

## **WILLIAM WORDSWORTH PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS (1800)**

### **Representation (Content): the Subject-Matter of Poetry:**

Read:

- from "The principle object . . ." [p. 438] to ". . . their own creation." [p. 438];
- from "Having dwelt thus . . ." [p.439] to ". . . subdued and temperate." (p.441);

In this preface to his Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth makes some general observations, very much in a Neoclassical vein, about the object of representation of poetry. Basically, his view is that art holds a mirror up to nature. He argues that poetry is the "most philosophic of all writing" (441) because its "object" (441) is "truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative" (442). The poet, "singing a song in which all humans join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion" (442). In a manner that is very much in keeping with the emotiveness synonymous with the Age of Sensibility which occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century, he argues that this truth that is "carried alive into the heart by passion" (442).

The poet, Wordsworth argues, holds a mirror in particular up to human nature: he is the "rock of defense for human nature" (442): in spite of "differences of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs" (442), the poet "binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time. The objects of the poet's thoughts are everywhere; though the eyes and senses of man are . . . his favourite guides" (my emphasis; 442). The influence of Locke on the last sentence ought to be obvious.

Wordsworth admits that the language of the poet performs often, "in liveliness and truth" (441), falls "short of that which is uttered by men in real life, under the actual pressure of those passions" (441), only "shadows of which the Poet . . . feels to be produced, in himself" (441). Although it is the "wish of the poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes" (441) and even though he may for brief periods of time "let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his feelings with theirs" (441), this is at best only an approximation of the "freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering" (441). Wordsworth acknowledges that "no words, which *his* fancy or imagination can suggest, will be to be compared with those which are the emanations of truth and reality" (441): the poet is at best a "translator" (441) who can only "substitute excellencies of another kind for those which are unattainable by him" (441).

Wordsworth draws a contrast between poetry and other forms of knowledge. Poetry offers the "image of man and nature" (442) but is not impeded by the "obstacles which stand in the way of the fidelity of the biographer and historian" (442). Sounding a similar note to Sidney, Wordsworth argues that there is "no object standing between the poet and the image of things" (442), whereas a "thousand" (442) obstacles stand between the things themselves and the "biographer and historian" (88). By the same token, where the man of science is concerned with the "particular facts of nature" (442) which are the object of his studies, the poet imitates, "whether in prose or verse" (443), the "great and universal passions of men, the most general and interesting of their occupations, and the entire world of nature" (443).

In making the comments above, Wordsworth sounds a very Neoclassical note. However, the Preface was also designed to serve as a defence of the radically different subject-matter and style of the Lyrical Ballads and functions, consequently, as a poetic manifesto of sorts. He advances what was for the time and place a revolutionary perspective on poetry that has had a huge impact on subsequent poetry to the point where his assumptions have largely become common place. He argues that his "principal object" (438) of description (or subject matter) (and, by extension, about which all poets should write) was

to represent "incidents and situations from common life" (438). Wordsworth stresses that he has above all sought "to look steadily at my subject" (439) as a result of which there is, he hopes, "little falsehood of description" (439). Such an intention represented something of a radical departure from the predominant forms of poetry which preceded it and which sought to depict not average or even low-class people and situations via language that was anything but ordinary. Compare, in this regard, the views of theorists like Pope on both the subject-matter and style of poetry.

A philosophical goal informs Wordsworth's intentions in this regard. His purpose in depicting commonplace incidents and situations is to trace the "primary laws of our nature" (438), in particular, the "manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement" (438). Like Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth has in mind here the views of Locke on the nature of the mind as well as the so-called 'associationism' of David Hartley whose views were inspired by Locke. Wordsworth is particularly interested in capturing how the human mind responds through the senses when it is excited or aroused by its encounter with the physical world and how the 'simple' ideas which come to be formed thereby are later associated or combined with others to produce 'complex' ideas. How is the depiction of humble folk conducive to these ends? Wordsworth reveals that he chose to represent what he calls "[h]umble and rustic life" (438) in his poetry (i.e. poor country-folk, the disenfranchised and the downtrodden) precisely because

in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, subsequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated. (438)

