

Discuss the work of any poet in relation to their writing about poetry.

Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* "signalled revolution in literary history" (Wu 2006: 327). The plainness of idiom reflecting "the real language of men" (Wordsworth 1800: 505), controversial subject matter of "low and rustic life" (Wordsworth 1800: 497) and the sharp accounts of an "enlightened perception of nature" leads "ultimately to a kind of non-violent political and social revolution" (Wu 2006: 327).

Wordsworth considered the poems as experiments to contemporary taste and decorum and as such he thought his readership in need of guidance. The Advertisement (1798) and the Preface (1800) to the *Lyrical Ballads* offer in a dialogue with its readers an "exposure to possible errors of judgment and feeling" (O'Neill 2001: 127). Both texts can be seen as "defining documents of British romanticism" (Trott a. Perry 2001: 2) because they question the "pre-established codes of decision" (Wordsworth 1798: 331) and attempt to redefine the purpose of poetry as a whole.

Wordsworth exposes in his writing about poetry the reasons for deriving the subjects of the poems from the ordinary rural life. In his letter to John Wilson (1802: 50-51) he states that "only men who lead the simplest lives most according to nature" have distanced themselves from "wayward and artificial desires, false criticism" and "effeminate habits of thinking and feeling". Thus, lower class characters close to nature, such as Simon Lee, are chosen to inhabit Wordsworth picturesque landscapes of the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Furthermore, Wordsworth is explicitly interested in the experiences of marginal social figures, such as vagrants, idiot boys and mad mothers. Although Wordsworth

is aware that his readership might find some of his characters “not of sufficient dignity” (Wordsworth 1798: 331) he portrays their suffering in giving sharp accounts of their poverty, misery and death. The female vagrant is an example for a character that would normally not be heard. The ‘Female Vagrant’ gives voice to a woman, who has to suffer “injustices caused by the overall social system” but whose “elemental honesty remains uncorrupted by the ‘influence of social vanity’” (Blades 2004: 142-143).

And homeless near a thousand homes I stood,
And near a thousand tables pined, and wanted food.

(Female Vagrant, l. 179-180)

In many ways, the poem emphasizes the problematic social situation of the poor in 18th century England and calls the readerships attention and awareness to it. Wordsworth recognises the contemporary issue of increasing numbers of homeless and reflects simultaneously on their social disintegration and desperate poverty (Blades 2004: 149).

However, in the Preface, Wordsworth points out that he is also interested in rural characters because their feelings are expressed in a simpler and more vigorous form. Especially children, such as Johnny the idiot boy, have the ability to enter into a more intense connection with nature. Johnny’s sensation of sound and colour in the wood presents nature from a new perspective with purer values and plainer enjoyments.

The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
And the sun did shine so cold.’
Thus answered Johnny in his glory,
And that was all his travel’s story.

(Idiot Boy, l. 560-464)

Johnny “met with strange adventures” (Idiot Boy, l 351) from a child’s anew point of view and expresses his exemplified joy in a “plainer and more emphatic language” (Wordsworth 1800: 497). It can be argued, that Wordsworth’s depicts marginal figures with essential passions because he intends them to have a didactic purpose on adults, especially on adults of higher classes and urban citizens. In this sense Wordsworth proclaims a conservative revolution connected with the return to the rural way of life, which is presented as the only place where certain fundamental truths exist (Bygrave 1996: 24). Thus, the subjects of the poems are designed to educate and effect the readers mind, which is then in a position to fully understand Wordsworth “purer, more lasting and more exquisite nature” (Wordsworth 1800: 507).

Nevertheless, apart from the characters, Wordsworth (1800: 497) adapted also the language of the “low and rustic life”. The character’s “very language of men” (1800: 500) reflects their specific social class with its social divisions and demarcations (Bygrave 1996: 73). In the Advertisement (1798:331) to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth emphasizes, that the majority of the poems are experiments, written to “ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure”.

This claim to use colloquial English in poetry contrasts the established view that the appropriate poetical language has to represent the idiom of the upper classes. 18th century poetry was expected to base its discourse on classical modes, especially in terms of diction and syntax (Blades 2004: 236). Yet, Wordsworth confronts this idea of a correct register for poetry in the *Lyrical Ballads*. The majority of these poems are written in a simple and modest language in opposition to the “arbitrary and capricious habits of expression” used by poets who “separate themselves from the sympathies of men” (Wordsworth 1800: 498). In the ‘Idiot Boy’ for example, Wordsworth mixes rhymed and unrhymed lines and uses words and expressions

from everyday English. Dialectical, unelaborated words, such as fiddle-faddle (13) and hurly-burly (60) are part of Wordsworth's understanding of the "real language of men" (Wordsworth 1800: 495) and so is his experimental meter, which approaches the flow of real spoken words.

