

Lecture Fourteen

Mr. Wordsworth's "Preface"

Scope: Lecture Fourteen will be devoted to a close analysis of Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (1800). We shall explore how Wordsworth, in his "Preface," radically redefines both the nature of poetry and the poet and the function of poetry and the poet in society. We shall focus especially on such key Wordsworthian formulations as poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," the poet as a "man speaking to men," and the role of poetry as an antidote to society's "degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation." We shall conclude with a brief look at Keats's famous distinction between negative capability and the egotistical sublime.

Outline

- I. In his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," Wordsworth redefines the nature and status of poetry along expressive lines.
 - A. Rather than treat poetry as an imitation of an action (mimetic) or an object fashioned to teach and please a specific audience (pragmatic), he sees it as a personal reflection of the poet's interactions with himself and his world.
 1. Of course, this is not to say that Wordsworth is unconcerned with imitating or teaching or pleasing (he is concerned with all three), but that these theoretical concerns flow directly out of his view of the poet.
 2. As we saw in Lecture Thirteen, it is not the rules of decorum but the visionary imagination of the poet that becomes the source and end of poetry.
 3. In a famous phrase, Wordsworth defines poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"; i.e., as an externalization of the internal emotions, moods, and perceptions of the poet.
 4. Indeed, Wordsworth's nature poetry is less a reflection on nature than on the feelings and ideas excited in the poet as he contemplates nature.
 5. Even in his more narrative poems, Wordsworth asserts that it is the feeling that gives importance to the action, and not vice versa. This turns Aristotle on his head.
 - B. Nevertheless, there is a mimetic element to Wordsworth's theory.
 1. Wordsworth often wrote on rustic subjects, not so much because the country made him "feel good," but because in such a setting, he felt men were more in touch with elementary feelings and durable truths.
 2. It was these essential passions, this emphatic, unmediated kind of life, that Wordsworth wanted to capture and embody in his poetry.
 3. For Wordsworth, as for all Romantics, the city and court life of the eighteenth-century poet was artificial, insincere, and out of touch with the wellsprings of our humanity. Wordsworth looked *both* to the freer life of the country and within his own heart for real passions and truths.
 4. He agreed with Aristotle (and Sidney) that poetry is more philosophical than history because it deals with both specific facts and general truths.
 5. For Wordsworth, that is, self-expression is not an end in itself, but a means to reach that which is most permanent and universal.
 6. This is Wordsworth's poetic version of Kant's subjective universality: in describing his own feelings, the poet describes the feelings of all men.
 - C. Just as Wordsworth sought to imitate the life and passions of his native Lake District, so he sought to imitate the simple, direct language of the country.
 1. He rejected the (to him) phony poetic diction of the eighteenth century, with its purposely contorted syntax and its artificial "poeticisms."
 2. Wordsworth adopted a more natural, less mannered, style that mimicked the syntax of good prose. He called it "the real language of men."
 3. When, seventeen years later, Coleridge wrote his own extended "Preface" (i.e., *Biographia Literaria*), he would quibble with this phrase, saying that Wordsworth went too far in his praise of rustic manners of speech.

4. However, just as Wordsworth tempered his expressivism with a mimetic focus on Truth, so he tempered his celebration of “real language.”
5. The poet, he asserts, should not slavishly imitate the rustic, but through a process of selection, purge his natural speech of its grossness.

II. Just as he redefines poetry, so does Wordsworth offer a new vision of the poet.

- A.** The questions “What is a poem?” and “What is a poet?” are synonymous.
 1. Just as poetry is to be written in the “real language of men,” so is the poet to be a “man speaking to men.”
 2. That is to say, the poet is not to be viewed as a different creature: he is of the same *kind* as all other men, though he does differ in *degree*. There is no “coterie of poets,” as thought of in the eighteenth-century concept.
- B.** The poet possesses a more organic, comprehensive soul than do other men.
 1. He has more lively sensibilities and is more in touch with his feelings.
 2. He needs little stimulation to experience deep emotions; indeed, he is able to feel absent pleasures as though they were present.
 3. He rejoices in his own spirit of life and seeks to discover that joy in the world around him; if it is not there, he will create it.
 4. He has a rich store of memories he can tap for poetic inspiration and the ability to relive his memories and the emotions attached to them.
 5. He can sustain an inner mood of tranquillity and pleasure.
- C.** The poet is a lover of his fellow man who honors “the native, naked dignity of man” by humanizing all things in accordance with the human heart.
 1. He is a friend of man who binds all things with passion and love.
 2. Whereas the scientist seeks truth as an abstract idea, the poet “rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion.”
 3. Indeed, prophesies Wordsworth, if science ever becomes so familiar an object that it takes on “flesh and blood,” it will be the poet (not the scientist) who will help transform and humanize it into a kindred spirit.

