

Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* re-examined

Abstract

Wordsworth's literary criticism in general and his "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800, extended and modified in 1802, 1805, and 1836) in particular are "usually considered the manifesto of the English romantic movement, the signal for the break with the age of neo-classicism" (Wellek130).¹ In spite of much adverse criticism – both by Wordsworth's contemporaries (for instance, Francis Jeffery and ST Coleridge), the moderns, and the postmoderns,¹ Paul de Man, Jerome J McGann,² and Davis Simpson, to name only a few), the seminal importance of the "Preface" is by and large admitted by almost all students of English literature, then and now. Everyone of them, however, will not agree with Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, who compare Wordsworth to Cromwell addressing the Rump Parliament: "It is not fit that you should sit here any longer...you should now give place to better men" (qtd. in Campbell 96,³ from Bloom & Trilling⁴ (1973) 593).

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A manifesto of a movement purporting to usher in a new trend in poetry is expected to offer at least a few original ideas. Recent research, however, reveals that there is almost nothing original in the "Preface". As Owen and Smyser put it: The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is Wordsworth's best known critical work, and his most original essay in aesthetics in the sense that it often appears to be the result of his introspective examination of his own poetic processes. It is less original than has sometimes been thought, however, in that many of its aesthetic, psychological, and sociological presuppositions are quite commonplace, especially in the numerous writings on aesthetics in English which appeared during the eighteenth century, based often on the associationist psychology of Locke and Hartley or on the primitivistic theories of culture and literature which are characteristic of the Scottish "Common-sense" philosophers (112).

The first person to claim that Wordsworth's "Preface" is "half a child of my own Brain" was, of course, Coleridge. The opening sentences, he declared, were indeed taken "from notes of mine" (qtd. in Owen & Smyser 112,⁵ from a letter to Southey). "The Preface," Coleridge further claimed, "so arose out of Conversations, so frequent, that with few exceptions we could scarcely either of us perhaps positively say which first started any particular Thought...yet I am far from going all lengths with Wordsworth" (qtd. in Owen & Smyser 112–13).⁵

Coleridge said all this in July 1802, when his friendship with Wordsworth was still unimpaired (they fell out in 1810, were reconciled in 1812 but the estrangement continued till 1828). However, Wordsworth never acknowledged any specific debt to Coleridge. On the other hand, he later declared, "I never cared a straw about the theory – & the preface was written at the request of Coleridge..." (qtd. in Owen & Smyser 167,⁵ Campbell 95).³ When he spoke of "several of his Friends' anxiety" for the success of the poems included in the *Lyrical Ballads*, he perhaps meant Coleridge alone. Yet it is

indeed hard to believe, as Brett & Jones⁶ rightly observe (xliv), that Wordsworth wrote six thousand words only to please Coleridge (who, in any case, was not pleased).

Although Coleridge never identified which of the ideas were his own, we may, with the help of several chapters of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), determine those which were not Coleridge's.⁷ Coleridge challenged the basic naturalism inbuilt in Wordsworth's poetics – that the language of poetry should correspond to the language spoken by the middle and lower classes of society, and that there is no essential difference between the language of prose and that of metrical composition. He also dissociated himself from Wordsworth's glorification of "humble and rustic life." Even though the late reaction carried with it "the knowing air of being wise after the event",³ it cannot be denied that he was sincerely opposed to Wordsworth's mode of theorization.

Wordsworth, however, was not the originator of this kind of poetic naturalism. As Wellek points out:

[E]very innovator in the history of English poetry has felt that he was reviving the spoken language. Donne thought his style more natural and colloquial than Spenser's, Dryden reacted against the artificialities of metaphysical wit, and T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound in our own day advocate spoken language in poetry (131).³

More relevant to this issue is the fact that Jacques Delille (1738-1813), a French critic, whose works were known to Wordsworth, "defended common words against the exclusions of French classical diction" (Wellek 131) as early as 1769. Another debt to Delille is

¹Wordsworth's "Preface" is certainly not the only "manifesto" of English Romantic movement. Leigh Hunt's Preface to his long narrative poem, *Story of Rimini* (1816), together with his justly famous 1844 essay, *Imagination and Fancy* (both available on the web now), may very well be considered as the second manifesto of the second generation of Romantics. The avidity with which Keats used to read and listen to Hunt and the marks it left upon his poetic style and diction (Chatterjee 210-112, McGann 28-30) lends support to this view.

²For sources, comments, etc. see Campbell 56-65 and Abrams 364-418.

