No. 6: Austin 1982), p. 15

¹⁴Jan Mukařovský, ‘Structuralism in Esthetics and in Literary Studies’, in *The Prague School: Selected Writings, 1929–1946*, edited by Peter Steiner, (University of Texas Press: Slavic Series, No. 6: Austin 1982) p. 79

¹⁵Jan Mukařovský as quoted by Jonathan Culler in SP, p. 56

The patterns thereby produced are, on the phonological level, a specific distribution of vowels and consonants and the occurrence of metre and rhyme and, on the grammatical level, a specific distribution of words belonging to certain wordclasses.

It is important to note that Jakobson rejects a clear distinction between the sound level and the semantic level of poetry. Instead he claims that “equivalence in sound . . . inevitably involves semantic equivalence” (LP 83) This reminds us of Coleridge’s treatment of metre as an organizing device for the construction of poetry and Jakobson quotes Gerard Manley Hopkins’ statement that “the force of this recurrence [of sound in a sequence of rhythm and rhyme for example] is to beget a recurrence or parallelism answering to it in words or thought” (LP 83). Jakobson, therefore, stresses an “interaction between meter and meaning” (LP 83) and, more generally, an interaction between sound and meaning: “Words similar in sound are drawn together in meaning” (LP 86), in fact, “any conspicuous similarity in sound is evaluated in respect to similarity and/or dissimilarity in meaning.” (LP 87)

This connection of all elements of poetic language with each other allows Jakobson to state an absolute difference between the language of prose and the language of poetry by pointing to a complete penetration of language by the poetic function: “poeticalness is not a supplementation of discourse with rhetorical adornment but a total reevaluation of the discourse and of all its components whatsoever.” (LP 93)

Ironically this statement of Jakobson comes very close to Culler’s opinion on the subject, although both positions are at least as much opposed to each other as the positions of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Culler starts his discussion and suggestion of *Structuralist Poetics* with an evaluation of the “scope and limitations of linguistic methods.” (SP ix) Among other theories he examines those proposed and practiced by Roman Jakobson and sees their limitation in a point in which they claim to be quite strong. In the above discussed lecture on ‘Linguistics and Poetics’ Jakobson explains that the poetic function, by making equivalence the constitutive device of the sequence, leads to symmetries and patterns in the poetic text. And by discovering such symmetries and patterns in a close analysis of numerous poems Jakobson seems to offer empirical evidence for his theory. But Culler doubts whether this evidence is really as valuable as it appears to be. He criticizes that “Jakobson’s method permits one to find in a poem any type of organization which one looks for” (SP 62), therefore also patterns whose “presence or absence . . . seems often to depend upon factors . . . which bear little relation to the effect of the poem” (SP 62). Above all, Culler notes, the presence or absence of a pattern seems to depend on the wish of the reader to find it. He therefore concludes that

even where linguistics provide definite and well-established procedures for classing and describing elements of a text it does not solve the

problem of what constitutes a pattern and hence does not provide a method for the discovery of patterns. A fortiori, it does not provide a procedure for the discovery of poetic patterns. (SP 65)

With this objection to linguistics Culler above all denies that Jakobson is really able to pinpoint the “empirical linguistic criterion” of the poetic function apart from the general statement that it makes equivalence the constitutive device of the sequence. Culler complains that the “repetition of similar constituents may be observed in any text and thus cannot serve as the distinguishing feature of the poetic function.” (SP 66) In short, contrary to all its claims linguistics simply assume that there is an essential difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose called poetic function but fail to prove to their readers that and how this poetic function emerges from the poetic text as a constitutive device of its language.

Culler, therefore, looks for a completely different place to situate at least the greater part of this poetic function, and instead of describing it as a device in the text itself he locates it in a set of conventions and expectations which govern our reading of a given text. Culler points out that although

we . . . tend to think of meaning and structure as properties of literary works . . . the work has structure and meaning because it is read in a particular way, because these potential properties, latent in the object itself, are actualized by the theory of discourse applied in the act of reading. (SP 113)

When he proceeds to apply this general statement to poetry Culler returns to his discussion of Jakobson’s theory. He acknowledges the “importance of formal patterns” as they can be found in “phonetic or rhythmic coherence.” (SP 163) He also acknowledges that these patterns “distance poetry from the communicative function of ordinary speech” and “enable poetry to assimilate the meanings which words have in other instances of discourse and subject them to new organization” (SP 163-4) thereby referring to characteristics of the poetic function Jakobson mentions in ‘Linguistics and Poetics’. But all this is not enough to explain the poetic function completely. “The . . . crucial factor . . . is that of conventional expectation, of the type of attention which poetry receives by virtue of its status within the institution of literature.” (SP 164) Our existing conviction of the significance of formal patterns simply is “itself a conventional expectation.” (SP 164) It is exactly this kind of expectation which disposes us “not only to recognize formal patterns but to make them something more than ornament attached to communicative utterances;” (SP 164) Culler therefore states that “the essence of poetry lies not in verbal artifice itself, though that serves as a catalyst, but more simply and profoundly in the type of reading . . . which the poem imposes on its readers” (SP 164), not by virtue of its linguistic devices but merely by the typographical arrangement which allows us to recognize it as a poem. By

taking “a piece of banal journalistic prose” and setting it on a page as a poem Culler demonstrates that although “the words remain the same . . . their effects for readers are substantially altered.” (SP 161) The visual arrangement of the text appears to be enough to give rise to “a new set of expectations, a set of conventions determining how the sequence is to be read and what kind of interpretations may be derived from it.” (SP 161) Culler can therefore conclude that “we are dealing less with a property of language . . . than with a strategy of reading, whose major operations are applied to verbal objects set as poems even when their metrical and phonetic patterns are not obvious.” (SP 163) In his opinion there is clearly no essential difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose but instead an essential difference between the reading of poetry and the reading of prose. Not so much the language but the “conventions of the genre” that govern our reading “produce a [different] range of signs.” (SP 162)

By now it must be obvious that there is no definite answer to the question whether there is or is not an essential difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose. Opinions vary according to known and established styles of poetry and according to changing styles of literary criticism. At the same time no up-coming suggestion appears to be completely new. Culler’s powerful reading conventions are already mentioned by Wordsworth who fears that they will prevent his readers from appreciating his poetry since it does not follow these conventions. Coleridge’s language combination approach to establish a definite difference between prose and poetry anticipates New Criticism and linguistic methods. I have also tried to demonstrate that it is not only important to consider *whether* there is an essential difference but also *where* this difference is located, since opponents in this dispute do not necessarily argue about the same thing. Since everybody seems to shed a different light on the point at issue by examining the similarities between poetry and prose like Wordsworth, or the different ways of combining language in poetry and prose like Coleridge, or the poetic function which is not mainly concerned with expressing and communicating and manifests itself in different linguistic devices like Roman Jakobson, or the role reading conventions play in the question which range of signs we use for what kind of interpretation like Jonathan Culler, no answer excludes the other. Instead they modify and enrich each other and present the problem in all its unavoidable complexity.

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