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ELL 202: **Romanticism**  
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1996/97, Semester Two

William Wordsworth's

## Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Poetical and political significance of his claim to choose  
'incidents and situations from common life'  
and describe them in  
'language really used by men'.

## Introduction

This work is concerned with the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth from 1802. It discusses the poetical and political significance of Wordsworth's claim in the Preface that he chose 'incidents and situations from common life' and described them in 'language really used by men'<sup>1</sup>. The quotations of the Preface refer to the edition in Duncan Wu (1994) *Romanticism. An Anthology*.

## Essay

Right at the beginning of the Preface Wordsworth states that the *Lyrical Ballads* are 'experiments'<sup>2</sup> to find out to what extent 'by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men'<sup>3</sup> can convey the 'vivid sensation, [and] [...] pleasure'<sup>4</sup> of the situation in which they are uttered. Wordsworth wants to bring the reader of his poems to the point that they share these feelings. To reach this he has chosen 'incidents and situations from common life'. In his eyes especially people in rustic environments whose life has a very close and direct relation to nature are capable to develop the 'essential passions'<sup>5</sup> Wordsworth seeks to convey in his poems. Under these conditions they (the passions)

are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; 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, and [...] are more easily comprehended and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.<sup>6</sup>

Wordsworth's aim is to explore the relationship of nature and human beings and he has tried to do that by describing everyday situations of common people using their simple everyday language.

Wordsworth did not work "in a vacuum", as everybody else he was influenced by his socialisation. Therefore the ideology underlying the *Lyrical Ballads* has to be seen in the light of his time. First of all Wordsworth (1771-1855) lived in a period of great historical change. The two major historical events in his lifetime were the French Revolution and the beginning

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<sup>1</sup> Wu (1994), p.252.

<sup>2</sup> ib., p.250.

<sup>3</sup> ib.

<sup>4</sup> ib.

<sup>5</sup> ib., p.252.

<sup>6</sup> ib.

of the Industrialisation in England. Being a witness of these developments, which still affect us today, the decision for one kind of object for his work rather than another and the explicit explanation of his reasons in the Preface bear a political significance that should not be neglected. Secondly, one has to pay attention to the contemporary poetical customs. The Renaissance had developed its typical literary forms and habits. Wordsworth openly uttered criticism<sup>7</sup> and propagated a new understanding of poetry and of the poet which was crucial for our understanding of them today. Consequently, one has to look for the means by which Wordsworth gave expression to his disapproval of contemporary poetical customs.

The publication of the Preface and the *Lyrical Ballads* created a lot of disputes among Wordsworth's contemporaries. Purkis (1970) attributes 'half of the trouble about the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*'<sup>8</sup> to its dogmatic style and Bloom and Trilling (1973) compare its tone to the one Cromwell used addressing the Rump Parliament<sup>9</sup>. But nevertheless the propagation of the use of "plain language" and deliberate rejection of poetic diction, the description of simple natural objects and common people's psychological situations was an open challenge of the poetical tradition of his time. Purkis (1970) regards these claims to be provocation's because Wordsworth's colleagues knew that he was able to write in a more "elaborated" style<sup>10</sup>. Wordsworth himself claims that poetic diction is 'mechanical adoption of those figures of speech' used by 'the earliest poets of all nations' and therefore lacks passion because it is 'frequently applied [...] to feelings and ideas with which they [poets using poetic diction] had no natural connection whatsoever'<sup>11</sup>. As Wordsworth wants to excite genuine passionate feelings in the reader of his poems he tries to avoid these stereotypical phrases. In his eyes the poet should try to 'bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he [sic!] describes' and 'modify[...] only the language' by the 'principle [...] of selection', that is he 'remove[es] everything what would otherwise be painful or disgusting in the passion'<sup>12</sup>.

Another purpose of Wordsworth's use of plain language is to make his poetry understandable to the many, to normal people<sup>13</sup>. This applies a different function to poets themselves. 'Poets

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<sup>7</sup> compare Wu, p.255: Wordsworth provokes astonishment when he claims that he has 'taken as much pains to avoid [poetic diction] as others ordinarily take to produce it'.

<sup>8</sup> Purkis (1970), p.39.

<sup>9</sup> compare Bloom and Trilling (1973), p. 593.

<sup>10</sup> compare Purkis (1970), p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Wu (1994), p.266.

<sup>12</sup> ib., p.258.

<sup>13</sup> ib., compare p.261.

do not write for poets alone, but for men'<sup>14</sup>. Therefore 'the poet must descend from his [sic!] supposed height, and in order to excite rational sympathy, he [sic!] must express himself [sic!] as other men express themselves'<sup>15</sup>. According to Wordsworth poets are not different from other "normal" people, they only have a more developed perception of the things surrounding them and a better ability to express what they see<sup>16</sup>. 'Among the qualities [...] principally conducing to form a poet, is implied nothing differing in kind from other men [sic!], but only in degree'<sup>17</sup>.

By taking common situations as object for his poetry Wordsworth breaks with the tradition of the Renaissance which tried to imitate classical ancient writers. Renaissance writing attempts to reflect reality and the world whereas Wordsworth gives a subjective account of what he sees. Dover claims that 'he [Wordsworth] sees his poetry [...] as an antidote to the artificial portraits of Man presented in eighteenth century poetry'<sup>18</sup>, e.g. poems written in the Courtly Love Tradition. Wordsworth writes subjective poetry, he portrays the psychological state of his characters, writes autobiographical poems and drifts from "real" sites into supernatural spheres. He does not represent the world as it is but as it appears to him. The focus of Wordsworth's poetry is completely different from what was regarded to be "good" poetry before. The poet does not only have objects, he is the object as well. He chooses situations for his poems only because of their personally emotional importance: it is 'the feeling therein developed [that] gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling'<sup>19</sup>.