Drawing upon an agricultural metaphor, Wordsworth argues that the 'essential passions of the heart' can be seen to grow better and in a less restrained fashion in such people who are untainted by city life and the false trappings of sophisticated town life. This is because the 'our elementary feelings' exist in such people in a much less complex but much more visible form. He contends that the

manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (438)

In other words, Wordsworth is of the view that the 'elementary feelings' inspired in this way gives rise to certain patterns of behaviour characteristic of persons who live in the country and which are easier to grasp from the study of the characteristic pursuits in which they are engaged. Moreover, peasants and other common folk are regularly exposed to the beauties of nature found in their purest form the countryside (as opposed to city folk who are confined to ugly cities). If Locke is right that the mind is something of a 'tabula rasa' until it is formed via intercourse with the external world through the medium of the physical senses, one's interaction with such a physical environment must necessarily form better human minds and by extension, characters. What he terms "repeated experience" (438) of this kind necessarily produces "regular feelings" (438) which, in turn, modifies character for the better, providing that one is exposed to sublime natural scenery.

### **Literary Form:**

Read:

- from "But whatever portion of this faculty . . ." (p.441) to " . . . a particular language." (p.443); and

- from "These and the like . . ." (p. 443) to ". . . the poet proposes to himself" (p.445)

Wordsworth's intention to depict this subject-matter leads him to consider questions of "style" (439) or form in general and diction in particular. To the ends listed above, Wordsworth argues, he sought to utilise in his ballads the "language really used by men" (438). His goal is, he stresses, to "imitate . . . the very language of men" (439). As a result, his "ideas are expressed in language fitted to their respective importance" (439). The language of the humble country-folk which he strives to depict is especially suited to such objectives in that it is "purified" (438), he feels, from "all real defects" (438). This is because it reflects the fact that "such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived" (438). In other words, if words are mimetic in that they derive their meaning from the reality which they reflect, then the language spoken by rural folk, given the 'beautiful and permanent forms of nature' with which they interact, must provide a glimpse of language in its purest form. There is another advantage, in Wordsworth's view, to imitating the language really spoken by humble rustic folk: "because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions" (438). In other words, unexposed to the sophisticated vanities of the higher classes, they speak a simple and unadorned language which is a "more permanent, and a far more philosophical language than that frequently substituted for it by poets" (438). By utilising 'poetic diction,' he argues, poets "separate themselves from the sympathies of men" (438) by indulging in "arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes . . . of their own creation" (438). This is why Wordsworth avoids "personifications of abstract ideas" (439) and "poetic diction" (439) in general, that is, the "large portion of phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of poets" (439). This is why Wordsworth abstains from using poetic clichés, that is, "many expressions, in themselves proper and beautiful, but which have been foolishly repeated by bad poets" (440) ad nauseam. His aim is to avoid the "incongruity" (441) that arises from introducing "foreign splendours" (441) of the poet's own making that is out of synch "with that which the passion naturally suggests" (441). For, he argues, "if the poet's subject be judiciously chosen, it will naturally . . . lead him to passions the language of which, if selected truly and judiciously, must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with [appropriate] metaphors and figures" (440-441). However, he stresses in all this that the poet must make a "*selection* of the language really spoken by men" (my emphasis; 440), in other words, it must be pruned of all the "vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life" (440) to which persons of that status are, in his view, prone.

This fidelity to the language spoken by real men applies to both poetry written in the third person, where the poet speaks through the "mouths of his characters" (443) (e.g. ballads, epics, and narrative poetry in general), and poetry written in the first person (so-called lyric poetry) where the poet "speaks to us in his own person and character" (443). In both cases, the goal being to hold a mirror up to human actions and behaviour, the language used must be reflective of that actually likely to be spoken. Given that the poet himself "thinks and feels in the spirit of human passions" (443), how then can his "language differ in any material degree from that of all other men who feel vividly and see clearly" (443), he asks. In order to "excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves" (443). This is why he advocates that the poet should avoid both idiosyncratic uses of language peculiar to the poet himself and what he terms 'poetic diction.' This is why it does not matter whether the person speaking is another character or the poet himself.

