

Preface to Lyrical Ballads

Introduction

This page is found under the author, William Wordsworth. However, as many understand, the *Lyrical Ballads* was a collaborative effort. Both Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were inspired to produce this book of poetry through many intellectual conversations. Only four poems in *Lyrical Ballads* are written by Coleridge and all remaining by Wordsworth (refer to the table of contents link). After the *Lyrical Ballads* was written, Coleridge wanted to write a Preface so that he could clarify his poetic style and eliminate many criticisms that were coming to light about their new writing. In one of his journal entries on the topic, Coleridge mentions the "artificiality and impermanence of poetic fashion with aristocratic taste" (Shulz). He wanted the public to know that his and Wordsworth's poetry was more real and therefore, would be more everlasting. Since it was his idea, Coleridge was supposed to write the Preface; but, he never did; leaving Wordsworth to write it under a very harsh time crunch (Shulz). So even though the *Lyrical Ballads* was a collaborative effort, it was Wordsworth who added the preface in the 1800 edition and refined in 1802. After its publication, Coleridge's disagreement with Wordsworth's preface began to surface through his writing of *Biographia Literaria* as well as other letters and essays. Coleridge's opinions do not clash completely with Wordsworth's, but there are definite disparities among the two. In this page, I am going to show some of the major points where Coleridge is not in accord with Wordsworth, and how this gives a sense of each poet's poetic style.

In Wordsworth's 1880 Preface he sets out his poetic position. He emphasizes various points stating his opinion regarding poetry of the time. I will focus on the "ordinary", the role of poetry and the poet, and the poet's response to public taste and opinion. These are not necessarily the most important issues of the Preface; however, they are issues that illustrate visible gaps between the two poets.

Emphasis on the "Ordinary"

In the *Preface*, Wordsworth describes his desire to break away from the overdecorated style of 18th century poetry and create a comprehensible art form for the "ordinary man". This is similar to what Coleridge claims about the artificiality of aristocratic taste. Where they differ, though, is under the topic of meter and personification. In breaking away from the overdecorated style, Wordsworth states that "personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes; and are utterly rejected, as an ordinary device to elevate the style, and raise it above prose" (preface, 9). Instead, Wordsworth wants to emphasize and adopt the language of men, which rejects personification as a "mechanical device of style, or as a family language which Writers in metre seem to lay

claim to by prescription" (preface, 9). Conversely, Coleridge states that he believes poetry should have some "passion" and that passion is present in metre. He claims this was stated to Wordsworth, but believes it was not accurately represented in the Preface (Shulz).

It was understood to Coleridge that Wordsworth's "assignment" was, as Coleridge quoted, to write poetry that would "propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us." (Coleridge, XIV). In other words, Wordsworth was to awaken the romantic beauty of nature to his readers. But when the second edition was published, Coleridge thought Wordsworth's poetry to be heterogeneous. In this Preface, Coleridge claims that Wordsworth extends this style of poetry to all kinds and rejects poetry that does not include the language of "real life" (Coleridge, XIV). Wordsworth proceeds to define a permanent poetic voice that should not reflect those of wealth and importance. Coleridge disagrees with this completely. He believes that common language does not apply to all classes; and therefore, should not be practiced. It is evident that Coleridge and Wordsworth differ in writing style: Wordsworth with his lack of "poetic diction" versus Coleridge's formal writing style. Coleridge's explains that Wordsworth cannot adequately and accurately write to different classes of men, so instead writes to the lowest "denominator of taste" (Shulz). This personal attack at Wordsworth's ability leads many to believe that Coleridge's "clarifications" of the Preface, are more nearly refusals.

The Role of Poetry and the Poet

The ordinary man, Wordsworth believes, is closer to nature; and therefore closer to human-nature. To succeed in directing poetry toward the "ordinary man", Wordsworth must address the significance of language in his poetry, as well as the effects of poetry on the reader. This leads to the discussion of the poet's role where Wordsworth claims he, being a poet, is capable of educating the reader by his ability to be affected by absence. The poet is a "man speaking to men" whose language should not fall short of that which would be heard by men. The opinion of these "men" differ among Wordsworth and Coleridge. Coleridge thinks the role of the poet should maintain some of the previous ideals of poetry regarding language rather than completely change to a language of lowly men.

The role of poetry is where both writers seem to agree. Wordsworth and Coleridge believe the purpose of poetry is to stir passion in the reader. However, their methods are slightly different. Coleridge agrees that being a poet does take the imagination and the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"; but, it also requires "good sense," which is the body of poetic genius" (Coleridge, XIV).

Response to Public Taste

This new trend of poetry, created by both Wordsworth and Coleridge in *Lyrical Ballads*, led to many criticisms. The readers of this time were set in their ways, accepting elegant, aristocratic writing styles. These criticisms were evident to Wordsworth and Coleridge, who showed separate reactions. The last ten paragraphs of the Preface speak of Wordsworth's "faith in the educative taste of the public" and ask that the reader to judge lyrical ballads by "his own feelings and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others." Coleridge has negative opinions toward public taste and claims that public taste "is to be despised" (Shulz, 629). He also wrote a memo in his journal saying he will write an essay on "public taste" in the future. (Shulz) To me, this shows that Wordsworth is more humbled by criticism rather than frustrated by it; while Coleridge remains arrogant believing that only his opinion is educated.