COLERIDGEANA: THE FOREST & THE TREES

Twenty-five years of concentration on compiling a "comprehensive" annotated Coleridge Bibliography might well have left me among those who "can't see the forest for the trees." I hope, however, that I have found a vantage point from which I can see at least a considerable part of the forest of modern critical and scholarly publications, not only on Coleridge and English Romanticism but also on a wider range of literature.

Present-day students of Coleridge and English romanticism for the most part produce biographical and critical studies of the same kinds produced for the past 200 years. One result has been the accumulation of much biographical and historical information, which has refined each generation's understanding of Coleridge and his works. Another result has been the publication of interpretations of Coleridge's life and works almost as varied as the interpreters themselves, often interpretations as incompatible as their authors would probably be in person. About none of these can we have serious complaints: after all, every generation, every person, has a right, perhaps a responsibility, to give its own reading of a great author and a past age: there may be a limit to the number of facts that can be accumulated, but of commentary there is no end.

Unfortunately, it becomes increasingly difficult, over time, to come up with either fact or comment that has not been presented in much the same way earlier. Even the most comprehensive and current bibliographies require much time-consuming perusal if a prospective author wishes to discover from them just what has hitherto been published on the topic he is studying. Professional scholars often do a thorough job of this kind of preliminary bibliographical research, but many writers manage to get their commentaries in print without this preliminary check. Of course, the original or the novel are not always necessary: much about a great man and his works needs to be said and written over and over again from decade to decade, generation to generation. But much plowing over of the same old fields without any new planting is not very productive and not the best kind of cultivation that professionals should undertake.

I suppose we could say that this situation is simply to be expected: it's in the nature of things. But there are contributing causes that ought to be considered, so that some of their ill effects can be avoided. In what follows, I argue that important fields of study are being neglected today in large part because of the limitations of the bibliographical tools most used by today's critics and scholars.

THE BIBLIOGRAPHIES

The serial bibliographies most used by students of Coleridge and of English Romanticism - the MLA International Bibliography (MLAIB), the Annual Bibliography of the MHRA, and the Romantic Movement Bibliography - have a powerful, almost controlling, though unrecognized and perhaps unintended, influence on the content and direction of the research and publications of present-day scholars.

Even though from the 1960s onward these bibliographies have become increasingly thorough, their policies of exclusion tend to leave in outer darkness unusual fields and kinds of study. These kinds may be neglected, perhaps, because it is assumed that they interest too few professionals, who, after all, are the main users of the bibliographies and the main authors recorded in them.Or perhaps these neglected studies are considered insignificant by the bibliographers.

The costs of gathering information and producing and distributing a bibliography force the establishment of limits. But something short of absolute exclusion would help recognize the value of certain treatments of literary works. At least relevant reference books and other major publications of these kinds could be included.

To be specific, let us consider some exclusions set forth under "Document Scope" on pages iii-iv of the 1981-95 volumes of the MLAIB. Most of these statements contain a qualifier allowing some exceptions, but the exceptions are extremely rare.I will here consider only statements affecting some fields the neglect of which seems to me to be unwarranted, although I cannot resist some comments on "editorial apparatus."

TEACHER-STUDENT MATERIALS

"Works limited to pedagogy, even as it relates to the teaching of language, literature, composition, and related subjects, are excluded." A related statement excludes "guides that are essentially plot summaries, and other...simplified works."

Discussions exclusively about teaching Coleridge happen to be few but they are often more substantial and illuminative of the literary work than many of the conventional critical pieces listed in the MAIB.

This policy statement also seems to exclude the category of editions of an author's works and anthologies prepared for use in schools and colleges, sometimes even on a postgraduate level. Consider just the following 1980-85 publications not listed in the MLAIB:
JACKSON, H[eather] J[oanna],ed. STC [Selected Works].(The Oxford Authors) Oxf & NY:Oxf UP(195).xviii,733pp.

ANON, ed. The R.A.M. (Tale Blazer) Logan,IA: Perfection Form Co (1980).Cover title,ii,46pp.Ill.190 x 130mm.
"Approximate reading level," grade 10;"appropriate interest level," grades 10-12. Prints poem without gloss. "Wraparound Study Guide" includes headnote ("Looking Forward" and "Words to Watch For"); "The Story Line"(including "Digging for Facts" and "Probing for Theme"); "In Search of Meaning"; Developing Word Power"(2 exercises); "Improving Writing Skills"(2 exercises); "Things to Write or Talk About"; and answer key for exercises in "The Story Line" and "Developing Word Power." The "most clearly identified " theme is that "We have a responsibility to love all of God's creatures." Illustrations are 7 from Dore (1876-c526).

