

## IN THE REVOLUTIONARY DELIGHTS, RE-READING *PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS*: A ROMANTIC MANIFESTO

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### Abstract

According to A.C. Bradley, “there have been greater poets than Wordsworth but none more original.” The originality of Wordsworth makes the relation between his work and age peculiarly complex. However with the emphasis on the importance of imagination, predominance of feeling and emotion, spontaneity, nature and common man, the *Lyrical Ballads* simply eulogizes Wordsworth’s subtle engineering and delicate art craft ship in his works. This paper makes an attempt to re-discover and re-frame the phrase of Romantic appeal of common creativity in today’s language of literature.

**Key Words:** Romanticism, Poetic diction, Neo-classical, Poetic truth, Meter, Species of Reaction, Tranquility.

Romantic Movement in literature was a vehement reaction against the eighteenth century rationalism. It was a deliberate and sweeping revolt against the literary principles of the Age of Reason. Just as Dryden and Pope had rejected the romantic tradition of the Elizabethans as crude and irregular and had adopted classical or more correctly neo-classical principles of French literature in their writing so, now Wordsworth and Coleridge, in their turn, rejected the neo-classical principles in favor of the romantic.

Now what is that distinguishes the classic from romantic? Simply put, classical writing is characterized by reason or commonsense, expressed in a restrained style, that is to say, which has order, proportion and finish. Reason dominated life and literature. Emotion and imagination were pushed to the background. Romantic writing, on the other hand, is characterized by imagination, expressed in a style more or less free of restraint—a style, that is to say, which may be simple or grand, picturesque or passionate, depending on the mood or temperament of the writer. In other words, classicism subordinates matter to form; romanticism subordinates form to matter. Classicism stands for regimentation, regulation and authority. The causes and character of the Romantic Movement have been subjects of endless debate and discussion. And to justify all the features of this movement, we have to delve deep into the great product of the age—Wordsworth’s *Preface To Lyrical ballads*—which gave a new orientation to literary ideals. It is a critical document of abiding significance.

Wordsworth's *Preface To Lyrical Ballads* outlines all the traits of Romantic Movement. Therefore it can be described as the 'Romantic Manifesto'. It inaugurates a new phase in the history of English poetry. Wordsworth here outlines his basic objectives, themes, the language to be used in poetry, the creative process and the concept of the poet. He also presents a criticism on eighteenth century poetic diction, the language of poetry and prose, function of poetry and the value he attaches to poetry.

In the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) Wordsworth expanded his observation into a full-blown 'Preface'. He declares that he has purposely chosen 'incidents and situations from common life' and endeavored to deal with them 'in a selection of language really used by men'. A novel 'colouring of imagination' gives this material distinctiveness. And the incidents are made 'interesting' because 'the primary laws of our nature' are traced through them. Poets confer honour neither on themselves nor on their work by using a sophisticated diction. In fact, it alienates natural human sympathy. Simple rural people are less restrained and artificial in their feelings and in their utterance, and those feelings are more at one with their environment. Wordsworth is at pains to point out that his is neither a recipe for or a justification of, 'triviality' or 'meanness', for each of his poems has a worthy purpose. Indeed, though 'all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', the poet's sensibility, and his long training in deep reflection, cannot but bear on his subjects in such a way that the reader is enlightened and emotionally purified. Wordsworth out rightly rejects artificial and ornamental language which is known as 'Poetic Diction'. He says that flowery language drowns the feelings expressed in poetry. Common man couldn't understand the intellectual poetry of the neo-classical age which is full of logic, unit and wit. Wordsworth advises poets to use simple and rustic language but he adds that even rustic language needs to be purified of the slang. Wordsworth recommends using meter in poetry as it adds beauty to the poem. He says that unlike poetic diction which doesn't have unified rules, meter has got a regular and uniform pattern and easily understandable.

Further, the approach to poetry and poet, thus set forth, shows the epoch-making character of the 'Lyrical Ballads'. It not only attaches a new colour to it but also carves out a niche for itself in the domain of critical theory and perspective. As regards the definition of poetry, Wordsworth clearly states that,

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling. It takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility. The emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, and an emotion kindered to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind."

In other words, Poetry is a natural activity. It is a matter of feelings, mood and temperament. It proceeds itself from the internal feelings of the poet. When the mood is on him it flows naturally and without labour. We cannot ask a poet to write at our sweet will. Poetry can't be produced to order; it must flow out voluntarily and willingly from the soul of the poet. Here to remember Keats' famous statement, 'Poetry comes, as naturally as, leaves to a tree.' The springs of poetry demands spontaneity and freedom. It can't be made to flow through artificially laid pipes. After this process the emotion is contemplated. This time memory plays a vital role. But here Wordsworth is silent about the 'species of reaction'. Then the tranquility gradually vanishes. And finally a new emotion is produced and finds expression in language.

