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In recent decades, Wordsworth's poetry has been a focus for many of the theoretical schools of criticism that comprise modern literary studies. Don Bialostosky here proposes to adjudicate the diverse claims of these numerous schools and to trace their implications for teaching. Bialostosky draws on the work of Bakhtin and his followers to create a "dialogic" critical synthesis of what Wordsworth's readers – from Coleridge to de Man – have made of his poetry. He reveals Wordsworth's poetry as itself "dialogically" responding to its various contexts, and opens up fruitful possibilities for current criticism and teaching of Wordsworth. This challenging book uses the case of Wordsworth studies to make a far-reaching survey of modern literary theory and its implications for the practice of criticism and teaching today.

Literature, Culture, Theory 2

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Wordsworth, dialogics, and the practice of criticism

DON H. BIALOSTOSKY
Professor of English, University of Toledo, Ohio

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Norman Maclean

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Preface

> By a "practice" I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*

Most of us who have been privileged to profess literature in the 70s and 80s have gotten more than we bargained for. Whatever text or author, whatever practice of reading or writing, whatever pedagogical or political project drew us to literary studies, our professional development of that first interest has taken us places we did not expect to go, put us in the company of people we did not expect to encounter, and confronted us with issues we did not expect to address. In my own case, an undergraduate professor sent me to Wordsworth's *Prelude* to see what it could teach me about my vocational crisis over the choice of a field of graduate study, and I ended up choosing the Wordsworthian enterprise of "English" itself, writing a dissertation on Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, assuming the identity of "Romanticist," and discovering that a Romanticist in the 70s and 80s, especially a Wordsworthian, was also singularly implicated in the field of "theory." My author, after all, had authorized a progressive and theoretically self-conscious enterprise of literary study, and his collaborator Coleridge had criticized his poetic theory and promoted a selection of his poetry in terms that became fundamental for New Critical theory and therefore fundamental for its opponents. The principal expositors of nearly every theoretical program for criticism during the past two decades (and of some decades earlier) have found it necessary to take up Wordsworth's poetry along with his and Coleridge's poetic theories, and many of

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them have been "Romanticists" as well as theorists. Even Wordsworthian critics who have chosen not to highlight their theoretical investments have nonetheless exhibited them to theoretically sensitized readers, and more and more critics have chosen to name their own theories lest they be theoretically characterized by another critic.

The intersection of Wordsworthian, Romanticist, and theoretical interests is by now so well known in England and America that I would expect most readers who pick up this book to recognize it and many to participate in it. A specialization in any one of these interests to the complete exclusion of the others seems impossible to me today, though a comprehensive profession of all three interests combined seems equally impossible. Theorists who have followed the theoretical debates of the last two decades have necessarily encountered only a limited Wordsworthian canon, just as Wordsworthians and Romanticists have been implicated in no more than a selection of the theoretical debates in progress, but I believe that whatever the limits of their knowledge, all who recognize this conjuncture will also recognize that it is one of the places in which the future of literary studies is being imagined and decided.

What brings our intersecting interests together in this conjuncture is a bond of "common enterprise" that Paul de Man mentioned in an early lecture, only to reject it out of hand as the bond to be discovered "at the root of Wordsworth's theme of human love." Though no critic concerned with the intersection of Wordsworth, Romanticism, and theory has played a more important part in the last two decades in shaping our common enterprise of literary studies, de Man did not represent his own work or Wordsworth's as programmatic. He rejected without argument any explanation of Wordsworth's theme of human love that appealed to a common enterprise upon which the poet believed himself and his readers to be embarked and emphasized instead "a common temporal predicament." He found "the key to an understanding of Wordsworth ... in the relationship between imagination and time, not in the relationship between imagination and nature" and not – to complete a thought he does not develop – in the relationship between imagination and common purpose or practice (THW 15–16). De Man predicted a direction for literary studies but did not advocate one, and he presented Wordsworth not as the advocate of a project but as the witness of a condition.

