

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH'S "PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS": QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

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Text used: Charles Kaplan and William David Anderson, eds. Criticism: Major Statements, 4th ed... New York: Bedford, 2000.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In 1798, two young poets, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (then 26) and William Wordsworth (then 28), both frustrated with the subject matter and style of poetry being produced in England, published a cooperative volume of poems titled Lyrical Ballads.

2. It consisted of 23 poems, four by Coleridge, including The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, and 19 by Wordsworth (1770-1850), the best being "Tintern Abbey."

3. At its publication, Lyrical Ballads was bitterly attacked in the more conservative periodicals. Nevertheless, it sold well enough to call for a second printing in 1800. The 1800 edition contains the epoch-making "Preface" written by Wordsworth.

4. Wordsworth's essay has become one of the most famous pieces of literary criticism in English, since it provides justification for the critical principles of the Romantic Movement, which dominated English poetry throughout the 19th century.

5. Wordsworth's primary purpose in the essay was to reform poetry by deposing an artificial literary tradition and substituting in its stead a new poetics, more in keeping with normal contemporary speech patterns. He attacked "both the subject matter and the 'poetic diction' of the preceding" eighteenth century (Kaplan and Anderson 240).

II. "PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS"

A. INTRODUCTION

1. The "Preface" covers a wide range of ideas about the nature of poetry and the poetic process.

2. Only four of these will be discussed: (1) the poetic process (EXPRESSIVE theory); (2) the subject matter of poetry (MIMETIC theory), (3) the language of poetry (OBJECTIVE theory), and (4) the effects of poetry (AFFECTIVE theory).

B. POETIC PROCESS: EXPRESSIVE THEORY

1. Until Wordsworth's time, the important aspect in the poetic process was its Mimetic function: how, or how well, a poem imitated the real world.

2. After Wordsworth, the central aspect of the poetic process became the Expressive function: what went on in the mind of the poet, not what was imitated.

3. As Wordsworth writes, the excellence of poetry does not lie in the "action and situation" (243) but in the poet's intensely subjective feeling toward his experience: The "feeling [of the poet] therein developed [that is, in the poet's mind] gives importance to the action and situation [EXPRESSIVE THEORY], and not the action and situation to the feeling [MIMETIC THEORY]" (243).

4. He states that the poet does not simply imitate the world, but "throw[s] over" "incidents and situations from common life" "a certain colouring of imagination" (242), the imagination being that part of the human mind that creates poetry.

5. Wordsworth states that there are three basic stages in the process of writing a poem; each focuses on the Expressive approach, that is, what goes on in the poet's mind:

First, the poet encounters a commonplace incident, which for reasons unknown at the time arouses powerful feelings in his mind.

At a later time, when he is far away from the incident and can "see" it only in his mind, the poet looks back calmly on the feelings aroused by this incident.

Suddenly his mind becomes agitated to the point that it calls forth a facsimile of the original feelings he had experienced.

At this point, having proceeded through three sequences of (1) powerful feelings, (2) tranquil assessment, and (3) a recreation of the powerful feelings in his mind, the poet is ready to write.

6. Here is Wordsworth describing the poetic process, of this: "[P]oetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually 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" (253).

7. Since his definition of poetry stresses the poet, Wordsworth analyzes what qualities make a person a poet: He asks, "What is a Poet?" (247). A poet "is a man speaking to men" (247), but one who "is endowed with more lively sensibility" and has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul" than other people (247). The poet sees the "similitude in dissimilitude and dissimilitude in similitude" (253).

However, Wordsworth insists that the poet differs from other men not "in kind," "but only in degree" (250). Two degrees of difference are listed: The poet is better able "to think and feel without immediate external excitement" and "he has a greater power in expressing [his] thoughts and feelings" than non-poets (251). But

Wordsworth insists that the similarities between poets and other people are far greater than their differences: the poet's "passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of [all other] men" (251).

C. SUBJECT MATTER OF POETRY: MIMETIC THEORY

1. To most writers before Wordsworth, common characters and rustic settings were suitable only for comedy.

2. The death knell of this attitude was sounded in Wordsworth's insistence that poems should concentrate upon "incidents and situations from common life" (242).

