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WILLIAM WORDSWORTH PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS 357

Thy mornings showed, thy nights concealed
The bowers where Lucy played;
And thine is, too, the last green field
Which Lucy's eyes surveyed! 15

Preface (extracts) (composed September 1800; this version revised
January–April 1802)¹

From LYRICAL BALLADS (2 vols, 1802)

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems, was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men, and at the same time to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way. And further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them (truly,² though not ostentatiously) the primary laws of our nature,³ chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas⁴ in a state of excitement.⁵

Low and rustic life was generally chosen 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;⁶ because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings,⁷ 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 incorporated⁸ with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.⁹

The language, too, of these men is adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects – from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects¹⁰ from which the best part of language is originally derived, and 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. Accordingly, such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent and a far more philosophical language¹¹ than that 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 and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites¹² of their own creation.¹³

PREFACE

¹ The first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, published 1798, carried a brief 'Advertisement' to prepare readers for the unusual fare within (see pp. 191–2). The second edition in two volumes, 1800, contained a much longer *Preface* that was revised and expanded for the 1802 edition. Extracts from that second version are presented here. The *Preface* was written at Coleridge's insistence, and drew on ideas conceived or gathered by him; as he told Southey, 29 July 1802, 'Wordsworth's *Preface* is half a child of my own brain' (Griggs ii 830).

² truly truthfully.

³ the primary laws of our nature i.e. (in this context) the workings of the mind.

⁴ we associate ideas the association of ideas – that is to say, the way in which emotions are connected with, for instance, memories, is an important element in Wordsworth's thinking. See Pedlar 78–81, *Two-Part Prelude* i 418–24, 432–42.

⁵ a state of excitement i.e. when we feel intensely.

⁶ Low and rustic ... language a belief first expressed in February 1798, Pedlar 239–45.

⁷ the manners of rural life ... feelings there is an implied comparison with the social life ('manners') of the city, which has become detached from 'elementary' human emotion.

⁸ incorporated interfused, united, blended.

⁹ the passions ... nature as, for instance, in the way that Michael's unfinished sheepfold becomes a symbol of his tragedy, or that Margaret's ruined cottage embodies hers. The search for permanence – of language and symbol – is fundamental to Wordsworth's aesthetic.

¹⁰ the best objects for example, natural objects.

¹¹ philosophical language i.e. fit for philosophical discourse.

¹² fickle tastes and fickle appetites tastes and appetites governed by literary fashion.

¹³ 'It is worthwhile here to observe that the affecting parts of Chaucer are almost always expressed in language pure and universally intelligible even to this day' (Wordsworth's note). Wordsworth believed that 'every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished' (MY i 150).

I cannot, however, be insensible to the present outcry against the triviality and meanness both of thought and language which some of my contemporaries have occasionally introduced into their metrical compositions. And I acknowledge that this defect, where it exists, is more dishonourable to the writer's own character than false refinement or arbitrary innovation (though I should contend at the same time that it is far less pernicious in the sum of its consequences).

From such verses the poems in these volumes will be found distinguished at least by one marked difference – that each of them has a worthy purpose. Not that I mean to say that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived, but I believe that my habits of meditation have formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings will be found to carry along with them a purpose. If in this opinion I am mistaken, I can have little right to the name of a poet; for all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. But though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic¹⁴ sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.¹⁵ For our continued influxes of feeling¹⁶ are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings.¹⁷ And, as by contemplating the relations of these general representatives¹⁸ to each other we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, 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 mechanically¹⁹ 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 being to whom we address ourselves – if he be in a healthful state of association²⁰ – must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated.²¹

I have said that each of these poems has a purpose. I have also informed my reader what this purpose will be found principally to be; namely, to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement.²² But (speaking in language somewhat more appropriate) it is to follow the fluxes and refluxes²³ of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature. This object I have endeavoured in these short essays²⁴ to attain by various means: by tracing the maternal passion through many of its more subtle windings (as in the poems of 'The Idiot Boy' and 'The Mad Mother'); by accompanying the last struggles of a human being at the approach of death, cleaving in solitude to life and society (as in the poem of the forsaken Indian); by showing, as in the stanzas entitled 'We are Seven', the perplexity and obscurity which in childhood attend our notion of death – or rather our utter inability to admit that notion; or by displaying the strength of fraternal or (to speak more philosophically) of moral attachment when early associated with the great and beautiful objects of nature (as in 'The Brothers'); or, as in the incident of 'Simon Lee', by placing my reader in the way of receiving from ordinary moral sensations another and more salutary impression than we are accustomed to receive from them.²⁵

It has also been part of my general purpose to attempt to sketch characters under the influence of less impassioned feelings (as in 'The Two April Mornings', 'The Fountain', the 'Old Man Travelling', 'The Two Thieves', etc.); characters of which the elements are simple, belonging rather to nature than to manners,²⁶ such as exist now and will probably always exist, and which from their constitution may be distinctly and profitably contemplated.

