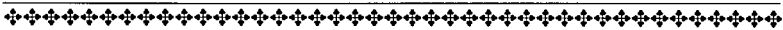



## I

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## Wordsworth, literary history, and the constitution of literature

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A constitution is a *substance* – and as such, it is a set of *motives*. There are constitutions of a purely natural sort, such as geographical and physiological properties, that act motivationally upon us. We are affected by one another’s mental constitutions, or temperaments. A given complex of customs and values, from which similar customs and values are deduced, is a constitution. And we may, within limits, arbitrarily set up new constitutions, legal substances designed to serve as motives for the shaping or transforming of behavior.

Kenneth Burke, “The Dialectic of Constitutions”

The trope by which I here treat the enterprise of “literature” as grounded in a “constitution” and take Wordsworth as one of its “founding fathers” received remarkable confirmation in the recent exhibition “Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism,” a widely disseminated public show in the late 80s that generated not only academic books and conferences but wide audiences and comment. It arrived in the United States just as the celebration of the bicentennial of the United States Constitution concluded, and visitors might have wondered whether the British Romantic show continued the American celebration.<sup>1</sup> The topic of revolution and its aftermath was common to them both; the Declaration of Independence in two different printed versions was displayed among the opening documents of the Romantic exhibition; styles of portraiture, printing, and handwriting belonged to the same period; and the mounting and magnitude of the Romantic display bespoke matters of comparable cultural importance. Visitors who took the Romantic exhibition for a part of the American observance would ultimately have noticed images of an unfamiliar revolution and portraits of unfamiliar

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth *et al.*, eds., *William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

Cambridge University Press

0521412498 - Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism

Don H. Bialostosky

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wordsworth, dialogics, and the practice of criticism*

founders that compelled them to distinguish the American Revolution from the British Romantic revolution, but they might nevertheless have held to their sense of connection between the events and wondered what this Romantic revolution was about, what constitution followed from it, what roles its celebrated founders played, what treasured documents embodied it, what institutions of interpretation perpetuated those documents, what controversies embroiled those institutions, and what consequences, if any, those institutions might have for their own lives.

Two academic books that appeared around the time of the exhibition could be taken to address themselves to those questions and thereby further to instantiate my trope of Wordsworth as a founding father of the constitution of literature. Clifford Siskin's *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* could be taken to reply that "the society that places Literature at its center" (95) was constituted by the Romantic revolution, and Jonathan Arac's *Critical Genealogies* could add that "Wordsworth did more than anyone else to establish the vocation of literature in relation to which... our own culture's... idea of the literary critic took shape" (3). Siskin actually juxtaposes Wordsworth and Thomas Jefferson as founders of their respective constitutions. Arac contrasts Wordsworth and Coleridge as founding fathers of literary criticism in terms that some have used to contrast Jefferson and Madison as American founders. Both critics focus on Matthew Arnold as a major early interpreter of the constitution of literature who plays a role in the history of that constitution analogous to the one Lincoln played as interpreter of the American Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

Siskin and Arac join a growing group of critics interested in how modern American critics of Romanticism and of literature generally have adopted their critical forms, stances, words, and authorizations – what I am calling the constitution of their enterprise – from the Romantics themselves. Jerome McGann has combated modern critics' adoption of what he calls this "Romantic Ideology" in the name of a "New Historicism" that reinserts Wordsworth's writing in Wordsworth's historical context.<sup>2</sup> Siskin and Arac identify their projects with Ralph Cohen's "New Literary History" and show how

<sup>2</sup> R. I. Marjorie Levinson has raised the banner of New Historicism over this project in *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). See also David Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987).

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0521412498 - Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism

Don H. Bialostosky

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wordsworth, literary history, and the constitution of literature*

the historical situation of contemporary American literary culture is constituted for Arac by the Romantic founders and for Siskin by Romantic formal innovations. Both “New Historicism” and “New Literary History” are constitutional projects in the sense I am developing, “an enactment of human wills ... done by *agents* (such as rulers, magistrates, or other representative persons), and designed (*purpose*) to serve as a motivational ground (*scene*) of subsequent actions, it being thus an instrument (*agency*) for the shaping of human relations” (RMGM 323, 341). For both schools Wordsworth is a representative person of the Romantic constitution whose program for poetic production and literary criticism needs to be displaced, revived, or revised in order to enable the actions and shape the human relations they desire.