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I believe, however, that de Man's disregard for the Wordsworthian common enterprise has misrepresented Wordsworth and interdicted our consideration of Wordsworth's role in founding the enterprise that constitutes us as students and teachers of literature. At the least, evidence of a programmatic Wordsworth can be found to answer the evidence de Man cites for his problematic Wordsworth. De Man repeatedly called our attention to that moment in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* where Wordsworth entertains the "illusory analogy" that "'considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature,'" but we may also recall those moments in which Wordsworth declares that each of his poems "has a worthy *purpose*" opposing a "general evil" which he believed would soon "be systematically opposed by men of greater powers and with far more distinguished success" than his own.[1] De Man characterized Wordsworth's poetry from the perspective of the *Essays upon Epitaphs* as assuming the "temporal perspective" of an "epitaph written by the poet for himself ..., so to speak, from beyond the grave" (THW 9), but we may also recall Wordsworth's account of the poet in the Preface as "a man speaking to men ... who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him ..., singing a song in which all human beings join with him ... in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion" (LB 255–59). Though de Man's selections from *The Prelude* have emphasized the reflective moments of contemplating the Boy of Winander's death or the French Revolution's failure, we may also recall the closing lines of the poem in which Wordsworth looks forward to working as a joint laborer in the redemption and instruction of his fellow men.

To speak more generally, we may remind ourselves that Wordsworth situated both the writing and the reading of his poetry not merely within nature or time, or even within language – de Man's ultimate critical category – but within a purposeful human enterprise dedicated to the advancement of learning and the sharing of pleasure, even if this purpose was not, as he said, "a distinct purpose formally conceived" (LB 240). The poet accepted the obligation "to extend the domain of sensibility for the delight, the honour, and the benefit of human nature," and the readers incurred the corresponding obligations to apply "to the consideration of the laws of this art the

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[1] RR 52. LB 246, 149, 250.

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best power of their understandings" and to exert within their own minds a "corresponding energy" to that exerted by the poet in order to comprehend his work. The one introduced "a new element into the intellectual universe," and the other, through learning and exertion, brought that element within the domain of the ongoing "'Spirit of human knowledge'" as well as "the sphere of human sensibility" and enjoyment (ES 66, 82–84). These and other affirmations of the "worthy *purpose*" (LB 246) Wordsworth imagined his art to serve drew me to his democratic yet intellectually demanding practice at the outset of my own profession of literature, and the troubling implications and alien representations of that practice I did not bargain for have not yet discouraged me from pursuing my vocation in its terms.

Recent accounts of the genealogy of literary studies would suggest that I am not alone in my investment in the Wordsworthian enterprise. Jonathan Arac has argued that Wordsworth "did more than anyone to establish a vocation of literature in relation to which ... our own culture's idea of the literary critic took shape." Clifford Siskin claims that Wordsworth underwrote an enterprise of critical inquiry and literary education in England and America which has produced the classrooms and the vehicles of literary publication in which his poetry has been written about, as well as the very literary critics and students of literature who have written about it. By refusing to accept either a given contemporary readership or a contemporary knowledge of literature as adequate to judging his work, Wordsworth projected into the future a task of learning and reading to which we may imagine what Robert Scholes has called "the English Apparatus" to be an institutional response.[2]

The adequacy of that institutional response and, indeed, the formulation of the task itself have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. The proliferation of "readings" generated by the institution of criticism has called into question whether the "great Spirit of human knowledge" in literary studies is truly moving, as Wordsworth believed, or just standing still, repeating itself (see graph). The recent questionings of the institutionalized distinction between "literature" and "history" have also called into question the boundaries of the "intellectual universe" in which poets write and