³The debate of course is as old as the fourth century BCE. Ariphrades, "anticipating Wordsworth's objections to poetic diction" (Lucas 187), "ridiculed the tragedians for using expressions that nobody would use in conversation" (Aristotle, Poetics chap.22, 1458b 31-34). Wordsworth, however, was not conversant with the Poetics when he wrote the "Preface" (Owen and Smyser 179). Nor was the dispute settled once and for all by Wordsworth's theorizing. Apart from Coleridge, there had been others who, working under a different motive, found fault with the democratization of the language of poetry and the tendency to give short shrift to the so-called poetic diction. The thoroughly hostile review of Keats's poems in the *Edinburgh Magazine* (October 1817) entitled "On the Cockney School of Poetry," is in many respects a repetition of the attack upon Wordsworth's programme in the *Lyrical Ballads*. In both cases the more traditional critics insist that a common lexicon and a colloquial style in poetry are only proper within certain prescribed – normally comic – limits (McGann 30).

noted by Owen & Smyser (179).⁵

Recent interest in feminism has led to the discovery of a number of women poets, so long debarred from the traditional canon. One such poet, Anna Barbauld, wrote to her brother and fellow-poet, John Aikin (31 January 1787): I have been much pleased with the poems of the Scottish ploughman (*scil.* Robert Burns), of which you have had specimens in the Review....The endearing diminutives, and the Doric Rusticity of the dialect, suit such subjects [as “Cotter’s Saturday Night”, “The Daisy,” and “The Mouse”] extremely (qtd. in Breen XXXIV).

Jennifer Breen⁸ editor of the anthology, *Women Romantic Poets 1785-1832* (1992), points out: Anna Barbauld here epitomizes the interest that was beginning to be shown in the use of ordinary language in serious poetry, in order to express the feelings of individual men and women in their own voices. This cultural revolution *culminated* in the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s⁷ *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. (XXXIV. Emphasis added).

Similarly, Wordsworth’s famous definition of poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and his remarks on emotion recollected in tranquillity are anticipated in the works of John Dennis. Thomas De Quincey in fact claimed in 1842 that he had to collect Dennis’s ‘ridiculous pamphlets to oblige Wordsworth, who (together with S. T. C.) had an absurd “craze” about him’ (qtd. in Owen & Smyser 171).⁵

Whichever idea may strike us as quintessentially romantic will always be found in the works of earlier writers.⁴ To mention a few:

- a) ‘[T]he language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society’ [Advertisement 1798 in Owen and Smyser 116]⁵ as a fit medium for composing poetry (William Duff, James Beattie).
- b) ‘Accurate taste’ as ‘an acquired talent’ (Joshua Reynolds, mentioned by Wordsworth himself in Advertisement 1798, Owen and Smyser 116).⁵
- c) Philosophic language (David Hartley, Joseph Priestley, and *Monthly Magazine*, 1796).
- d) Taste and moral feelings (Earl of Shaftsbury, Francis Hutcheson, Joshua Reynolds).
- e) Imaginative identification with others (William Duff, Alexander Gerard).
- f) Knowledge as pleasure (Edmund Burke).
- g) Perception of similitude in dissimilitude (Francis Hutcheson, Lord Kames, Adam Smith).

It is also interesting to note that Wordsworth had not read Aristotle’s *Poetics* even when he first revised the “Preface”. Hence he made such a guarded statement as “Aristotle, *I have been told*, has said, that Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing...” (Owen & Smyser 139,⁵ lines 377-79. Emphasis added). Not just this clause but the whole section (line 283 ff) is absent in the 1800 text.⁵ Wordsworth was

apparently referring to *Poetics*,¹⁰ chap. 9, 1451b 5-6: “for this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history” (trans. Malcolm Heath 16).¹¹ It has been pointed out that Aristotle did not say what is attributed to him by Wordsworth, who must have heard it from Coleridge. Wordsworth, however, acquired first-hand acquaintance with the *Poetics* when he wrote *Prelude* (as evidenced in 11. 91-92). Peculiarly enough, Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* 2:101 altered and reversed the order of Aristotle’s words (*spoudaiotaton kai philosophotaton genos* in place of *philosophoteron kai spoudaioteron* (noted in⁵ in their comments on line 378 of the 1850 Preface).

