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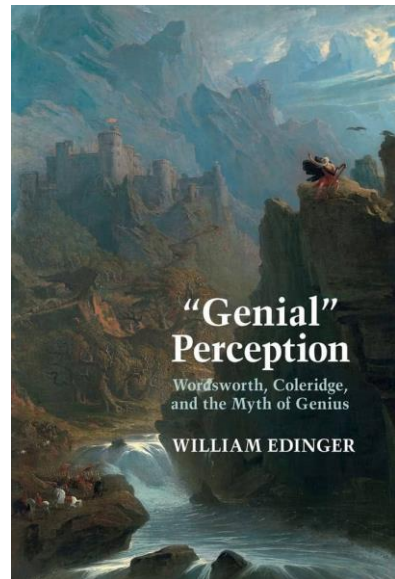
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*“Genial” Perception: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the
Myth of Genius in the Long Eighteenth Century*

by William Edinger¹

NEXT YEAR’S MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION Convention in Philadelphia will feature a roundtable called, simply, ‘Hating the Eighteenth Century.’ As the call for papers puts it, Sylvia Plath ‘hated’ the eighteenth century and ‘she wasn’t alone’. The panel was pitched as an attempt to recuperate an ugly feeling, for participants will ‘discuss hatred as a gateway into the field’, but hatred, of course, doesn’t always open doors. At my university in the American Midwest, it is probably indifference rather than hatred that bars the door to eighteenth-century literature. There is no ready and easy way to convince most students to enroll in a course focused on the vast literary terrain that stretches between John Milton and Jane Austen. This resistance to the long eighteenth century results in a great loss of learning, a less-epic English major that is also short on satire, sprawling poetry, sensibility, the picaresque, the familiar essay, and the Scottish Enlightenment. Without exposure to the eighteenth century, the novel does not rise but appears suddenly in mid-flight; the great age of English criticism is simply overlooked. When students materialize in a class on Romanticism without this context, it is all too easy to take the revolutionary rhetoric of a new generation at face value. To borrow a line from a young William Hazlitt, a figure like Coleridge can seem like a purely original writer who ventures ‘into the world unknown of thought and imagination, with nothing to support or guide his veering purpose’.

A distillation of a lifetime’s thought and reading, William Edinger’s *“Genial” Perception: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Myth of Genius* demonstrates in spades that Wordsworth and Coleridge were not haters of eighteenth-century literary culture but were in fact supported and guided by its critical preoccupations. Edinger takes for granted the power of both Wordsworth and Coleridge as poets and poetic theorists, but his persistent, grounding move in this study is to show that most of their ideas were not natural or unmediated but were, in fact, ‘dependent on literacy and language’, especially as it was focalized and deployed



¹ William Edinger, *“Genial” Perception: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Myth of Genius in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2022).

by eighteenth-century critics (5). This in itself is not a controversial position, but Edinger manages to defamiliarize some of the familiar historicist or philological protocols of literary scholarship—protocols that he also deploys with great skill and erudition—by setting them at odds with what he describes as Wordsworth and Coleridge’s ‘critical naturalism’. As critical naturalists, Wordsworth and Coleridge ‘understand genius as an inborn gift whose power is wholly ‘natural’; in this sense, their interest in the genial perception of the book’s title entails a self-determining, autonomous perception that is free of ‘cultural influence’ (1). I should say upfront that I see Wordsworth and Coleridge as very half-hearted ‘critical naturalists’, and I am more inclined to follow Nancy Yousef in seeing a figure like Wordsworth as someone interested in drawing attention ‘to the artifice of an ostensibly organic image, not so as to refute or reject it but to self-consciously indulge it, to explore the need or desire fulfilled by this mythic notion of the self as autonomously formed’.² Edinger sees Wordsworth and Coleridge’s critical naturalism as much less ambivalent, though he too is quick to puncture its illusions, suggesting that his study ‘critiques the two Romantics’ faith in critical naturalism and genial perception by uncovering their unacknowledged indebtedness to history and culture’ (3).

In this sense, *‘Genial’ Perception* falls in line with a tradition of scholarship that accounts for various Romantic phenomena by reaching back to the eighteenth century. Sensible of a long scholarly tradition, Edinger’s book seems almost polemically invested in scholarship from the first half of the twentieth century—the insights of critics like Joseph Warren Beach, Abbie Findlay Potts, and Russell Noyes stand beside those of more recent scholars. In this long critical range, *‘Genial’ Perception* brought to mind a line from a dusty copy of Basil Willey’s *The Eighteenth Century Background* that I once found in a used bookshop: ‘Much of what follows can be regarded as prolegomena to the study of Wordsworth and Coleridge’.³ Edinger approaches the eighteenth-century critical tradition in a similarly teleological way, and *‘Genial’ Perception* offers a sensitive inventory of what is lost when Wordsworth and Coleridge are examined apart from this background. I also found myself thinking of Marshall Brown’s pivotal study *Preromanticism*, a book that starts by noting that while ‘Wordsworth and Coleridge understood what they were after in their major works and wrote at length about it . . . most of the preromantics left the task of writing about literature to unimaginative professors of rhetoric and belles lettres’.⁴ Taken as a whole, Edinger’s book gives these professors their day in court, one from which they emerge as anything but unimaginative. In fact, Edinger shows that Wordsworth and Coleridge stand on their shoulders in theorizing the imagination, as well as its distinction from the fancy.