I will take up McGann’s “New Historicism” at several points in subsequent chapters, but I turn here to recount and criticize Siskin’s and Arac’s arguments because they open constitutional issues of the kind that define my entire project. Seeing, as I do, a fundamental conjunction of Wordsworthian, Romantic, and critical theoretical issues in literary studies at the present time, they give plausibility to my constitutional trope and provoke me to elaborate upon as well as to differ with their constitutional interpretations.

Under the common rubric of “New Literary History” Siskin and Arac share several interpretations of the constitution of literature. Arac holds with Siskin that “only around 1800 did there come into being the notion of ‘literature’ as we have since known it” and that this notion of literature “formed a new, literary human nature ... that makes psychoanalysis possible” and underwrites “psychological” at the expense of social criticism (*Genealogies* 48–49, 56). Following Foucault, as Siskin also does, Arac sees the “production of ‘literature’ as a particular social and linguistic space in the nineteenth century, achieved through a series of separations and purifications” as part of “an increasing differentiation of social functions” (264). Arac also sees “the history of criticism [as] ... part of the history of literature” (3); he questions the social uses which “literary criticism” has served and urges connection of the concerns once enclosed within “literature” with the “larger concerns of state and economy” (307–08). Finally, like Siskin, he wishes to “end [the] cycle of repetition” (93) in which modern critics uncritically read Romantic texts in Romantic terms. Siskin’s and Arac’s constitutional critiques and programs nonetheless differ substantially, and I will discuss them each at some length before

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Don H. Bialostosky

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wordsworth, dialogics, and the practice of criticism*

returning to my own version of the constitution. I must remind my reader, however, that even my dialogic revoicing of their arguments is beginning the work of my own.

**Literature and the power of Romantic Discourse**

What I call the constitution of literature Siskin's Foucauldian language calls "Romantic Discourse." He argues that a "Romantic Discourse," typified by Wordsworth, continues to exert "extraordinary power over our professional and personal behaviors" (13), and he attempts to historicize that discourse in order to change our relationship to it, diminish some of its power over us (13), and permit us to "break our own critical habits" (190) of "dependence upon" it (183). Though Siskin historicizes the discourse of addiction as one powerful innovation of Romantic Discourse, he nevertheless relies on it to characterize the way modern "literary professional[s] have] addictively returned" (186) to Romantic genres even in their recent revisionary attempts to demystify visionary Romanticism. Sensitized to what he reads as a compulsive repetition of the past by today's doctors of literature, Siskin attempts to make others aware of the power of the Romantic canon in order to avoid "the political mistake of being blind to that power, and of thus facing the inevitable prospect of reproducing ... Romantic relationships that have not yet been written to an end" (14).

"Literature" with a self-conscious capital "L" is one of the principal Romantic inventions Siskin tries to attenuate. "Like America," he writes, "Literature ... is an invention that has obscured its own origins ... [and] dehistoricized a version of the human" that serves coercive political functions (85–86). Dedicated to the Wordsworthian/Arnoldian imperative to "make us feel," Literature prescribes an order in which "every individual ... is supposed to identify sympathetically with the [literary] work" and conform to the psychological norm it establishes (84). Those who fail to do so are doubly damned as lacking the "healthful state of association" Wordsworth required of his readers and as failing to exercise the capacity of being excited "without the application of gross and violent stimulants," whose exercise elevates one being above another (LB 247–48). They are, in other words, sick and inferior – at once needing the cure of literary education because of their illness and deserving their degradation because of their failure to exert themselves. In response to his own

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Don H. Bialostosky

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wordsworth, literary history, and the constitution of literature*

presentation of this version of human needs, Wordsworth “sets up the writer as the doctor who can cure [his readers’] ‘savage torpor’” (81). At the same time he founds the apparatus of Literature that has proliferated into a system of “creative writers, analytic critics, developing students, and loving readers who have helped to form academic departments, publishing houses, foundations, and governmental bureaucracies” (84) that control us not by imposing direct moral prohibitions but by stimulating our desires for literary works, treating our unhealthy failures to appreciate them, and grading our degrees of appreciation.