However, he stresses that there is "no necessity to trick out or elevate nature" (441): he warns that one ought to remove anything that would "otherwise be painful or disgusting

in the passion" (441) by applying the "principle of selection" (441). This is why Wordsworth confesses that at times in his poetry, rather than merely holding a mirror up to nature, he sought to "throw over" (438) commonplace "incidents and situations" (438) a "certain colouring of the imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect" (438). This is why, too, he admits that the "necessity of producing immediate pleasure" (442) distinguishes the function of the poet from that of a historian or biographer: the production of pleasure is an "acknowledgment of the beauty of the universe" (442) and a "homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man" (442). To accomplish this necessitates holding a selective mirror up to nature resulting in a contradiction not dissimilar to the one that can be glimpsed in Samuel Johnson's view of art: literature must hold a mirror up to reality only to a limited extent and must offer, in its stead, an ideal of human conduct to which it must encourage its readers to aspire.

Wordsworth finds it necessary as a result of the foregoing claims to spend some time defending his poetry against the accusation that it contains "prosaisms" (440), that is, that at times what he has written less resembles poetry than prose because its language resembles that found in prose fiction. It was up to this point widely thought that poets should use a certain kind of diction proper to poetry, so-called 'poetic diction' whereas prose fiction writers should use more ordinary language. Wordsworth argues that "there neither is, nor can be, any *essential* difference between the language of prose and metrical composition [i.e. verse]" (440) because a "large portion of every good poem . . . must necessarily, except with reference to the metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose" (440). Moreover, whether poetry or prose fiction, literature originates in and affects the same human beings and thus cannot be that different from each other: both poetry and prose "speak by and to the same organs; the bodies in which both of them are clothed may be said to be of the same substance, their affections are kindred, and almost identical, not necessarily differing even in degree" (440). Indeed, Wordsworth goes so far as to advance a materialist, earth-bound model of poetry that differs considerably from the idealist, other-worldly model of poetry which had risen to ascendancy in Germany at this time and was rapidly making an inroad into English critical theory: poetry, he says, "can boast of no celestial anchor that distinguished her vital juices from those of prose; the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both" (440). Both Shelley and Coleridge, contemporaries of Wordsworth, would adopt a very different view of poetry.

Wordsworth also has much to say about "metre" (440) which, he argues, must vary according to the passions represented. This is something, he contends, that has been borne out by the "concurring testimony of ages" (443). He argues that he chose to write in verse, rather than prose, because, firstly, "words metrically arranged" (444) give more pleasure than mere prose. Where morally sound prose is only 'utile,' morally sound poetry is also 'dulce.' However, given that the "end of poetry is to produce excitement in coexistence with an *overbalance* of pleasure" (my emphasis; 444), the regularity provided by a particular rhythm functions to temper the feelings generated in the reader's heart by the depiction of certain passions and to restrain the concomitant irregular association of ideas produced thereby in the mind:

excitement is an unusual and irregular state of mind; ideas and feelings do not, in that state, succeed each other in accustomed order. If the words, however, by which this excitement is produced be in themselves powerful, or the images and feelings have an undue portion of pain connected with them, there is some danger that the excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds. Now the correspondence of something regular, something to which the minds has been accustomed in various moods and in a less excited state, cannot but have great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion by an intertexture of ordinary

feeling . . . not strictly connected with the passion. (444)  
 Wordsworth praises the "tendency of meter to divest language . . . of its reality, and thus to throw a sort of half-consciousness of unsubstantial existence over the whole composition" (444), that is, the "indistinct perception . . . of language closely resembling that of real life, and yet, in the circumstance of metre, differing from it so widely" (445). This is what produces a certain "complex feeling of delight" (445) that functions to mitigate the "more pathetic situations and sentiments" (444) and the "painful feeling always found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions" (445). Of course, the opposite effect is also possible: if the poet's words be "incommensurate with the passion, and inadequate to raise the reader a height of desirable excitement" (444), the poet's choice of metre can "contribute to impart passion to the words" (444) because of the "feelings of pleasure which the reader has been accustomed to connect with metre in general" (444) and the specific "feeling, whether cheerful or melancholy" (444), connected to a "particular movement of meter" (444).