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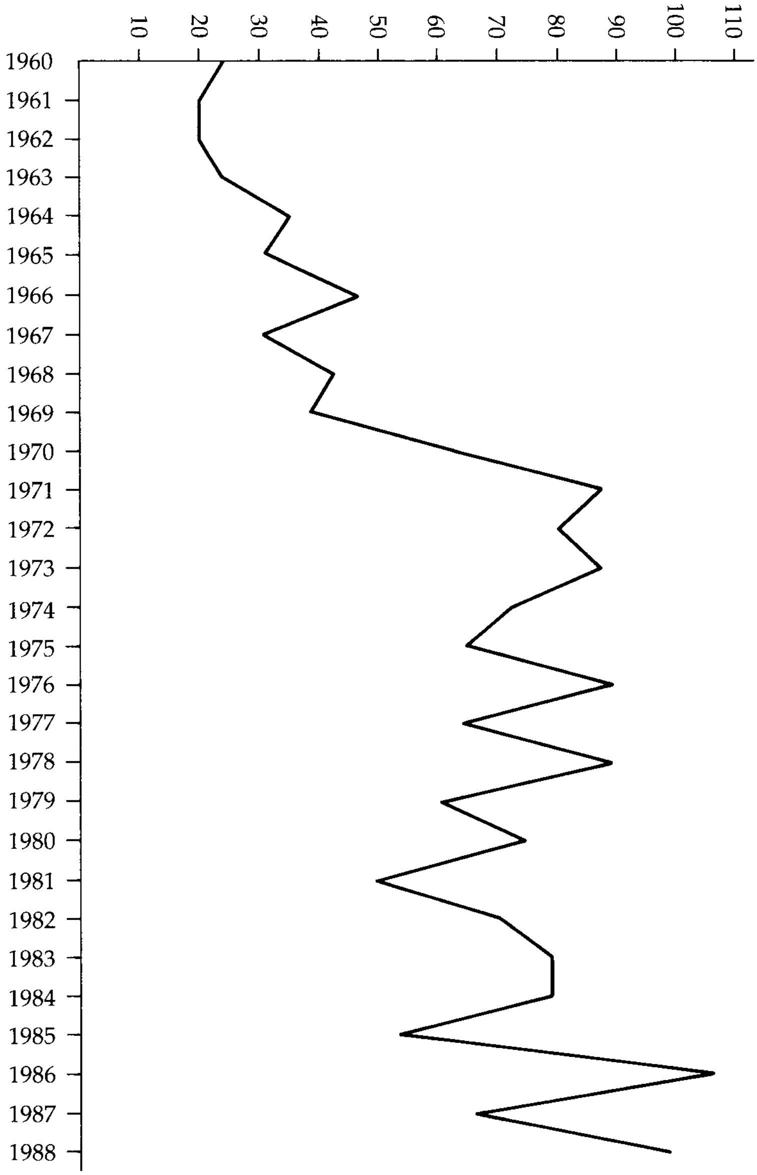
[2] *Genealogies* 3. *Historicity passim*. Robert Scholes, *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 1–17.



The growth of a poet's mind: studies listed under "Wordsworth" in the *MLA Annual Bibliography*, 1960–88.

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readers read, and critics have asked who has been left out and what has been sacrificed in setting that poetical "universe" apart from the world of politics, society, and economy. From another side, both "literature" and "history" have been subsumed by a radical critique of language that has questioned the autonomy and liberating power of either intellectual discipline. And these diverse critiques and agendas have called into question the educational functions of literary study as either a specialized area or a part of liberal education.

For literary scholars and teachers and for the institutions and students that sustain and make claims upon them, these questions call for re-examination of the literary enterprise and of Wordsworth as a founder and continuing object of that enterprise. Readings of *his* poems have proliferated and need to be accounted for. *He* has been held responsible for the anti-historical aestheticization of literature, and *he* has been re-read as "a poet of sheer language" (RR 92) who has provoked some of his followers to self-deluded aesthetic defenses. *He* has been identified as the liberator of oppressed classes and as the oppressor of women in literature. *He* has been made the center of pedagogical experiments. His poems have been chosen to demonstrate the efficacy of almost every critical school of the past fifty years in America, and his name has been invoked to warrant postmodern literary studies as well as to discredit the entire enterprise of "Literature." It is not only possible to address the larger questions of the literary enterprise today by writing about Wordsworth; it is scarcely possible to write about Wordsworth without addressing those questions. I at least have not been able to do so.