If any readers have trouble, as I do, hearing what Siskin hears – the insidious workings of Foucauldian discipline in Wordsworth’s programmatic rhetoric – they may better hear what Siskin hears in Wordsworth if they listen to the Wordsworthian echoes in F. R. Leavis’s defense of “‘English’ as a Discipline of Thought.”<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth himself may sound to us like a defender of the universal “discriminating powers of the mind” against the causes that threaten to reduce those powers to “a state of almost savage torpor.” When he writes that “the human mind is capable of excitement without the exercise of gross and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know that one being is elevated above another in proportion as he possesses this capability” (LB 249), these words may seem universal and ennobling enough. But Leavis sounds (and makes Wordsworth sound) more like an enforcer of class and coterie discipline when he writes in a similar vein that “the reader who cannot see that Tennyson’s poem, with all its distinction and refinement, yields a satisfaction inferior in kind to that represented by Wordsworth, cannot securely appreciate the highest poetic achievement at its true worth” (74–75). Wordsworth may come across as worthy and serious when he declares that his sort of poetry is “important in the multiplicity and quality of its moral relations” (LB 272), but Leavis seems more threatening and potentially invasive when he comes “to the point at which literary criticism, as it must,

3 F. R. Leavis, *The Living Principle: ‘English’ as a Discipline of Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). Siskin himself does not cite Leavis in evidence in this connection but, in effect, invents him. John Willinsky hears the same note in Leavis’s tone and traces its echoes through the school system in “Literary Theory and Public Education: The Instance of F. R. Leavis,” *Mosaic* 21 (1988): 165–77.

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0521412498 - Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism

Don H. Bialostosky

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wordsworth, dialogics, and the practice of criticism*

enters overtly into questions of emotional hygiene and moral value – more generally (there seems no other adequate phrase), of spiritual health” (75).

Neither Leavis nor Wordsworth, however, is dedicated simply to the imperative Siskin identifies – to “make us feel.” Both of them insist on the cultivation of thought *and* feeling in a combination that envisions poetry as a provocation to active critical thought that would enable readers to judge its emotional appeals. But both Wordsworth and Leavis also call attention to and deliberately cultivate what Leavis calls “habits of assumption” (104) which it is easier to condemn in their opponents than it is to recognize in themselves. Neither believes in “*reasoning* [the reader] into an approbation of...particular poems” (LB 242), but both believe in cultivating habits of such appreciation through an intellectual and emotional discipline that can too easily be reduced to the choice between learning to echo the judgments and tones of the teacher or failing the class. No conformity is more insidious than that which imagines itself as critical thought and no social group more elitist than that which imagines itself as the saving remnant of universal human values. Leavis’s discipline of English makes the Wordsworthian constitution of literature sound too close to Siskin’s disciplinary discourse for comfort.

Siskin’s Foucauldian vision of the constitution of Literature and its disciplined subjects thus threatens, as he recognizes, “our assumptions about what we study and why” (67). It presents us and our founding father Wordsworth as addicts, pushers, and quack doctors, our object of study as a controlled and controlling substance, and our function (if not our conscious purpose) as the enforcement of conformity and the naturalization of social inequality. To historicize Literature in this way is to produce an effect of alienation that demoralizes our professional identities without reconstituting them. Siskin acknowledges the need to “provide an alternative” (6) to Romantic Discourse. What alternatives does he provide?

Siskin offers two, one explicit and one implied. Explicitly he offers the practice of “New Literary History” his book exemplifies. That practice addresses our current situation “of conceptual and thus generic transition” (4) by enabling an understanding of change, but it offers no “cure” for our Romantic addictions.” In effect, New Literary History enrolls critics addicted to Romanticism in something like a Romantics Anonymous where they will hear over and over

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0521412498 - Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism

Don H. Bialostosky

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wordsworth, literary history, and the constitution of literature*

the “tale of [their] need to be cured” and recognize at each hearing the “ongoing power” of Romantic Discourse. Siskin does not posit any other power that could supplant the insidious and ongoing power of Romantic Discourse, and it is not at all certain that his New Literary History has the power to fulfill his desire “to classify [the Romantic] self as a construct – to put it in the past” (194). At best, it would seem that it might help us become, in the language of Alcoholics Anonymous, “recovering Romantics.”