Wordsworth's metaphor 'overflow' suggests the underlying physical analogy of a container – a fountain or natural spring from which water brims over. The container is unmistakably the poet. The materials of a poem come from within, and they consist neither of objects nor actions, but of

fluid feelings of the poet itself. Thus his theory introduces a new orientation towards the artist. The focus of attention is upon the relation of the elements of the work to his state of mind. And the suggestion, underlined by the word 'spontaneous', is that the dynamics of the overflow are inherent in the poet. Thus there is a shift from 'the poet as an interpreter' to 'the poet as a creator'. Then the adjective chosen by Wordsworth to describe the 'overflow of powerful feelings' refers to a quality that is, like the outpouring of sentiment itself, generally attributed to Romantic art. In fact emphasis on spontaneity, in one sense or another, was an essential part of the total orientation underlying the rise of Romanticism throughout Europe, no doubt in relation to the precious cult of so called correctness. But the interpretation given to 'spontaneous' varied considerably from writer to writer, depending as much as on individual preferences on the historical context .

Yet when Wordsworth comes to answer the question, 'what is a poet?' the claims made are almost awesome. He brings out the individualism of the poet, but at same time, at every step, he takes care to stress his essential humanity. A poet not only has a more 'lively sensibility', a 'more comprehensive soul', 'a greater zest for life', and 'a greater power of imagination', he is also a man who has thought long and deep. The poet also has the ability to conjure up passions in himself which resemble those produced by real events, and has a greater readiness and power in expressing what he feels. Later on, Wordsworth added one more quality for the poet that of sincerity. The sincerity of the poet is seen in the care in which he takes to revise and perfect his communication. He is careful to polish and refine his composition and takes infinite pains to convey his meaning clearly and unambiguously. In short, Wordsworth considers a poet essentially a man, a man speaking to men. He is quite conscious of the individualism of the poet—that the poet is a rare gifted individual, a man of genius, a unique personality in many ways. In this way, he seeks to make the poet come out of his ivory tower, to democratize the conception of the poet.

As regards the exact function of poetry, Wordsworth tells us that the main purpose of a poem is not only to give pleasure to the readers but also to enlighten them with new ideas and purify their feelings. The duty of producing immediate pleasure is no degradation of the poet's art. It is 'an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe.....and it is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man'. Hence it is the duty of the poet to produce good poetry. A poet, endowed with an intense power of imagination and sensibility, is capable of expressing his emotions and ideas precisely in his poems. Aristotle in his 'Poetics' has defined that poetic truth is higher than the truth of History or Philosophy as it supplies both particular and general which is common to all and understandable to all. Hence it is the responsibility of the poet to convey messages of love and unity, thus emphasizing oneness of all. The poet thus joyfully makes of truth a constant companion, while the scientist seeks it as a remote benefactor: 'Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all the knowledge; the impassioned expression that is in the countenance of all science'. 'Poetry is the first and last of all the knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man'.

However, Wordsworth's poetry exhibits the importance of human mind, memory, imagination and emotion in the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth praised the power of the human mind. Using memory and imagination individuals could overcome difficulty and pain. Just as the individual is the pivot of the Romantic universe, so within the individual the focal point is his imagination, his power to perceive and recreate the world according to his own inner vision. It is this power of imagination which enables the poet to universalize the particular and personal. It is through this power that poet arrives at his actual place. For instance, the

speaker in 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' (1798) relieves his loneliness with memories of nature, while the leech gatherer in *Resolution and Independence* (1807) perseveres cheerfully in the face of poverty by the exertion of his own will. Wordsworth did not go so far as the other Romantics in reason to an inferior position. He preferred to give a new dignity to the word and to insist that inspired insight is itself rational. It should be noticed that here Wordsworth calls imagination 'Reason in her most exalted mood'. It is that faculty which transforms sense perceptions, makes the poet conscious of human immortality. The examples of this technique are too manifold and too familiar to need enumeration: the Highland lass in *The Solitary Reaper*, the leech gatherer in *Resolution and Independence*, the daffodils in *I wandered lonely as a Cloud*, the huntsman in *Simon Lee*: these are some of the most obvious. Also the transformative power of the mind is available to all regards of an individual's class or background. The democratic view emphasizes individuality and uniqueness. Throughout his work, Wordsworth showed strong support for the political, religious, and artistic rights of the individual, including the power of his or her mind. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth explained the relationship between the mind and poetry. Poetry is 'emotion recollected in tranquility' - that is the mind transforms the raw emotion of experience into poetry capable of giving pleasures. Later poems such as, *Ode, Ode on Intimations of Immortality* (1807), imagine nature as the source of the inspiring material that nourishes the active, creative mind.

There might be greater poets than Wordsworth; but Wordsworth like T. S. Eliot knew what he was writing. *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* embodies his theory of poetry which he tried to realize in his art as far as possible. How far he has succeeded it is for the readers to judge in a revolutionary delight or in a delight of transition.

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