

Preface to lyrical Ballads

By William Wordsworth

Introduction:

The **preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*** is an essay, composed by William Wordsworth, for the second edition (published in January 1801, and often referred to as the "1800 Edition") of the poetry collection *Lyrical Ballads*, and then greatly expanded in the third edition of 1802. It has come to be seen as a *de facto* manifesto of the Romantic movement.

The four guidelines of the manifesto include:

- Ordinary life is the best subject for poetry
- Wordsworth uses common man's language.
- Everyday language is best suited for poetry
- Expression of feeling is more important than action or plot
- "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of emotion" that "takes its origin from emotion,

recollected in tranquility." - William Wordsworth

Preface to Lyrical Ballads by William Wordsworth begins with a discussion of the collection of poems, written mostly by Wordsworth with contributions by S.T. Coleridge. Originally published in 1798, in 1800, Wordsworth added an earlier version of the *Preface*, which he extended two years later. Because he felt his poems were of a new theme and style, Wordsworth felt they needed an introduction. Some scholars say that Coleridge wanted to write the preface, but never got around to it, so the work fell to Wordsworth instead. As the majority of the poems in the collection are by Wordsworth, this was probably a more appropriate choice, though there is suggestion in some of Coleridge's later writings that the two disagreed about what the Preface should say. In the *Preface*, Wordsworth writes that the

purpose of the collection was to write poems that dealt with things that happen in everyday life. Most importantly, Wordsworth considered each poem in the collection to be an experiment in language usage, or diction. He wanted to find out if conversational language could be used effectively in poetry.

What, then, is poetry? Wordsworth sets out to define this particular form of art. In the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth outlines his definition of the nature and function of poetry—as well as identifying the qualities that make someone a true poet. For Wordsworth, poetry must reflect spontaneity and an “overflow of powerful feelings.” Passion is key, as are mood and temperament. Although poetry must emerge from spontaneity, it must not be written spontaneously. Rather, Wordsworth asserts that a poem should be the result of long and deep reflection. He also cautions against being too concerned with the poetic rules of Classicism.

Next, Wordsworth breaks down the poet's process into four stages. The first is observation. A person, object, or situation must stimulate powerful emotions in the Romantic poet, and those observations must be noted. Recollection follows, which is the stage when the poet contemplates those observations. For this, tranquility is a must. Memories may surface that are days old or older, and the poet should contemplate those memories to explore how the emotions they provoke relate to past experiences. The third stage is filtering, when the poet clears the mind of all non-essential elements. The result of this is that the poet's personal experience becomes relevant to a wider audience. It's not until the fourth and final stage that the poet should begin to compose. The goal is to express emotions in a way that the reader will understand, and can therefore contemplate.

Wordsworth's next topic is imagination. He begins by discussing how the neo-classicists

defined imagination. They said that the mind was passive, and recorded sensations. Imagination, therefore, is a function of memory combined with the ability to associate those sensations with other things that may or may not exist. He provides the example of mythical creatures, which elicit, in literature, real sensations. For Romantics like Wordsworth, imagination is much more creative. Rather than assigning recorded sensations to other objects, the imagination has the power to create a new reality, and to see beyond the material world surrounding the poet. As for what to write about, Wordsworth states that poetry can capture any and every subject that is of interest to the mind. What matters is not whether a subject is poetic, but rather, whether the poet can add meaning to a subject and therefore make it poetic. Suddenly, themes from common life can be poetic and worthy of the contemplation Wordsworth requires of the poet. The reason this works, according to his argument, is that those who live a rustic

lifestyle are closer to nature—and therefore farther away from vanity bred by artifice.

Next, Wordsworth dives deeper into the function of poetry. Unlike the classicists, who value art for the sake of art—the idea that art should be produced regardless of any moral values or concerns—Wordsworth and the Romantics believe in art for the sake of life. That is, Wordsworth sees the function of poetry as ennobling the reader through the teaching of moral and philosophical values and ideals.