The chapters that follow, then, engage the issues of literary studies and liberal education through an engagement with Wordsworth. Chapter 1, "Wordsworth, literary history, and the constitution of literature," engages two recent Foucauldian accounts of Wordsworth's role in the founding of "Literature" and defines the historical situation of the present inquiry in relation to them. Chapter 2, "Displacing Coleridge, replacing Wordsworth," examines the claims of these competing "founding fathers" of modern literary study, probes the difficulties of choosing between them, and works to build the critical tradition that would make Wordsworth's claims more powerful. Chapter 3, "Wordsworth's dialogic art," tests the critical resources that have been used to characterize Wordsworth's poetry against a marginal poem in the Wordsworthian canon and re-examines his canonical poems from the point of view of the margin in terms drawn

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from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Chapter 4, "Dialogics of the lyric: a symposium on 'Westminster Bridge' and 'Beauteous Evening,'" examines how two of Wordsworth's canonical sonnets have been read by critics connected with eight post-war critical schools, introduces a Bakhtinian reading among them, and addresses the problem of how those readings have generally neglected one another and failed to constitute a responsible field of discourse. Chapter 5, "Social action in 'The Solitary Reaper'" criticizes Geoffrey Hartman's paradigmatic reading of "The Solitary Reaper" as a dramatization of consciousness and resists a New Historicist reduction of the poem to an evasion of historical reality. Chapter 6, "What de Man has made of Wordsworth," reviews the roles that Wordsworth has played in Paul de Man's writings. Chapter 7, "The revival of rhetoric and the reading of Wordsworth's *Prelude*," supplements recent rhetorical readings of Wordsworth through a recovery of classical rhetorical distinctions and an application of them to the first book of *The Prelude* and to the venerable topic of Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction. Chapter 8, "Theoretical commitments and Wordsworthian pedagogies," examines the pedagogical implications for Wordsworth's poetry of recent shifts in critical theory. Chapter 9, "Wordsworth, Allan Bloom, and liberal education" marshals Wordsworth as an alternative authority in the recent debates on liberal education.

Throughout this preface I have dwelt upon the common enterprise of literary study and teaching that has enabled the composition of these chapters and linked my work with the work of other participants in that enterprise. Professing literature, as Gerald Graff's recent book of that name has reminded us, is something more than reading it, and those of us who study and teach it professionally cannot leave our own practices, purposes, and projects out of account when we discuss it. I have tried in what follows to highlight those practices and bring those projects and purposes into the foreground of my own writing and the writing of my fellow critics and fellow teachers, emphasizing not just the logical presuppositions of our arguments and practices but also the signs of our affiliations with and oppositions to the others who have provoked us to write and teach as we do. I have tried, as Graff urges, to "teach the conflicts" but also to present the convergences of my own and others' work. Accordingly, matter usually consigned to the footnotes and acknowledgments has regularly taken a place in my text, and topics that often go unmentioned have been mentioned. My own argument

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has sometimes been conducted through the double-voiced dialogic representation of others' arguments rather than in formal counter-argument, and it has sometimes taken its shape not from a division of any thesis of mine but from the openings and materials they have made available. I have sometimes tested the limits of academic decorum and sometimes experimented with what might be taken as excessive elaborations of uncommon genres, because I am convinced that the enterprise of literary studies can no longer address its authors and its objects without addressing at the same time what its own members have made of them. What Dominick LaCapra has said of the essay-review applies to my own adoption of that genre and of the symposium, as well as to my use of dialogic figures of thought even in the critical essay: "It is a recognition that critical discourse is dialogical in that it attempts to address itself simultaneously to problems ... and to the words of others addressing those problems ... it is an enactment of the humanistic understanding of research as a conversation with the past through the medium of significant texts; it is also an especially vital forum in a contested discipline that is undergoing reconceptualization."[3]

I acknowledge here, as Wordsworth himself did, the experimental character of my departures from the genre in which my readers may reasonably expect me to be writing, and I ask, as he did, that my readers recognize the deliberateness of my experiments and the urgency of the circumstances that have provoked me to them. The quantity and variety of the work we produce has far outrun our capacity to assimilate and respond to it. The paradigms on offer for our common enterprise are many; and their cases for our adherence remain unadjudicated or are decided by fashion or the need for a conveniently vulnerable authority. Our syllabi and teaching techniques frequently reflect old models and habits of literary study that our research and theory claim to have displaced or discredited. If we are to justify our work to ourselves and to the institutions and polities that grant and sustain our professional privileges, and if we are to appreciate and build upon the extraordinary quantity and variety of work our colleagues have already produced, we students of literature must find new ways to assimilate and respond to what our colleagues make of our objects of inquiry, and we must reflect on what it means

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[3] Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 20–21.