¹⁴ organic innate, inherent.

¹⁵ If in this opinion . . . deeply Wordsworth's championing of 'powerful feelings' is strongly modified by the insistence on long and profound thought.

¹⁶ influxes of feeling i.e. 'flowing-in' of emotion; cf. the Pedlar's 'access of mind' (Pedlar 107).

¹⁷ For our . . . feelings our emotions are modified by our thoughts, which are themselves the products of our past feelings.

¹⁸ these general representatives thoughts deriving from feelings in the past.

¹⁹ by obeying blindly and mechanically it is crucial to the creative act that the poet completely surrender to associations, and habits of thought and feeling.

²⁰ a healthful state of association i.e. a state of mind in which the reader is receptive, and does not impose on the poem irrelevant prejudices or assumptions.

²¹ ameliorated improved. Poetry should be emotionally uplifting.

²² the manner . . . excitement the way in which emotions and ideas interact associatively when the mind is stimulated.

²³ fluxes and refluxes ebb and flow.

²⁴ essays attempts.

²⁵ by placing . . . then the initial pity, which leads the narrator to offer to help Simon Lee, gives way to the more complex sentiment expressed in the final lines of the poem.

²⁶ manners customs.

the poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes – nay, for short spaces of time, perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound⁴⁶ and identify his own feelings with theirs, modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose: that of giving pleasure. Here, then, he will apply the principle on which I have so much insisted – namely, that of selection. On this he will depend for removing what would otherwise be painful or disgusting in the passion; he will feel that there is no necessity to trick out⁴⁷ or elevate nature.⁴⁸ And the more industriously he applies this principle, the deeper will be his faith that no words which his fancy or imagination can suggest will be compared with those which are the emanations of reality and truth. . . .

Aristotle, I have been told,⁴⁹ hath said that poetry is the most philosophic of all writing.⁵⁰ It is so. Its object is truth,⁵¹ not individual and local, but general and operative;⁵² not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion – truth which is its own testimony, which gives strength and divinity to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal.

Poetry is the image of man and nature. The obstacles which stand in the way of the fidelity of the biographer and historian (and of their consequent utility) are incalculably greater than those which are to be encountered by the poet who has an adequate notion of the dignity⁵³ of his art. The poet writes under one restriction only – namely, that of the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a man.⁵⁴ Except this one restriction, there is no object standing between the poet and the image of things; between this, and the biographer and historian, there are a thousand.

Nor let this necessity of producing immediate pleasure be considered as a degradation of the poet's art; it is far otherwise. It is an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe, an acknowledgement the more sincere because it is not formal, but indirect; it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love. Further, it is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure⁵⁵ by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves. . . .

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.⁵⁶ The emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity 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.⁵⁷ In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on. But the emotion (of whatever kind and in whatever degree) from various causes is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever which are voluntarily described, the mind will upon the whole be in a state of enjoyment.⁵⁸ Now, if nature be thus cautious in preserving in a state of enjoyment a being thus employed, the poet ought to profit by the lesson thus held forth to him, and ought especially to take care that, whatever passions he communicates to his reader, those passions (if his reader's mind be sound and vigorous) should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure.

Now, the music of harmonious metrical language,⁵⁹ the sense of difficulty overcome, and the blind association of pleasure which has been previously received from works of rhyme or metre of the same or similar construction, an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling that of real life (and yet, in the circumstance of metre, differing from it so widely) – all these imper-

⁴⁶ *confound* confuse; effectively, the poet cannot tell the difference between his own feelings and those of his subject.

⁴⁷ *trick out* dress up.

⁴⁸ *nature* natural utterance.

⁴⁹ *I have been told* probably by Coleridge, who had been a Catechist (boy in the highest class) at Christ's Hospital.

⁵⁰ *Aristotle . . . writing* Wordsworth aimed, of course, to compose the great philosophical epic of his day – *The Recluse* (see p. 271).

⁵¹ *truth* effectively, the real world – real people and real things, as opposed to abstract personifications.

⁵² *operative* practical.

⁵³ *dignity* high status.

⁵⁴ *not as . . . man* i.e. the poet is concerned with fidelity to psychological truth, rather than with facts.

⁵⁵ *pleasure* positive sensations (spiritual and physical) deriving from our involvement with the external world.

⁵⁶ *emotion recollected in tranquillity* in August–September 1800 Coleridge recorded in his notebook that poetry was a 'recalling of passion in tranquillity' (*Notebooks* 1 787).

⁵⁷ *The emotion . . . in the mind* what the poet experiences is related to the original emotion, rather than the original emotion itself.

⁵⁸ *so that . . . enjoyment* Wordsworth emphasizes that we gain aesthetic pleasure even from reading poetry that is tragic in theme.

⁵⁹ *harmonious metrical language* poetry.