The second, implicit alternative Siskin offers is the late eighteenth-century discourse that he reconstructs in contrast to Romantic Discourse. Characterized, like Foucault’s regime of sovereignty, by sharp differences of social and literary kinds in place of Romantic differences of degree, personified powers in place of mystified individual power, and didactic directness in place of masked Romantic didacticism, this eighteenth-century discourse provides Siskin’s instruments of generic analysis and underwrites his direct didactic style. Though presumably this cultural form has been “put ... in the past,” Siskin brings it back and effectively identifies himself with it instead of with the Romanticism he deplors. He repeatedly reasserts distinctions of kind against Wordsworth’s reductions of kind to degree in a neo-classic correction of Romantic aberration. Like the personifications he analyzes in the poetry of Collins, Gray, and Goldsmith, Siskin’s personified figures of Literature, Power, and Romantic Discourse become agents which make “the self ... the subject of their authoritative activities and not an active, authoritative subject” (75). In effect, Siskin repeats the position of what he calls the helpless self of Sentimental verse subjected to the personified Power(s) that dominated it. *This* domination is the reality that makes the active Romantic self seem illusory.

For Siskin, the absolute Powers of the Old Regime still rule from underground in the new, and it is not clear how an exposé of their persistence can lead to their circumscription or productive ordering in any new constitution. Foucauldian discourse performs for Siskin the functions of a constitution (or perhaps what Burke would call the constitution behind the constitution). Romantic Discourse serves as what Burke calls the motivational ground of subsequent actions, shapes human relations, and indeed produces human subjects of various kinds, but what Burke would call the scene/agent ratio is heavily weighted in favor of scene, or Romantic Discourse, and the agents produced by that scene have no relative autonomy in the face

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0521412498 - Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism

Don H. Bialostosky

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wordsworth, dialogics, and the practice of criticism*

of its power and nowhere else to turn to ground their actions or redefine their relations to one another.

**Wordsworth and the possibilities of critical discipline**

Arac shares some of Siskin's understanding of the Romantic constitution of literature, but he finds more alternatives and more room for active agency within Romanticism and the constitution of literature to which it gives rise. As an inconsistent and incomplete constitution, it has more room for the negotiation of conflicting interests and for the acknowledgment of formerly excluded interests than Siskin's ubiquitous disciplinary discourse allows.

Arac, like Siskin, recognizes repetitive disciplinary effects of Romantic Discourse in contemporary criticism, and he wishes, like Siskin, "to end [the] cycle of repetition" (*Genealogies* 83), but because he recognizes what Burke would call the necessarily "partially representative" (RMGM 371) character of any constitution, he is not confined to repeatedly documenting the repetitive power of a ubiquitous Romantic Discourse. He can appeal instead to an alternative mode of cultural reproduction – the activity of exclusion – that opens up alternative strategies of cultural or constitutional transformation. He calls attention to those authors, texts, and elements of texts that repetitive emphasis overlooks instead of dwelling on the scandal of repetition itself (*Genealogies* 81). This emphasis draws Arac's focus from the centers created by repetition to the excluded margins, from texts to contexts, from dominant precursors to recessive predecessors.<sup>4</sup> Indeed Arac locates literature itself on the margin of a society in which "other technical skills have proved more socially powerful than the mastery of words" (7), while Siskin envisions "the society that places Literature at its center" (95). Arac also sees Wordsworth not as Siskin's (and McGann's) "'normative and, in every sense, exemplary'" (196 n. 15) figure for the Romantic constitution of literature but as an alternative to the still dominant figure of Coleridge. While Siskin exaggerates the power and centrality of Romantic Discourse in order to compel an alienating recognition of contemporary Romantic practices, Arac attempts to displace powerful Romantic figures with other figures that enable

4 See Daniel Stempel, "History and Postmodern Literary Theory," in *Tracing Literary Theory*, ed. Joseph Natoli (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 89.



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0521412498 - Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism

Don H. Bialostosky

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wordsworth, literary history, and the constitution of literature*

other practices. Arac does not try to put a monolithic Romantic past behind us but to “excavate the past that is necessary to account for how we got here and the past that is useful for conceiving alternatives to our present condition” (2).