### **Authorship: the Nature of the Poet**

Read:

- from "But as the pleasure . . ." (p.441) to ". . . external excitement." (p.441);
- from "What has been thus far said . . ." (p.443) to ". . . fear and sorrow." (p.443); and
- from "I have said that poetry is . . ." (p.444) to ". . . the prose is read once" (p.445)

In a significant departure from the norms of preceding critical theory, Wordsworth turns his attention to the question of authorship: he attempts to define the poet and the relationship of his consciousness to the world around him, offering a conception of the poet which is largely Lockean in outlook. "What is a Poet?" (441), Wordsworth asks. His answer: the poet is a "man speaking to men" (441). However, the poet is certainly different in two important ways from other men. He feels things more keenly and thinks more deeply and expansively than others: poetry "to which any value can be attached" (438) is produced by men who "being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply" (438). The poet is *naturally*

endowed with a more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe. . . . To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet . . . do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events. (441)

Wordsworth stresses that although the poet feels things more keenly than other people, the nature of his passions and feelings is not different from those of others: they are the "general passions and thoughts and feelings of men" (443). The poet is "nothing differing in kind from other men, but only in degree" (443), that is, the poet is different from others only in his sensitivity.

If poets mostly resemble other men (the difference being quantitative rather than qualitative in nature), the key to understanding both the nature of the poet and the impact of poetry on the reader, therefore, is to seek to comprehend human nature. To this end, Wordsworth draws heavily on Locke's philosophy of mind and, more precisely, his view that

ideas in the mind are formed at least in part by the absorption through the senses of impressions stimulated by objects external to us. Our thought, in other words, is to a large degree the product of sensations and feelings inspired by our intercourse with the world around us. In typical Lockean fashion, he contends that many of our ideas are a product of man's intercourse with the world around him. The "mind of man" (442), he writes, is the "mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature" (442) and reflective of "certain powers in the great and permanent objects" (439) around him in the natural world. Wordsworth lists some of these objects that impinge upon the mind as the

operations of the elements, and the appearances of the visible universe; . . .  
 . . . storm and sunshine, . . . the revolutions of the seasons, . . . cold and heat, . . .  
 . . . loss of friends and kindred, . . . injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope,  
 . . . fear and sorrow. (443)

Wordsworth is at pains to stress here that both the physical and the social environment has an emotional impact upon us. Whether natural or artificial, there are numerous "causes which excite" (443) in us "moral feelings and animal sensations" (443) which, in turn, produce relevant thoughts. These, in turn, have an effect upon our feelings: "our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings" (438), modify and direct "our continued influxes of feeling" (438). There is, in other words, a certain reciprocity between our feelings and our thoughts.

However, in keeping with Locke's argument that some of our ideas are also derived from internal sources, that is, they reflect processes internal, rather than external, to the mind (i.e. some of our ideas denote ideas and related mental processes), Wordsworth is of the view that the poet's thoughts and feelings also arise in part from sources within. For Wordsworth, the mind is not merely a sponge formed by sense-impressions absorbed from without. Poets are distinguished from other men, he argues, not only because he is someone who naturally possesses a "greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels" (441), but because is naturally endowed with the gift of expressing "those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without *external* excitement" (my emphasis; 441). To put this another way, the poet is "chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without *external* excitement; and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings are produced in him in that manner" (my emphasis; 443). In other words, poets are endowed more than others with the related gifts of introspection and self-expression, that is, a greater capacity than most others to represent for the benefit of others what goes on within himself and, by extension, the internal workings of human beings in general. This may very well be the cardinal contribution made by poetry to the compendium of human knowledge and that which makes it superior to other forms of human knowledge such as the sciences and history: it offers an accurate representation of human nature in all its complexity and depth.