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for us always to meet those objects in the company of those colleagues.

In Wordsworth we must even recognize that a producer of compelling literary objects is at the same time an influential, founding colleague whose sense of purpose has shaped our own purposes and whose account of his own works has helped to guide our accounts of them. If he were alive today, we would have to give him an honorary degree. Though he is not, we must nonetheless grant him the collegial acknowledgment of a critical response. In the common enterprise we share with him and in part owe to him, we meet him not just as an object to analyze or a genius to admire but as a fellow inquirer to question, hear out, and answer in our turn.

Many of my fellow inquirers have heard out and answered parts of this book on its way to its present shape, and many others have provoked and shaped its titular author on his way to writing it. Wayne C. Booth, Winifred Casterline, Norman Maclean, James M. Redfield, Stuart Tave, and Charles Wegener deserve special mention for disciplining and informing the author's intellect in ways that he can still recognize in this text published fifteen to twenty-five years after his formal submission to their instruction has ended. Colleagues at the University of Akron, Ball State University, Columbia University, Indiana University, Michigan State University, Northwestern University, Reed College, Rhode Island College, Siena Heights College, St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and the University of Washington have invited me to produce or present various parts of this argument and responded to my presentations with further provocations. Organizers of sessions at conventions of the College English Association of Ohio (Barry Chabot), the Modern Language Association (Evan Watkins, A. W. Phinney, and Tilottama Rajan), the National Council of Teachers of English (David Laurence), the Northeast Modern Language Association (Charles Rzepka), and the Society for the Study of Narrative Literature have also brought parts of this work into being or provided occasions for its testing and transformation. Bruce Bashford, Peter Elbow, Clint Goodson, Charles O. Hartman, Steven Mailloux, Peter Manning, Wallace Martin, Wendy Olmsted, Gene W. Ruoff, David Q. Smith, Michael Sprinker, and Susan Wolfson have read substantial parts or all of this work in progress and responded to it with collegial tact and intellectual rigor.

If I have not always taken their good advice, I have always been grateful for it.

A number of institutions that play a part in the "English Apparatus" have also enabled the production of this volume. A grant for recent recipients of the Ph.D. from the American Council of Learned Societies and a Summer Study Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities a decade ago have at last borne some fruit in this argument. The Department of English at the State University of New York at Stony Brook released me from teaching duties to work on this project with the expectation that it would come to fruition much sooner than it has. Academic Vice President William Free, Dean Alfred Cave, and the Chair of the English Department, David Hoch, at the University of Toledo generously provided me with the time to work on this project and with the able research support of Beth Poulos, Lynn Anderson, and Lori Demers, to whom I am also grateful. A Challenge Grant from the Ohio Board of Regents has subsidized the excellent technical assistance of Laurie Cohen. I also thank the Graduate School at Toledo for a Faculty Research Award that has accelerated the completion of the project. The Carlson Library at the University of Toledo and the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library at the University of Michigan, the latter made available to me through the courtesy of the Graduate School Visiting Scholars program 1987–89 and of Robert Weisbuch, Chair of the English Department, 1989–90, were indispensable to my work. Borders Book Shop and Shaman Drum Bookshop helped, too. The editors who have seen the book through the press at Cambridge, Kevin Taylor, Josie Dixon, and Linda Randall, also deserve special acknowledgment.

I am pleased, in addition, to acknowledge several editors who have accepted or published earlier versions of parts of this book for their encouragement of my work and their generosity in permitting me to publish here revised and expanded versions of those pieces: Kenneth Johnston and his fellow editors of *Romantic Revolutions* at Indiana University Press, Marilyn Gaull, editor of *Wordsworth Circle*, Eugene Garver of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Clint Goodson and Roger Meiners of *Centennial Review*, David Laurence of *ADE Bulletin*, and Michael Macovski, editor of *Textual Voices, Vocative Texts* from Oxford University Press. Without their endorsements at crucial points in the project, I might well have been discouraged from elaborating the whole of which the pieces they published could

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become parts. I must also acknowledge with thanks the editors of three journals that rejected earlier versions of parts of the book, W. J. T. Mitchell of *Critical Inquiry*, Ronald Schleifer of *Genre*, and John W. Kronik of *PMLA*, for sharing their provocative anonymous readers' reports with me. In choosing, as I have, to call attention to the other voices that have shaped and provoked my own, I cannot ignore them and have, in fact, cited several of their remarks in Chapter 4.

