

Question! - What is Poetic Diction?

Answer! - English neo-classical poets, like their French counterparts, were very particular about the division of poetry into various kinds or genres - such as the elegy, the heroic poem, the satire, the epic, and so on. They upheld the principle of decorum which demands that for every kind a particular style is needed and that there should not be any confusion of styles. Further, they drove a wedge between the language of prose and the language of serious poetry. For lower genres like satire they did not mind using the language and idiom of prose, but for the elegy, the heroic poem, the epic and such like genres, what they aimed at employing was a language as far removed from the lowly prose as possible. Obviously, in an epic such words as pot, broom or even door could not be used, as their

presence would create a bathetic effect. Consequently, a special language of poetry was devised, and later traditionalised, by the practice of poet after poet. This special language, somewhat stilted and artificial, ruled the roost for decades and was challenged only by Wordsworth at the end of the eighteenth century. In the Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) Wordsworth vehemently protested against what he called "the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many ~~modern~~ modern writers." He further protested "There will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction, as much pain has been taken to avoid it as is ordinarily taken to produce it." Wordsworth was against the very principle of the division of language into the language of prose and the

language of poetry. He went so far as to assert that "there neither is, nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition - Poetry sheds no tears 'such as Angels weep' but natural and human tears she can boast of no celestial ictor that ~~at~~ distinguished her vital juices from those of prose, the ~~same~~ same human blood circulates through the veins of both."

Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* controverted Wordsworth's point of view. He maintained that there ought to be some difference between the language of poetry and that of prose, as there should be some difference between the language of prose and that of actual conversation. "I write," said Coleridge "in metre because I am about to use a language different from that of prose"

It may be pointed out here that Wordsworth did not only criticise the language (diction) used by many of his predecessors but also their frequent indulgence in archaisms and various other "poetic licences" pressed into service for poetising their language and consequently removing it as far from the language of prose as possible. Robert Bridges in his essay "Poetic Diction in English" in *Collected Essays* observes, "The revolt against the old diction is a reaction which in its general attitude is rational and it is in line with the reaction of 'The Lake School' of poetry, familiar to all students in Wordsworth's statement, and Coleridge's criticism and correction of that statement in his *Biographia Literaria*. Both movements alike protest against all archaisms

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of vocabulary and grammar and what are called literary forms and plead for the simple terms and direct forms of common speech."

The end.

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