Finally, Wordsworth discusses in greater depth the diction of poetry. Diction is basically the use of language, but more specifically, it's the choice of words, phrases, sentence structures, and even figurative language. While diction is important in all of literature, Wordsworth places particular importance on its role in poetry because it is the poet's medium. Whereas prose also has characters, setting, and plot to convey a message, the poet's choice of language, or diction, is the sole means of

expression in poetry. Despite this, Wordsworth argues that the diction of poetry and prose is the same, and criticizes the neo-classicists for their “artificial” and “unnatural” language. Passion should drive diction, not ornament, dignity or meter. He wants poetry to center on rustic, humble situations using rustic, humble language. According to Wordsworth, that is the real source of poetic truth and beauty.

William Wordsworth:

William Wordsworth (7 April 1770 – 23 April 1850) was an English Romantic poet who, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, helped to launch the Romantic Age in English literature with their joint publication *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Wordsworth's *magnum opus* is generally considered to be *The Prelude*, a semi-autobiographical poem of his early years that he revised and expanded a number of times. It was posthumously titled and published by his wife in

the year of his death, before which it was generally known as "the poem to Coleridge".

Wordsworth was Britain's poet laureate from 1843 until his death from pleurisy on 23 April 1850.

William Wordsworth was one of the founders of English Romanticism and one its most central figures and important intellects. He is remembered as a poet of spiritual and epistemological speculation, a poet concerned with the human relationship to nature and a fierce advocate of using the vocabulary and speech patterns of common people in poetry. The son of John and Ann Cookson Wordsworth, William Wordworth was born on April 7, 1770 in Cockermouth, Cumberland, located in the Lake District of England: an area that would become closely associated with Wordsworth for over two centuries after his death. He began writing poetry as a young boy in grammar school, and before graduating from college he went on a walking tour of Europe, which deepened his love for

nature and his sympathy for the common man: both major themes in his poetry. Wordsworth is best known for *Lyrical Ballads*, co-written with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and *The Prelude*, a Romantic epic poem chronicling the “growth of a poet’s mind.”

NOTABLE WORKS

“The Solitary Reaper”

“The Prelude”

“Lyrical Ballads”

“The World Is Too Much with Us”

“Ode: Intimations of Immortality”

“Peter Bell”

“Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey”

“The Recluse”

“The Ruined Cottage”

“Michael”

Summary:

The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge appeared after the first publication of the poems and then

in numerous revised forms until the end of Wordsworth's career. It remains the clearest statement of Romantic principles as it lays out the purpose and practice of writing poetry and its close relation to prose. It also explains the profession, or craft, of the "poet" and the role of poetry in giving a voice to contemporary and simplified ways of living that stay close to the truths of nature. For Wordsworth, as for all the Romantic writers, one discovered these primary laws of nature through experiences in the natural world—experiences that, when combined with emotion, produced poetry.

Importance of Subject Matter

Wordsworth emphasizes why and how he chooses the subjects for his poems. He separates his work from that of past ages and literary figures, showing they have been too "literary" by emphasizing formal or classical models of artificial conventions. Rather than the recording of actual observations or events, Wordsworth believes emotional truths and fidelity to nature

are the keys to providing ordinary readers with insights into their own conditions of life. He favors a "humble and rustic" rural existence (yet without narrating anything unsettling or violent) to urban life because it seems simpler and more natural. Wordsworth also favors a more unified, common population that shares similar experiences. In cities like rapidly expanding London, the permanence of natural truths seems absent. The short-lived values of shifting populations give no connection to the past or the promise of future tranquility for the common people, whose experiences can form the basis for poetry as well as prose. Wordsworth sought to make ordinary experiences seem more extraordinary and enduring. As nature reveals permanence and unchanging truths, the new literature Wordsworth proposes would share the simplicity, and depth, of people's lives.

Characteristics of Poetry

Wordsworth says poetry must arise from the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it

takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." Although a poet should make a poem seem spontaneous, the creation of it is not. Poetry must reflect emotion, or passion—not simply record observations. The poet must draw from real-life experiences and describe them in ordinary language, and the poet must "throw over them a certain coloring of the imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect." It is the imagination that permits the poet to touch on the eternal, making the surrounding world new and connecting the people with that world.

