

**William Erdinger, “Genial” Perception: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Myth of Genius in the Long Eighteenth Century. Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2022. Pp. 287. £104.50. ISBN 9781638040224.**

In *Genial Perception*, William Erdinger offers a compelling philological approach to, and understanding of, ‘critical naturalism’ (1) pivotal to the critical work of Wordsworth and Coleridge. At the heart of critical naturalism are the keywords nature and genius and it is specifically here that Erdinger seeks to strip away the modern perspective and instead, take an approach consistent with critical thinking of the long eighteenth century. Erdinger is fully aware his modern standpoint leaves him a ‘permanent outsider’ (3) when attempting to interrogate older discursive environments, yet he reasons that the perspective of ‘insider/outsider’ (3) offers a unique opportunity to engage with aspects of ‘surplus meaning’ (4). He suggests that both Coleridge and Wordsworth’s tendencies to assume their own critical originality and discoveries may well have come from unconscious recognition and adherence to cultural predispositions inherent within the very tropes, language and traditions they sought to dismiss.

Chapters one, two and three provide a solid foundation by initially defining the term genial and then offering an insight into the perception of both poet-critics that genius by definition must be unmediated. Chapter 2 reminds us that Wordsworth and Coleridge did not see eye to eye critically in regard to the imagination/fancy debate, with Wordsworth allowing space for fancy to step outside the ‘mechanical (45) and be creative within the sphere of imagination; whilst for Coleridge the difference between the two was absolute. This then leads into an insightful delve into binary patterns, from classical style criticism through to Wordsworth’s critical use of oppositions and Coleridge’s triadic dialectical stance. This focus on binaries is continued in Chapter 3 where Erdinger considers the influence of warm and cool poetic ornaments upon the form and content. He argues that the habitual treatment of these effects by taste-critics led them to become second nature and their power to shape the later critical work of the two Romantics went unnoticed.

Chapter four builds upon this subconscious acquiescence to earlier taste-critic work by highlighting the sunlight trope and its centralised position in descriptions of unified effects in poetry. Erdinger demonstrates how Coleridge whilst outwardly appearing to embrace new experiences of imaginative unity in *Biographia*, actually enlists many of the keywords of the Addisonian tradition.

Chapters five and six take Wordsworth as their focus and extend the theory of unconscious assimilation to his take on ‘unmediated experience’ (101) within genial perception. Erdinger presents Wordsworth’s issues with the nature and terminology of the picturesque and his ‘absolute’ (103) rejection of its previous commentators. Once again, we are offered the sense that the poet’s clear familiarity with these views cannot allow him to completely rid himself of their influence.

By considering their ‘unacknowledged discursive influences’ (12), chapters 6 and 7 seek to position Coleridge’s theory of imagination and Wordsworth’s imaginative perception historically. Chief amongst these is the long neglected Shaftesburian tradition, to which Erdinger argues, Wordsworth’s capacity to convert ‘borrowed ideas into lived experiences’ (137) is indebted.

The final chapters bring the focus to language and the limitations of the *ut pictura poesis* theory. Ultimately, there are fundamental practical difficulties within the claims of both poet-critics for genial perception because the ‘burden’ (158) they place on language cannot be supported. Where a painter can present a form or image of something new or novel to their viewer, the poet, in spite of his ‘gleam’ (161), can only ever evoke images that are already familiar to the reader. Erdinger compares Coleridge’s ability to draw upon and rephrase his

own vast internal library of acquired written descriptions and writing as a form of ‘bricolage’ (166), and Wordsworth’s unconscious reshaping of literary sources as a ‘poetic intertextuality’ (167) based on intellectual traditions rather than the visual ones so often explored over the last 50 years. The final chapter applies Erdinger’s self-coined ‘philological close reading’ (17) to the Snowdon episode of *The Prelude* in order to present the revisions as evidence for the literary influences of Milton, Akenside and Collins.

Whilst Coleridge and Wordsworth viewed their positioning of nature and genius as allowing them to effectively ‘leave language largely out of account’ (187), Erdinger challenges this stance and his complexly argued, philological approach offers a persuasive reading of the taste critics. Erdinger’s positioning as historical outsider gives him capacity to present the contemporaneous long eighteenth-century critics and classical predecessors whose critical influences can be mapped onto the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge and as such, belie their claim to autonomous genial perceivers operating outside a place in history.

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