In the same way as marginal characters express purer feelings so is their rural idiom more purified and less corrupted. On the one hand, it is closer to nature because rural language is "less under the influence of social vanity" (Wordsworth 1800: 497) and thus not so much affected by the fashion and habits of the modern urban society. On the other hand, rural persons "hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived" (Wordsworth 1800: 497); namely from nature. As a consequence language, which is itself subject to codes of taste and decorum, is far more essential in the uninfluenced environment of "low and rustic life" and therefore better qualified to express Wordsworth "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 1800: 504).

However, having related the critical literary thoughts from the Preface and the Advertisement to the characters and language of the *Lyrical Ballads*, it is also important to examine Wordsworth's intention and purpose of his experimental poems and his critical literary writings. Mayo argues that the poems are published for economic purposes and therefore reflect attitudes of popular tastes. In his view, the *Lyrical Ballads* deal with nature and its simplicity, which is "obviously not experimental in subject; nor in form either" (Mayo 1972: 71). 'The Thorn', for example, appeals to the popular contemporary taste of Gothic narratives. Hence, according to Mayo (1972: 73), the critical remarks to the poems have misled and offended the reader, who would otherwise have accepted "without question the greater part of the work".

O'Neill (2001: 124) on the other hand sees the central topic of the *Lyrical Ballads* in questioning and critically examining "agreed norms of behaviour, judgment and feeling". In the Preface, Wordsworth notices, that taste is subjective and variable as well as close connected to specific social classes and cultures. The poems content and language attempt to widen public expectations, to modify the readers taste and to direct the public's way of reading, thinking and feeling. Hence, the humble life, as the subject of the poems, attempts to emphasize on the "basic elemental feelings of mankind as well as genuine freedom of expression and truth of experience" (Blades 2004: 239). Wordsworth writing about poetry highlights these fundamental values more explicitly and asks the reader of the *Lyrical Ballads* to recognise them as revised models of humanity.

This profound approach but also Wordsworth's controversial subject matter and use of language made the *Lyrical Ballads* vulnerable for misreading. As a consequence Wordsworth provides instructions, which should help the reader, but also control and direct the reader's response to the poems. It can be argued, that Wordsworth's critical writing about poetry attempts to educate his readership so that his poetry is better received. In the beginning of Wordsworth letter to John Wilson (1802: 49) he expresses his vision of an ideal reader attempt to the *Lyrical Ballad*:

It is plain from your letter that the pleasure which I have given you has not been blind or unthinking; you have studied the poems and prove that you have entered into the spirit of them.

In Newlyn's view (2003: 117-127) Wordsworth has intended to create a model readership with his critical writing. His writing about poetry should help to transform the anonymous hostile public who is more conversant "with our elder writers" (Wordsworth 1798: 331) into a sympathetic readership. Only a well-meaning and open-minded reader would be able to judge the poems by his "own feeling genuinely"

and finally clearly perceive and rate the objects, which Wordsworth and Coleridge proposed and attained in the *Lyrical Ballads*.

In conclusion, the *Lyrical Ballads* in relation to the Preface and the Advertisement extend poetical traditions and attempt to redefine the relationship between poet and reader, poet and poetic language as well as poet and worthy subject matter. The poem's presentation of marginal social figures and its use of the "very language of men" (Wordsworth 1800: 500) are innovative and criticize contemporary social problems, impassionate feelings and traditional habits of expression.

In doing so the poems do not always conform to popular taste and ask the reader to reject "pre-established codes of decision" (Wordsworth 1798: 331). The Advertisement and the Preface advice the individual reader to disregard his cultural prejudices so that he might be able to enter into the true spirit of the poems where he would be raised to the "height of desirable excitement" (Wordsworth 1800: 503). In this sense Wordsworth's writing about poetry is as "crucial to literary history as the poems themselves" (Blades 2004: 3) and needs to be seen in close relation to the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Literature Essay
Mark: B
Summer term 2006

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