Wordsworth analyzes what he sees as four parts of the poet's creative process. The poet first observes something that creates a powerful emotion. Then he tranquilly contemplates and reflects on the emotion. During this period the poet may recall other things that relate to the observation itself or to the past in some way. Such contemplation is personal, intended only for the poet. The tranquility of contemplation

disappears after a time, and then the poet distills all these thoughts, eliminating some and keeping others so that the original emotion is recreated in a way that is more universal. Finally the poet is ready to write, with the aim of sharing the emotion with an audience.

Poetry, therefore, doesn't arise from classical models or through an immediate inspiration on any supernatural level. It arises through experience on an ordinary level—understood and reflected upon. Wordsworth rejects elaboration or literary devices as artificial and uses numerous examples of earlier poets' work in his discussion. He hopes to lead readers to meditate on their own emotions and arrive eventually at a more moral and true conception of themselves and of life. Poetry can achieve the finest level of art by being simple and straightforward.

Poetry and Prose

Wordsworth devotes much of the Preface to examining his views on poetry and prose. He rejects past distinctions of one being more heroic

or a higher art than the other. His aim is to reveal both as sharing the most important characteristics of "the language of men." As he simplifies the art of being a poet into being "a man speaking to men," he essentially erases the lines separating prose from poetry. He sees the distinction of both as opposed to science, as he understands it, because the relatively new field of science focuses on the factual. Moreover, he sees the scientist as making discoveries on their own, away from others, and not influencing the common condition, which for Wordsworth is the essence of poetry. For Wordsworth, who favors free, straightforwardly rhymed lines over traditional rhyme and meter in poetry, the use of most meter produces a forced type of "verse" rather than the "naked," simpler poetry that shares truths with prose.

He explains that he chooses to write poetry—with a proper and natural "Poetic Diction"—rather than prose because it offers more possibilities for his imagination to explore the

natural passions of men and give them form. However, he refuses to acknowledge any strict separation between poetry and prose because both must spring from emotion and reflection. Wordsworth writes, "They both speak by and to the same organs ... their affections are kindred, and almost identical, not necessarily differing even in degree." He ends the Preface by saying that whether he writes in prose or verse, the essential principle of his art—made of imagination and sentiment—will employ "one and the same language" of meter or prose.

Analysis

The Preface as Writing

Although the Preface itself is a work of prose, Wordsworth quotes much poetry within it and, like his verses, places the same emphasis on common experience being illuminated by the imagination. It is clearly the manifesto of an individual explaining a radically new approach to something that has had a long existence already. In his essay he sets himself as both alone and with

the common experience of others as heralding a new age in understanding and communicating feelings and emotions in a changed world. During his long career, Wordsworth often saw himself as embarking on new and uncharted paths. He had a broad and thorough education in the canon of Western literature and used this background in new ways.

Many past movements saw themselves as either inheriting literary traditions or making their own, but Wordsworth was the first to base his work on the actual lives of ordinary people. The Preface often alternates between proudly staking out his own principles and calling on the views of his contemporaries, as when he begins with "Several of my friends are anxious for the success of these Poems." His own voice is loud and clear, unafraid to criticize even good intentions in others. He seems always aware of a performance art in which he quotes others against each other, with his own views making the judgments on levels of quality. Whereas Coleridge wrote with

more abstract emphasis on the unusual and even the supernatural, Wordsworth focuses on the ordinary, the voices of the common folk, of whose assumed simplicity and homogeneity he approves, even though they may have little experience with poetry.

The Preface was revised and republished several times: beginning from the period when Wordsworth spoke as a young radical voice through his recognition as a leading literary voice. As both a young and mature man, he embraced sharply different ideas from those of other poets. During the high point of the Romantic movement, which the manifesto seems to have ushered in, his emphasis on feeling and individualism became commonly held.