Although Wordsworth states that he has chosen 'incidents and situations from common life' he does not include situations from all conditions of life as one would suppose. Ferguson criticises that

Wordsworth's identification of poetry with "every subject which can interest the human mind" would seem to betoken a remarkable degree of tolerance for all poetry, but he [Wordsworth] redirects the terms of this initial statement in such a way as to require the tolerance of the potential reader for the specific kind of poetry presented in the *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> ib.

<sup>15</sup> ib.

<sup>16</sup> ib., compare p.259: The poet directs his attention to the knowledge people have about themselves and their environment.

<sup>17</sup> ib., p.260.

<sup>18</sup> Dover

<sup>19</sup> Wu (1994), p.254.

<sup>20</sup> Ferguson (1977), p.9.

Nevertheless, Wordsworth's deliberate decision for rural settings is particularly in political terms interesting. At a time when people start to gather in big cities and work under very hard and inhuman conditions, when the economy begins to develop from agriculture towards industry Wordsworth writes about rural settings, about nature and its positive influences on people. Bloom and Trilling (1973) put forward that in the Preface 'Wordsworth is responding to the early stages of that mass society and mass culture which we recognise as among the defining characteristics of modern life'<sup>21</sup> and attribute Wordsworth to have an 'explicit sense of cultural crisis'<sup>22</sup>. Wordsworth indirectly criticises the development of society when he emphasises that the people he describes 'from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse being less under the influence of social vanity'<sup>23</sup>.

The Industrialisation brought alienation and estrangement into society: people became "work force", they lost their individuality by playing only a part in the process of production and they lived under conditions like animals. In contrast to this Wordsworth puts emphasis on people's creativity and imagination. In his eyes everybody has got the same qualities as a poet<sup>24</sup>. He characterises human beings contrary to their contemporary social status and gives a positive conception of their worth. 'He explores in imaginative writing a human potential often existing in opposition to the low esteem in which characters are held by society'<sup>25</sup>. The simple fact that Wordsworth regards common people worth to be the object of his poetry is an accusation of contemporary disrespect of people's needs, emotions and values.

As Wordsworth tries to excite strong feelings with his poems and uses rural settings to do this he propagates a "simple" form of pleasure. The 'craving for excitement'<sup>26</sup> and entertainment caused by the boredom of urban work is an unnatural feature of urban people. According to Wordsworth 'the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants'<sup>27</sup>. People do not necessarily need external stimulants. They are able to enjoy simple things. Therefore Wordsworth attempts to stimulate strong feelings by describing the elementary powers of nature, like e.g. the feeling of a warm breeze or the birth of a child.

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<sup>21</sup> Bloom and Trilling (1973), p.593.

<sup>22</sup> *ib.*

<sup>23</sup> Wu (1994), p.252.

<sup>24</sup> *ib.*, compare p.260.

<sup>25</sup> Hamilton (1986), p.3.

<sup>26</sup> Bloom and Trilling (1973), p.593.

<sup>27</sup> Wu (1994), p.254.

Thus criticising the emerging mass society and the loss of individuality Wordsworth worships traditional values. In contrast to the French Revolution which revolted against existing societal institutions Wordsworth stresses the institutional importance of poetry as a vital part of culture. 'Wordsworth expands poetry's sympathies, and stakes its claims to cultural centrality, in response to the contemporary questioning of institutions of all kinds, fostered by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution'<sup>28</sup>. In Wordsworth's opinion poetry is good for people, because it is the 'image of man and nature'<sup>29</sup> and the poet's duty is to create 'immediate pleasure'<sup>30</sup> which is the vital motivation for everything<sup>31</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Summing up the points made in this essay one has to acknowledge that that Wordsworth's claims put forward in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* bear poetical as well as political importance.

Wordsworth's aim is to explore the relationship of people and nature and to excite strong emotions with his poetry. In his eyes the poet has the duty to address everybody, that includes

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<sup>28</sup> Hamilton (1986), p.3.

<sup>29</sup> Wu (1994), p.258.

<sup>30</sup> *ib.*, p.258.

"common" people, and to create pleasure among his readers. To reach these goals Wordsworth adapts plain language to his poetry and describes rural situations. The nature of Wordsworth's understanding of poetry differs significantly from the contemporary understanding of it. He openly criticises traditional poetic forms such as so-called "poetic diction" because of its artificiality and states that he has 'wished to keep [his] reader in the company of flesh and blood'<sup>32</sup>.

Furthermore Wordsworth responds to the contemporary development of society. By describing rural settings and people he expresses his disapproval of the effects of the emerging mass society. Wordsworth reacts to the French Revolution and its struggles against existing social institutions by stressing the importance and central institutional function of poetry.

Wordsworth's understanding of them has formed today's conception of poetry and of the poet. His critical arguments against the effects of mass society are still the same today. One has to remark that Wordsworthian thinking had lasting influence.

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<sup>31</sup> ib. compare.

<sup>32</sup> ib., p.255.

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