Toward the end of the study, Edinger himself helpfully flags one other

² Nancy Yousef, *Isolated Cases: The Anxieties of Autonomy in Enlightenment Philosophy and Romantic Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 118.

³ Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1940), v.

⁴ Marshall Brown, *Preromanticism*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 2.

early study as central to his approach: Jonathan Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu* (1930). Edinger highlights the importance of Lowes's powerful demonstration that even Coleridge's distinctive, idiosyncratic language was often 'a kind of bricolage'; in his terms, Lowes's 'meticulous and exhaustive tracing of Coleridge's diction back to *loci* in his reading revealed that for many of his most vivid, creative, and original touches he had drawn directly, if often unconsciously, on the resources of his vast literacy' (165–66). Adopting 'a Lowesian approach', Edinger notes that this kind of intertextual tracing is not limited to poetry but could be brought to bear on Wordsworth's 'critical perceptions' (167). Looking at Wordsworth's 1815 Preface, he notes that many of the passages Wordsworth used to illustrate the distinction between imagination and fancy could be easily traced back to eighteenth-century critics. He focuses on Wordsworth's opening salvo of exempla: a passage from Virgil's first Eclogue, a passage from *King Lear*, and an epic simile from *Paradise Lost*. Edinger notes that Wordsworth could have found these same passages flagged—in something of a similar order—in earlier critical texts. Charles Rollin's *Method of Teaching and Studying the Belles Lettres* (1734)—a standard-issue text used in eighteenth-century schools—begins its comparison of imagination and fancy with the same passage from Virgil. So does an essay misattributed to Oliver Goldsmith, which also anticipates Wordsworth in proceeding to the exact same passage in *Lear*. David Duff's *Critical Observations on the Writings of the Most Celebrated Original Geniuses in Poetry* (1770) deploys the same two passages from *Paradise Lost* that Wordsworth next considers. The effect is something like turning the tables on 'The Tables Turned'; as Edinger puts it, Wordsworth's 'supposedly genial perspicacity owes perhaps as much to his retentive reading as to his native powers' (168). Books might be a dull and endless strife, but they might also provide life and food for future years.

Much of the book catalogs this future-oriented critical liveliness in short, densely argued chapters that explore various topics that both Lake Poets shared with their critical antecedents. Looking to both Kant and British empiricists, Edinger begins with an inventory of a 'genial' mode of perception rooted in unmediated nature and the 'stability of stylistic effects and qualities' over time' (27). The next two chapters document the many ways in which the critical binaries favored by the Lake Poets can be traced back to 'the eighteenth-century critical culture in which Wordsworth and Coleridge grew up' (51). Edinger focuses on various antecedents to the Imagination/Fancy distinction, but his philological survey also turns up fascinating commentary on the neoclassical distinction between stylistic 'ornaments warm and cool' (60). Edinger's next three chapters emphasize questions of description and perception in criticism, including (among other things) the importance of 'unified local effects' in poetic description (77); the long predominance of the Addisonian descriptive tradition; the picturesque roots of Wordsworth's 'perceptual habits' (106); and the role of Longinian 'great-mindedness' in Wordsworth's pictorialism (128). In a chapter that I suspect will be one of the book's most influential, Edinger makes a vigorous case for Wordsworth's

'Shaftesburyan Inheritance', arguing in particular that 'his claims for the epistemological and moral significance of aesthetic perception almost certainly reflect a primary indebtedness to the Shaftesburyans' (137). In the book's final chapter, Edinger moves past the mere tracing of ideas through time to conclude with a 'philologically oriented close reading' of Wordsworth's ascent of Snowdon in *The Prelude*.

Whatever the topic, Edinger's range of reference is staggering. In a discussion of *ut pictura poesis*, he describes an emerging, eighteenth-century critical consensus that 'poets should aspire, within the limitations of their medium, to the painter's effects of instantaneity and simultaneity' (83). To drive the point home, Edinger deploys quotations from no fewer than eight eighteenth-century writers in a single paragraph: Hugh Blair, Samuel Johnson, Abraham Cowley, Joseph Spence, Lord Kames, Joseph Trapp, Thomas Gray, and James Beattie. Future critics might linger over any one of these connections, but Edinger has drawn a broad map, one that's more alert to convergence than rupture in literary history. At the same time, he's freed us collectively of any critical lapse in overlooking all of the echoes and allusions that fly under the radar of Wordsworth and Coleridge's poetic theory. And this, in a sense, might be what Edinger sees as the real source of Wordsworth's genius: 'Notions (topoi) that in earlier eighteenth-century poets or philosophers are now of merely intellectual or historical interest appear in Wordsworth's poetry as the very shape and texture of his own felt life, so completely does he naturalize them as autobiography' (124). Wordsworth (like Coleridge) might have been steeped in eighteenth-century critical lore, but he was also—this book suggests—a natural.