3. The subject matter of his poems—that is, the world he would imitate (his MIMETIC approach)—would be "humble and rustic life" (242).

4. Why would he choose this segment of society, instead of aristocracy or the middle class? Wordsworth justified his choice largely upon the intimate ties between country dwellers and Nature: In "that condition [rural settings] the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature" (242).

4. Thus, in Wordsworth's poems, the humblest of people are exalted to the highest dignity and worth. That is, he felt, that the poet's imagination could make commonplace happenings take on a quality of magic: He sought "to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect" (242).

D. THE LANGUAGE OF POETRY: OBJECTIVE THEORY

1. What kind of language is appropriate for poetry? Aristotle, Longinus, Horace, Dante, Sidney, Dryden, Pope, and Johnson had all advocated to a certain degree that a serious poet should use a lofty style. They basically contend that the language of literature, whether poetry or drama, should be different from the language used in the real world.

2. Wordsworth opposes this view, and in so doing makes an OBJECTIVE analysis of the language of poetry.

3. First, he says that some poets believe they must "use a peculiar language" (251). On the contrary, he asserts, a poet "must descend from this supposed height" and "express himself as other men express themselves" (251).

3. Thus Wordsworth objects to the "poetic diction" (251) so prevalent in the poetry of his time.

Poetic diction is usually defined as "words and phrases which have established themselves as appropriate to poetry because they are not used in speech."

For instance, Samuel Johnson described “poetical diction” as “those happy combinations of words which distinguish poetry from prose.”

4. Wordsworth says, “My purpose [in his poems] was to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men” (244). He takes pride that there “will also be found in [his poems] little of what is usually called poetic diction” (244). He desires “to bring my language near to the language of men” (244).

5. Thus, he says, his poems use “the language of [common, rural-based] men [since] such a language arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that [poetic diction] which is frequently substituted for it by Poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men” (242-43).

6. However, Wordsworth does qualify this conception of the language to be used in poems. For instance, he states that the language of real people should be “purified indeed [by the poet] from what appears to be its real defects” (242).

Therefore, poetry becomes not the real language of people, but a selection from this real language: Poetry should be “as far as . . . possible . . . a selection of language really used by men” (242) or, as Wordsworth phrased this later in the essay, “a selection of the language really spoken by men” (246).

Furthermore, Wordsworth felt poems should be “alive with metaphors and figures [of speech]” (246) and also should be written in regular meter, although he concedes these are seldom, or not even, used in “real life” (253).

7. To sum up, in practice the verse of Wordsworth does not reproduce the dialect or illiterate jargon of his humble characters, but it does employ a vocabulary and phrasing much closer to standard English speech than the “poetic diction” used by many 18th-century English poets

8. The poetic diction or artificialities of expression which Wordsworth opposed included ponderous words and phrases, personifications of abstractions, inversions and other elaborate rhetorical patterns, mere listings and catalogs, stereotyped allusions and elegant words, and inflated figures of speech.

E. THE EFFECTS OF POETRY: AFFECTIVE THEORY

1. What is the purpose of poetry? Immediate pleasure and enduring truth, Wordsworth answers: “The poet writes under one restriction only, . . . the necessity of giving immediate pleasure” to the reader (248). However, the poet never forgets that the central purpose of true poetry is the recording of truth: “The object [of poetry] is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion” (248).

2. What Wordsworth affirms here is that the poet’s emotions presented in the poem arouse in the reader emotions similar to the poet’s. So communication between

the poet and the reader takes place in the realm of the emotions not that of ideas, not a higher plane of Platonic ideals, not even in mirroring or imitating the world around us. But in the reality of emotions.

III. CRITICISM OF WORDSWORTH'S CRITICAL IDEAS

1. Coleridge was to point out one major problem with Wordsworth's idea that the common man spoke a truer, more poetic language.
2. Coleridge argued that to be a poet you need to be educated. If the peasants of Wordsworth's countryside spoke a pure and vigorous language, this came not from uninstructed communion with nature, but from a spirit of independence, a solid religious education, and acquaintance with the Bible and hymnbooks.
3. A second criticism of Wordsworth is that he replaced one poetic diction with another: Stock words like "wild, dark, lonely, light, dream" appear over and over in his poetry and poetic clichés become even more prevalent in later Romantic poets.