

William Wordsworth: A Preface to the Lyrical Ballads

The Lyrical Ballads is a collection of poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. They are first published in 1798 and generally considered to have marked the beginning of the English Romantic movement in literature.

Most of the poems in the 1798 edition are written by Wordsworth, with Coleridge contributing only four poems to the collection including one of his most famous poems, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner".

A second edition was published in 1800, in which Wordsworth included additional poems and a preface detailing the couple avowed poetical principles. For another edition, published in 1802, Wordsworth added an appendix titled "Poetic Diction" in which he expanded the ideas put forth in the preface.

The Aim

Why did Wordsworth write the Preface?

Several of Wordsworth's friends advised him to write the *Preface* to defend the theory of poetry by which he wrote the poems.

The Structure

Generally, the Preface can be divided into Four parts:

1. The Subject of Poetry
2. The Language of Poetry
3. The Poet
4. Poetry

The Subject of Poetry

1. A poem should deal with incidents and situations from common life.
2. Imagination should present ordinary things in an unusual way.
3. Low and rustic life should be chosen because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain maturity.

The Language of Poetry

The language “really used by men” is adopted. The language of common life conveys feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. Simple language is accordingly more permanent than a philosophical one.

The Poet

1. He is a man speaking to men.
2. He has more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness.
3. He has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind.
4. He is pleased with his own passions and volitions, and rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him.
5. He has a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present.
6. He has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which arise in him without immediate external excitement.

Poetry

Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.

The emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility 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.

Poetry's ultimate goal is pleasure

It is based on experience

Diction

Diction is the use of language, but more specifically, it's the choice of words, phrases, sentence structures, and even figurative language.

While diction is important in all of literature, Wordsworth places particular importance on its role in poetry because it is the poet's medium. While prose has characters, setting, and plot to convey a message, the poet's choice of language, or diction, is the sole means of expression in poetry.

Despite this, Wordsworth argues that the diction of poetry and prose is the same, and criticizes the neo-classicists for their "artificial" and "unnatural" language. Passion should drive diction, not ornament, dignity, or meter.

He wants poetry to center on rustic, humble situations using rustic, humble language. According to Wordsworth, that is the real source of poetic truth and beauty.