

ENG 303: Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) Study Guide

Below are the main passages from the Preface that we covered in class, ranging over 6 main points (labeled A through F). In black font we have Wordsworth's circuitous prose, followed by Professor Moy's comparably lucid English.

- A. It was published, as an **experiment**, which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain, how far, by **fitting to metrical arrangement** a selection of **the real language of men** in a **state of vivid sensation**, that sort of **pleasure** and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a **poet** may rationally endeavour to impart. (293)

I have proposed to myself to imitate, and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men....What is a poet?...He is a man speaking to men...(297, 299)

Lyrical Ballads is an **experiment** to see how much **pleasure** a **poet** can derive by taking the **language of real men** who are **excited (in a state of sensation)** and fitting this otherwise regular prose language into **meter**.

- B. 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 **colouring of imagination**, whereby **ordinary things should be present to the mind in an unusual way**...(294-5)

I'm going to write about **everyday, ordinary and common** things using the **language really used by men**, but present them in an **unusual light** by using my imagination to color them.

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**...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**)...being **less under the influence of social vanity** they convey their **feelings** and notions in **simple and unelaborated expressions**. (295)

I chose to write about **low and rustic life** because the lower classes are more down to earth and their language better expresses their true feelings. Of course, I changed and omitted any low-class terminology, slang or grammar mistakes that we educated folk might find **dislikable** or **disgusting**. What we're left with then is **plain, passionate language** that conveys **feelings**, which is not as artificial or **vain** as the lofty poetry we're used to reading. (Think the Pope quote and heroic couplets we had on the blackboard).

- C. For **all good poetry** is the **spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings**...(295)
It takes its origin from **emotion recollected in tranquillity**. (303)

No translation necessary. This is unadulterated genius!

I have said that each of these poems has a **purpose**...namely to illustrate the manner in which our **feelings and ideas** are **associated in a state of excitement**. But, speaking in language

somewhat more appropriate, it is to **follow the fluxes and reflexes** of the **mind** when **agitated** by the **great** and **simple affections of our nature**. (296)

Each poem in *Lyrical Ballads* is meant to demonstrate how we human beings **associate feelings** with **ideas** when are riled up in a **state of excitement**. Our mind undergoes **fluxes** and **refluxes** when we are agitated by the **affections** in our human **nature**, both **great** and **simple**. *Note: For Wordsworth, this flux and agitation is in response to thoughts and feelings (especially memories), not to shocking incidents or actual stimuli.

- D. I should mention one other circumstance which distinguishes these poems from the popular poetry of the day; it is this, that the **feeling** therein developed **gives importance to the action and situation**, and **not the action and situation to the feeling**. (296)

Wordsworth offers a model “backwards” from what we are used to. Usually in a story or poem, some event happens in the plot, which then sets off certain feelings (cause and effect). For Wordsworth, a thought or memory is what creates the excitement or agitation in his poem. **Thought** gives rise to **action**, not the other way around.

- E. For the **human mind is capable** of being **excited without** the **application of gross** and **violent stimulants**...For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to **blunt the discriminating powers of the mind**, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost **savage torpor**. The most effect of these causes are the **great national events** which are taking place...where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident...the works of Shakespeare and Milton are driven into neglect by **frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse**.--When I think upon this **degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation**, I am almost ashamed...(296-7)

I wish to cultivate a new mode of reading where audiences don't have to read something shocking or disgusting just to get excited. People these days are so bored and boring that their minds are almost jello. They no longer read Shakespeare or Milton. Instead, they read gothic novels and German dramas because they have a sick craving for emotional stimulation. How disgusting! It's shameful...

- F. Now the music of **harmonious metrical language**, the **sense of difficulty overcome**, and the blind association of pleasure which has been previously received from works of **rhyme** or **metre** of same or similar construction...imperceptibly make **up a complex feeling of delight**, which is of the most important use in **tempering the painful** feeling which will always be found intermingled with **powerful descriptions of the deeper passions**. ..the **ease and gracefulness** with which the **poet manages his numbers** are themselves confessedly a principal source of the **gratification** of the **reader**. (303-4)

Why do we love poetry? It's a matter of mingling **pain** and **pleasure**. Sometimes it's painful to revisit **deep passion** and strong emotions, especially those that are **powerfully described**. But, if these strong feelings are expressed in poetry instead of prose, this helps **temper the painful feelings**. The easy **rhyme** and beautiful **meter** of a poem sounds **harmonious** to us. It gives us **pleasure**, and even reminds us of other poems we like that might have the same rhyme or meter. The way that a poet fits language into rhyme and meter--with **ease** and **gracefulness**--gives us **pleasure** to help

offset any painful feelings. In other words, this is why meter, rhyme, **numbers** and measurement are so important--it's what makes poetry special, not just formally but for our emotional reception of ideas!