III. Finally, Wordsworth ascribes to the poet (and poetry) a new social function.

- A.** Wordsworth warns against the ill effects of urbanization/ industrialization.
 1. The massing of men into cities and the repetitive drudgery of their jobs produces in them an ignoble “craving after extraordinary incident” and “a degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation.”
 2. Their senses have grown dull, and they need grosser, more violent, and more scandalous stimulants to satisfy their blunted psyches (yes, nineteenth-century London had its own versions of MTV and *The Enquirer*).
 3. Wordsworth calls this state of emotional and spiritual deadness, this loss of the ability to be moved by simple beauty and truth, “savage torpor.” (Compare this with Longinus.)
- B.** Wordsworth saw it as the role of poetry to restore this lost ability.
 1. Poetry, by enlarging and refining our sensibilities, has the power to re-humanize us, to bring us back into the human community.
 2. Poetry restores our child-like wonder, revives our ability to take joy and delight in the natural world and in the quiet beatings of our heart.
 3. Considering this new social function, poetry is more, not less, necessary in an industrialized age than in a rural, pastoral age.
 4. We might note here that, although Wordsworth rejects the refinement and wit of the eighteenth century, he promotes a new “aristocracy” of sensitivity.
- C.** Though poetry does instruct, it exists first and foremost to give pleasure.
 1. It is through pleasure that poetry draws us back into touch with our world, our fellow man, and ourselves.
 2. The pleasure that poetry gives is no mere entertainment and is not to be scorned; it is the very spirit through which we know and live.

- IV. In his letters, John Keats makes a distinction between “negative capability” and the “egotistical sublime” that offers an interesting critique of Wordsworth.
- A. Whereas poets who possess negative capability are able to enter the lives of other beings and see the world from their perspectives, those possessing the quality of the egotistical sublime always mediate their visions of the world through their own strong, dominant personalities.
1. Shakespeare had the former; Milton and Wordsworth, the latter.
 2. To link Wordsworth to the egotistical sublime is not to say that he is arrogant or selfish, but that his personality is such that it both draws all things to itself and colors all things by its perceptions.
 3. Coleridge, too, noted (in *Biographia Literaria*) that, even in his poetic studies of others, Wordsworth is a spectator *ab extra* (“from the outside”). In other words, he (Wordsworth) had sympathy, but not empathy.
- B. Keats’s desire to move out of himself is not so much a rejection of, as an antidote to, the Romantic belief that things are as they are perceived.
1. The strong focus on the poet and his perceptions often leads to the Romantic “disease” of over-self-consciousness: the poet thinks so much that he loses his ability to feel and experience the world directly.
 2. Romantic theory (and practice) is a balancing act between the desire for an unmediated vision of nature and an equal and opposite desire to shape nature in accordance with the poet’s perceptions.
 3. The anti-Romantic turn we will encounter in Unit Five (Lectures Seventeen to Twenty) will reject this struggle in favor of a more impersonal, objective view of poetry that uses Keats’s negative capability as a springboard.
- C. There is another vital aspect to negative capability, but we shall save this for the beginning of Lecture Sixteen.

Essential Reading:

William Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” in Adams.

John Keats, Selected Letters, in Adams.

Supplementary Reading:

Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*.

Wimsatt and Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, Chapter 16.

James Engell, *The Creative Imagination*, Chapter 18.

W. J. Bate, *Negative Capability*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Have your own powers of discrimination, your ability to discern beauty and truth in the subtle aspects of life, been blunted by the media’s vulgar and endless assault on our senses and judgment? Read some Wordsworth and see if his poetry does not help to restore your sensitivity and humanity!
2. Wordsworth argues that the true poet is distinguished from other men by a more sensitive and comprehensive soul. Do you agree?