GORBUNOV,A[ndrei] N[ikolaevich],comp. S.T.C.: Verse and Prose.
[Compilation and commentaries, A N Gorbunov. Afterword, A N Gorbunov and N A Solov'eva.] Moscow: Progress Publishers (1981). 447pp. Intended for a wide circle of Russian readers of English. C texts in English, editorial matter in Russian (including translations of Greek and Latin). Includes 52 poems (a few with omissions); parts of B.L. XIII-XV, XVII,XVIII (68 pages); parts of the Collier reports of lectures 2,7, and 12 on Shakespeare ((55 pages), and the four autobiogrpahical letters to Poole (1797). Afterword (27pp) presents critical estimate of C.'s overall achievement and his role in English Romanticism; quotations from C. are in Russian translation. Extensive background, vocabulary, and explanatory notes (67 pp).

Should not the users of the MLAIB be informed about the best editions with editorial apparatus suited to undergraduate and graduate students, and even some general readers? Are none of the users of the MLAIB ever concerned directly or indirectly with secondary-school students? If the Bibliography is supposed to reach an international audience, why omit the fine Russian edition by Gorbunov?

LITERARY WORKS AND TRANSLATIONS

"Literary works and translations are generally excluded unless they are newly discovered or rare works or editions that are accompanied by new critical or bibliographical apparatus or that are based on a newly established authoritative text."

Editorial apparatus

In practice, the too rigid interpretation of what constitutes "new critical or bibliographical apparatus," or " a newly established authoritative text," has resulted in the omission from the 1980-85 MLAIB of volumes 7 and 13 and the second part of volume 12 of the Collected Coleridge, to select just a few from Volume III of the Coleridge Bibliography.

Translations

In practice, the too rigid exclusion of translations suggests a lack of recognition of the extent to which a translation is an interpretation just as significant to its readers as one by a conventional literary critic,

artist, or composer, however different the media of these interpretations. In each case, the interpreter may change what might seem to others the poet's intended meaning and feeling to something that conforms to the interpreter's taste and attitudes or to what the interpreter considers to be those of the interpreter's expected viewers, listeners, or readers. For 1980-85, volume III of the Coleridge Bibliography will list 3 Italian translations, 3 Japanese, and one each Czech, German, and Spanish, none of which, by policy, are in the 1980-85 MLAIB.

OTHER CREATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

We are now considering categories where the necessity for limits is urgent, so that the principal serial literary bibliographies cannot be seriously faulted. Not surprisingly, these categories are ignored in the MLAIB statement of principles and in MLAIB practice. Unfortunately these categories are not covered adequately anywhere else, so what little is being done in those fields still remains consigned to outer darkness, further justifying my view of the enormous influence - too often a limiting influence - of serial bibliographies today.

It is important to recognize the value not only of translations but also of creative interpretations of an author's works by artists(not only in book illustrations but in independent works of art, including portraits), by musical composers, and by collaborators in theatrical and audiovisual productions. These modes of interpretation often yield insights into an author's works as valuable as the verbal interpretation of conventional literary criticism.(I will not take space here to give examples of the many treatments listed in volumes II and III of the Coleridge Bibliography.)

The MLAIB does not restrict "the organization, format, or purpose" of the works it lists, including "indexes, bibliographies, catalogs, handbooks, dictionaries, and other types of reference works." That policy must be very narrowly interpreted to account for the omission of the following:

WALKER, Richard [J B].Regency Portraits. 2vols. I,Text; II,Plates. National Portrait Gallery (1985).xvii,719pp;iii,1603

PIPER, David. The Image of the Poet: British Poets and their Portraits. Oxf: Clarendon P (1982). xxi,219pp.

RICHARDSON, Joanna. Keats and His Circle:An Album, of Portraits. Cassell (1980). vi,127pp.

PEPPIN, Brigid, and Lucy Micklethwait.Book Illustrators of the Twentieth Century. NY:Arco (1984). 336pp.Ill.

CONCLUSION

The omission of "definitive" scholarly editions is probably one that MLA bibliographers would recognize as requiring a change in policy. Whether research-orientated academic bibliographers would be willing to include even substantial pedagogical studies is another question. On the positive side, the MLAIB has become increasingly thorough in its coverage within the limits of its policy, and increasingly detailed in its indexing and its cross-referencing from one section of the bibliography to another. That thoroughness makes accessible the very few publications that consider Coleridge in non-traditional connections, but such publications are rare. (Some of these connections I identified in the Preface to volume II of the Coleridge Bibliography [1983], and some I discussed in considerable detail in the Coleridge Bulletin, No.3,Winter 1990.)

The "forest" of literary criticism and scholarship has more species of "trees" than can be easily identified by perusal of the principal serial literary bibliographies. But the seldom seen, sometimes exotic trees, may be as useful, beautiful, even inspiring, as those seen in great abundance, and as worthy of study.

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