The Preface on Verse and Prose

The long essay in its various versions returns numerous times to the question of types of writing. Wordsworth devoted his life to writing, never having had another occupation or seeming to search for one. When his formal education

ended, he traveled as widely as he could with limited resources, and his poems are often shaped by these experiences. When *Lyrical Ballads* appeared, it gained considerable attention. Its detractors objected to Wordsworth's choice of subject matter and disagreed with his emphasis on common people, rustic and even illiterate lives of poverty, real human passions, and feelings joined with reflection. Although Wordsworth avoided extreme or vulgar examples of these things, his detractors found such points of interest to be outside the realm of poetry. Having taken poetry to this new territory, Wordsworth in the Preface proceeds to examine how the actual forms of writing can best conform to such aims. He goes deeply and repeatedly into comparing and contrasting the range of powers open to the poet in both prose and poetry.

Past literary movements frequently have emphasized one of these genres over the other, depending on the work and reputations of the writers of the time. Wordsworth seems intent on using the best of both, not excluding one in favor

of the other, but seeking always to find the most appropriate genre. He spent decades of his life writing poems in various formats and voices but dispensed with many rules and formulas. The Preface is his great prose work and never enters poetic territory despite its focus on it. Wordsworth repeats that efforts to privilege verse or prose are wrongheaded, for both share the same instinct for truth and human passion in the communal sense. Science, on the other hand, seems new and impersonal, based on facts that poetry cannot affect or change. His aim to raise his readers' moral sense appears untouched by scientific study or research.

To make prose and verse allies, in a sense, against the potential changes in society is also to limit the poet's own impact in the future. Also, Wordsworth's emphasis on emotions will eventually lessen his influence, as new ways of looking at the world will emerge and people will judge the Romantic era with different eyes. In time, the effort to convince the world that poetry

and prose are essentially similar in approach and content can be judged independently of form will result in these becoming commonplace ideas. However, these ideas were often ignored by others, as poets and prose writers continued to go their separate ways.

Wordsworth as Judge

The usefulness of the Preface in judging merit in poetry depends on several factors. Wordsworth appears neither modest nor boastful when citing his own poems and measuring them against others, including works of well-known writers. A few pages into the text, Wordsworth harshly criticizes the 18th-century poet Thomas Gray. Quoting lines from one of Gray's few poems, Wordsworth says the verse is far from simple truths that could be expressed in either prose or more natural-sounding poetry. Wordsworth dismisses more than half of Gray's sonnet as having no value. Gray's other major work, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," with its canonical, or scriptural, lines "on the paths of

glory" and "far from the madding crowd," remains among the most quoted and best-loved poems of all time, so it may seem odd to find Gray so faulted. Similarly, Samuel Johnson's writing is noticeably said to have "contemptible matter."

But throughout, nothing indicates Wordsworth is issuing such opinions specifically to promote his works over others. He seems to have given serious thought to his views and taken a long and broad view of literature before his own time. The emphasis remains not on him personally but on what any poet may achieve when he focuses on the correct foundations for a common and humble source of truth. He appears willing to view his own work as an experiment in poetic diction, newly formed and purified of what he believes it lacked before. He admits to putting store in what others think of his work and having doubts about whether he can achieve the high goals he has set. Wordsworth sees his *Lyrical Ballads* as innovative and connected to a high

level of truth and significance, if not a high level of life and society.

Ages after the Preface made its judgments, and Wordsworth's own reputation has endured its ups and downs, it is doubtful many contemporary readers would use either his praise or his criticisms as the basis for their own reactions to literature. Modern readers can understand how Wordsworth saw people and society and his need to express new ideas in the hope they would lead to progress in life as well as art. He returns again and again to the need to take down barriers, as in the traditional separation of prose and poetry, but such forms continue to exist, even strictly, for some. Passion and commitment to change motivate Wordsworth, and using literature as a means to effect change can be understood and appreciated in a democratic society that values free expression. If readers do not actively judge the writers Wordsworth mentions, they can value him for his openness and ability to take risks in his opinions.