The voices that have challenged standard arrangements in the institutions of literary study during the past decade have not left domestic relations unquestioned. In particular, challenges to male privilege have charged the convention of acknowledging my wife's part in making this book possible with rhetorical dangers that would make me prefer to thank her in private rather than to risk appearing to patronize her in public. She deserves recognition, however, for taking time from managing our home, rearing our children, contributing her energies and intelligence to their schools, and beginning her training for her own career to read every word of this book and give me the benefit of her excellent eye and ear for the English language. Her presence at the center of my life and my secure place in her life for more than twenty-five years have enabled me to discover and pursue projects like the present one, just as she has found and followed her own purposes. I cannot imagine living, let alone writing books, without her. I would not, then, make my theme of "common enterprise" serve, as de Man made his theme of "common temporal predicament" serve, as "the root of Wordsworth's theme of human love," for "love," as Wordsworth declares near the end of *The Prelude*, is "first and chief" (1805 XIII, 144).

Abbreviations used in text and notes

Advancement	Bacon, Francis. *The Advancement of Learning*. Ed. G. W. Kitchin. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1973.
ANC	Lentricchia, Frank. *After the New Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
Approaches	Hall, Spencer, with Jonathan Ramsey. *Approaches to Teaching Wordsworth's Poetry*. New York: Modern Language Association, 1982.
CEA Critic	*College English Association Critic*.
DLDA	Voloshinov, V. N. "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art," *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*. Trans. I. R. Titunik. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.
DLDP	Voloshinov, V. N. "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry," *Bakhtin School Papers*. Trans. John Richmond. Ed. Ann Shukman. Russian Poetics in Translation, no. 10. Oxford: RPT Publications, 1983.
DN	Bakhtin, M. M. "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
EE	Wordsworth, William. *Essays upon Epitaphs, Prose* II.
ES	"Essay, Supplementary to the Preface," *Prose* III.
FF	Arac, Jonathan. "The Function of Foucault at the Present Time," *Humanities in Society* 3 (Winter 1980): 73–86.
FM	Bakhtin, M. M., and P. N. Medvedev. *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*. Trans. Albert J. Wehrle. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

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Abbreviations

Genealogies	Arac, Jonathan. *Critical Genealogies: Historical Situations for Postmodern Literary Studies*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.
Historicity	Siskin, Clifford. *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*.
LB	Wordsworth, William, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Lyrical Ballads*. Eds. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones. London: Methuen, 1963.
Marxism	Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
MLA	Modern Language Association.
MLN	*Modern Language Notes*.
MLQ	*Modern Language Quarterly*.
MPL	Voloshinov, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. New York: Seminar Press, 1973.
Making Tales	Bialostosky, Don. *Making Tales: The Poetics of Wordsworth's Narrative Experiments*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
New Organon	Bacon, Francis. *The New Organon*. Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1960.
NLH	*New Literary History*.
OED	Oxford English Dictionary.
PC	Richards, I. A. *Practical Criticism*. New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1929.
PDP	Bakhtin, M. M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association*.
Prose	*The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*. Eds. W. J. B. Owen and Jane W. Smyser. 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.
RI	McGann, Jerome. *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
RMGM	Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives and a Grammar of Motives*. New York: World Publishing Company, 1962.

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More information

Abbreviations

RR	de Man, Paul. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
SiR	*Studies in Romanticism.*
SEL	*Studies in English Literature.*
THW	de Man, Paul. "Time and History in Wordsworth," *diacritics* 17 (1987): 4–17.
T&P	Miller, J. Hillis. "Theory and Practice: Response to Vincent Leitch," *Critical Inquiry* 6 (Summer 1980): 609–14.
WC	*The Wordsworth Circle.*