Moreover, Wordsworth also seems to suggest that the mind may not be merely a reflection of either external or internal sources. In a manner that reflects the growing influence at this time of the views of Immanuel Kant on contemporary thought, Wordsworth argues that there are also, he believes, "certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind" (439). As a result, there may, in fact, exist something of a two-way relationship between the poet's consciousness and the world outside of it, the mind being both affected by and in turn acting upon things outside the self. To some degree, in other words, the poet may in fact be capable of actively imposing his consciousness on the external world. Hence, Wordsworth's view that the poet

considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and re-acting upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure. . . .  
 He considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other. (442)

The poet's thoughts and feelings are, in short, seemingly partly innate and partly acquired. His consciousness is in part formed by the external world which is at least in part also 'fashioned' (or, at least, conceptualised in pre-given ways) by the consciousness of the poet. For Wordsworth, arguably, at least to some degree, human nature does not merely hold a mirror up to nature; rather, it reshapes nature in its own image. The result is that the poet gives as good as he gets.

Whatever the source, external or internal, of consciousness, Wordsworth argues that the foregoing evidently applies as much to poets as it does to other men (the only difference being that the former are naturally more sensitive and deeper thinkers). He offers a famous definition of the source of poetry: "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling" (438). However, it should be noted that poetry is never crafted even as the emotions are being aroused. Rather, he stresses, poetry "takes its origin from emotion *recollected in tranquillity*" (my emphasis; 177). He describes the precise process of poetic creation in this way:

emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on. . . . (444)

In other words, long after the initial stimulation, the poet pauses retroactively to cognitively assimilate the emotions experienced earlier, turning feelings into thoughts, and records them by putting pen to paper.

### **The Reader: the Moral Impact of Poetry**

- Read from "I cannot, however, be insensible . . ." (p. 438) to ". . . distinguished success" (p.439)

Like Sidney, Wordsworth is also trying here to respond to Plato's invitation to rescue poetry from exile by demonstrating that it performs a salutary function. Given that the poet is a man speaking to men, the impact that literature has upon the reader is a subject of "great importance" (439) to Wordsworth. Plato warned, you might recall, that poetry inspires feelings in us that we would be better off without because it was, he argued, far more important to cultivate our reason than our passions. However, where for Plato this is necessarily a bad thing, for Wordsworth this can be a beneficial process, given the necessary link between our feelings and our thoughts. Briefly, if our thoughts are derived from our feelings, then we can change our thoughts by changing the objects which inspire our feelings.

Wordsworth suggests that by "contemplating the relation" (438) between particular feelings and their concomitant thoughts, "we discover what is really important to men" (439). He argues that by the

repetition and continuance of this act [i.e. contemplating the link between our feelings and our thoughts], our feelings will be connected with important subjects till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified. (439)

Arguing that the "human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants" (439) and that humans are distinguished from each other "in proportion

as he possesses this capability" (439), he contends that "to endeavour to produce or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which . . . a writer can be engaged" (439).

Such a function is especially important, he feels, at the present time when a variety of causes have conspired to "blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor" (439). Not the least important factor in this regard is the "increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the conformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident" (439). This has led to a "degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation" (439), the worst example of which is the abandonment of great literature for "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" (439). Arguing that the poems found in the Lyrical Ballads have a "worthy purpose" (439), Wordsworth is of the view that his poetry constitutes a "feeble attempt . . . to counteract" (439) these tendencies.

In conclusion, Wordsworth's mimetic model of literature and the philosophy of language upon which it is predicated locates him very much in the *realist* camp, that is, as supportive of the view that literature ought to hold a mirror up to real life. Indeed, the views expressed in the preface, even though restricted to a consideration of poetry, represent one of the first and most important statements on realism in literature with which the nineteenth century, the so-called 'golden age of the novel,' is synonymous. His views continue to be influential on modern realism in general, even here in the Caribbean where most writers strive to depict the commonplace, rather than the extraordinary, to foreground characters drawn from the 'rank and file,' as they say, and to capture the language which ordinary people speak. He is also important in so far as he is one of the earliest to attempt to understand the nature of the author in relation to the physical and social context in which he wrote.