That present condition for Arac is not Siskin’s time of change or transition but rather an “impasse” that requires us to discover alternative routes, discipline our powers to enable us to take those routes, and rouse our wills to determine us to exercise those powers. In search of alternative routes he reviews the history of the constitution of literature, from the Romantic founding to the recent critical revolutions, to find what both Bakhtin and the legal profession would call loopholes – unexploited texts and passages, alternative interpretations of familiar texts and passages, underused authorities and fresh contextualizations of well-used authorities. For discipline, he looks to a “more resolute focus on rhetoric” to provide alternative strategies of interpretation that can “repluralize the figures” of rhetoric in the wake of New Critical and deconstructive reductions of those figures to a small number of tropes (*Genealogies* 75, 78). (I will return to this topic in Chapter 7.) And for inspiration he looks above all to Walter Benjamin, who undertook literary history “as a task for human agency, ‘a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past’” (22).

As one alternative constitutional route, Arac takes Wordsworth around the obstacles to productive criticism posed by the continuing authority of “Coleridge’s romantic metaphysics of symbol and imagination” (3). Though this important turn to an alternative constitutional authority is complicated for a number of reasons I will consider in Chapter 2, Arac makes good use of it by selecting Wordsworthian texts that have not commonly been taken as constitutionally significant and reading them in violation of their canonical meanings. He chooses “Nutting” instead of “Tintern Abbey” (34–49), for example, though he might have gone further afield, as those of us have done who have tried to redeem the neglected experimental poems (see my Chapter 3 below) and the works of the later Wordsworth from the “oppressed past.” Siskin, for one, advocates attention to neglected Wordsworthian poetry outside the “Great Decade,” especially the plentiful sonnets, though he holds Wordsworth at least as responsible as Coleridge and Arnold for the “myth of creativity” (8) that justified the exclusion of these poems from the canon in the first place.

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0521412498 - Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism

Don H. Bialostosky

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Wordsworth, dialogics, and the practice of criticism*

Arac finds Arnold less of an obstacle than Coleridge to the constitution he wants. He discovers more in Arnold's work than the "proverbs of criticism" Siskin identifies him with – the tribute to Wordsworth's ability to "make us feel" and the reduction of Wordsworth's poetic work to the selections from the "Great Decade."<sup>5</sup> Arac reads Arnold's Biblical criticism, studies his career in the schools, and appreciates his importance in the history of the constitution of literature: "Arnold achieved what Johnson and Coleridge, those earlier geniuses of English criticism, did not do: he established the terms of a continuing cultural discipline" (*Genealogies* 129).

Although Arac seeks different goals and different means for that discipline from Arnold's, he affirms the productive, empowering, affirmative aspect of the discipline as such even as he acknowledges the subjected social roles it imposes and the exclusions it necessarily brings into being. Arac cites the later Foucault and through him Arnold's contemporary Nietzsche as the source of this affirmation of discipline; Siskin cites the same Foucault, but he reads Foucault's substitution of productive disciplinary power for repressive sovereign power as the exposure of a more subtle domination, not as what Arac calls an empowering self-subjection.

Arac's view of a contemporary impasse in literary history leads him to seek ways around our prominent contemporary constitutional interpreters as well, but his way around them is through them. He extensively criticizes half a dozen living judges on today's literary supreme court including two important Wordsworthian interpreters – Geoffrey Hartman (see my Chapter 5), who refuses to decide cases but writes ingenious opinions, and M. H. Abrams, who deprecates "ingenious exegetic[s]" (*Genealogies* 65) and decides cases without enough difficulty. Arac offers his own combination of ingenious exegesis and confident decision as an alternative to both of them and makes himself a strong candidate for a seat on the bench, which, after all, has no statutorily limited number of seats. Though his involvement with the controlled substance of Romanticism might disqualify him in the eyes of those like Siskin who distrust its power, Arac seems to me to have made that power productive of knowledge without being compulsively dominated by it.

5 The phrase "proverbs of criticism" is from Lionel Trilling, "The Fate of Pleasure: Wordsworth to Dostoevsky," in *Romanticism Reconsidered*, ed. Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 73.