In 1981, Marilyn Butler¹ declared: We should dismiss at the outset the belief, still widely held,¹² that Wordsworth’s contribution to the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798 represent an altogether new kind of poetry. Wordsworth’s experiments with subjects from among the lower order of society, in metres appropriately taken from popular poetry, follow this manner, and are thus characteristic of the culture of the Enlightenment (58).¹³

She also shows that the word “spontaneous” does not mean “unpremeditated” but “voluntary” or “of one’s own will” (as opposed to “external restraint”), and is so used in eighteenth-century philosophical writings. “That key “Romantic” phrase carried a more cerebral connotation than appears at a later date. In its context, it is moreover subordinated to purposes characteristic of the Enlightenment’ (60).¹⁴

The much vaunted *Lyrical Ballads* (1798),¹⁵ like its famous Preface (continuously revised and augmented up till 1850) “is in fact a *culmination* of thirty years of poetry based on popular metres and humble subject matter, *fundamentally neoclassical* in its rejection of adornment and its concern to reach a wide audience” (Butler’s¹ view, summarized in Campbell 65.³ Emphasis mine).¹⁶

Consequently we must disagree with the exaggerated claims made in 1950 by Helen Darbishire (and many others after her) that “Wordsworth’s was a revolt of a nature and importance which perhaps no literary revolt had before. It was revolt against literature, or the literary element in poetry, an assertion of the supreme value of life at all costs in poetry” (qtd. in Sharrock 157).¹⁷

Yet we should not lose sight of one great merit of the “Preface.” Writing in 1992, Jennifer Breen⁹ shrewdly observed: ...Wordsworth, however, innovative he might seem when his “preface” and poems are read in isolation, was merely endorsing theoretically a change in poetry-writing that had already taken place. *His originality lay in introducing the notion that poetry about common life should also reflect the psychology of the individual – “the primary laws of our nature.”* (XXXIV. Emphasis added.)

Breen’s sober and balanced assessment, unlike others’, seems to hit the nail on the head. Unfortunately this very aspect, the only claim to originality that the “Preface” possesses, remains underemphasized to date. This aspect of Wordsworth’s “Preface” deserves a separate study. I cannot take up the matter here. Yet a few words are necessary to underline the validity of the point.

The view held by an overwhelming majority of teachers and students of English literature, not to speak of the wider reading public, is that the hallmark of Romanticism is love of nature. It should, however, be pointed out that humans in general are equally, if not more, important to both the earlier and the later generations of the English Romantics. More often than not nature is the backdrop of some poems, against which the human drama is enacted. As to Wordsworth, it will be salutary to pay attention to what JR Watson¹⁸ says:

⁴For further details see Owen and Smyser’s commentary on the “Preface” 167-89 passim.

⁵For the 1800 Preface see, besides Owen and Smyser, Brett and Jones, and Owen. Several scholarly and popular editions of the texts of *Lyrical Ballads* along with the Prefaces are available on the web as well in print (for instance, those edited by R.L. Brett and Richard Jones 2005, Michael Mason, 2007, and Michael Schmidt 2007 in Penguin Classics, 2007). There are, however, no significant improvements upon or radical departure from the texts previously edited by Campbell or Owen and Smyser.

Wordsworth is always known as the poet of nature. There is something rather strange about this, because he thought of himself as writing principally about man:

the Mind of Man – My haunt, and the main region of my song.

(Preface to *The Excursion*, ll. 40-41).

When he is considered alongside the other Romantic poets, what is so extraordinary about Wordsworth is not his evocation of nature but his insight into the nature of man, both individually and in society. His poetry is filled with characters, as sharply defined as those in Greek tragedy (and sometimes as tragically): Michael at the sheepfold, the Solitary [*sic!* The Solitary Reaper?] among the mountains, the discharged soldier, Martha Ray crying ... [110].

Watson goes on developing this theme more elaborately and effectively. But there is no need for further confirmation of his basic contention. Wordsworth's philosophy of nature, even his pantheism, found expression invariably in referring to "the mind of man," as evidenced in "Tintern Abbey":

A sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,

And the round ocean and the living air,

And the blue sky, *and in the mind of man,*

A motion and the spirit, that impels

All the thinking things, all objects of all thought,

And rolls through all things. (lines 96-103)

The poem was composed nearly two years before the "Preface" was conceived and is included in *Lyrical Ballads* (ed. Mason 207-14).¹⁹ A genuine concern with the human condition and a deep psychological insight not only into himself but also to his fellowmen characterize Wordsworth's views on poetry and find place in the "Preface" most appropriately.

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Conflict of interest

Author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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