Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads (1798)
and Poetry's Past:
The Link Between Poetry's Past and the Morn of Romanticism.

The cluttered, busy sounds of Richmond were beginning to quiet down as William Wordsworth decided to take an early evening stroll out onto the bridge overlooking the Thames River. The river was still and quiet, except for the occasional ripple caused by a leaf gliding along its surface. Standing upon the rustic bridge, William leaned out upon the worn railing and gazed down into the river. Time seemed to be rushing by him, he thought, causing changes, it seemed, to be occurring almost daily before his eyes, and he didn't like the direction in which they were headed. The Industrial and Agricultural Revolution were now in full steam, taking over, it seemed, the entire country of England.

He had begun to see the destruction of the family as an economic unit; it was no longer dependent upon itself for its everyday existence, but it was now dependent upon the factories and businesses for the money to buy the things that they needed. The individual was no longer an important force, but rather, he had become an impersonal labor force to be used. Individual's were no longer in control of their own lives, but they were pawns to be used in today's capitalistic empire. Worst of all, nature had also become a victim of the Revolution. The beauty and serenity of nature was quickly being replaced by the soot, noise, and clutter of factories, businesses and company homes. So much so, that it became necessary for William to often try and intervene to save the trees and even rocks and stones from destruction at the hands of his Westmorland neighbors. How often he thought about the past, and how those days seemed to be so much simpler. He thought about poetry's past, and how it had changed right before his eyes. There were some things which he was glad to see changed, while others, he wished had remained. Each year brought more and more new "poets" to the pages of Gentleman's Magazine, none of which were of any value at all. What would the famed poets of the past, Alexander Pope, William Cowper, Thomas Chatteron, or William Collins say to the Revolution...to England...to the world.

William thought about Collins...now there was a poet. He wondered what Collins would say to the Revolution. William loved Collins' work and enjoyed reading it when time permitted. He thought about a poem by Collins that described the scene which laid before him now. The poem was called "Ode on the Death of Thompson," and it was a memorial to the poet Thompson and to his work. He stood there thinking about the poem as another leaf floated beneath him upon the Thames. Then, he had an idea! Why not write an ode to Collins in the very spot where Collins was remembering Thompson. So William pulled out a piece of paper and wrote the title, "Rememberance of Collins, composed upon the Thames near Richmond." As he sat there working on the poem, he wondered about his place in poetic history. He would not be the end of the neoclassical era, for there were structures and techniques that he wished to maintain; nor did the Romantic era begin with him, for there were many signs of its arrival already around him; instead, he was a link in the chain, holding together the past with the oncoming future. He would, in fact, attempt to create a new beginning with the best of both worlds. Looking up, he would hear the gurgling of the river, the echoed chirping of the grasshoppers, and the faint splash of an old,
wooden oar; coming towards him, he could see another leaf gliding along the river, until finally, it disappeared out of view.

In comparing Wordsworth's 'Remembrance of Collins' with Collins' 'Ode on the Death of Thompson,' in Penguin Classics' English Romantic Verse, Wordsworth's part in the chain of poetic history becomes quite evident when examining the similarities and differences between these two poems.

First of all, in both poems, the poet maintains an objective voice. The voice of the character discussed is not allowed to be heard, unlike Wordsworth's later poems in the Lyrical Ballads (1798), the writer remains an objective observer of the remembered poet; like a scientist, he does not wish to interfere with his own observations. Objectivity is essential if reason to be in control to pattern and to examine the object in view. This is one of the legacies of Neoclassicism that constituted for Wordsworth his link to poetry's past.

Another similarity between the two poems is their use of enjambment. Enjambment is the running on of a sentence from one couplet or line into the next line without a pause at the line's end. In Collins' 44-line poem, enjambment occurs eight times, whereas in Wordsworth's 24-line poem, it occurs six times. Thus in proportion to the length of the poems, Wordsworth uses enjambment more frequently, even though both poets use the technique.

Thirdly, both poets use the technique of the apostrophe. An apostrophe is defined as a digression in the poem; strictly, it is a turning aside from the course of a speech in order to make a short address to a person or thing, whether present or absent. In Collins' poem, it occurs when he writes,

\[
\text{But thou, who own'st that earthy bed,} \\
\text{Ah! what will every dirge avail;... (qtd. in Wright 18)}
\]

In this stanza, Collins addresses the owner of the 'earthy bed' where Thompson is laid. After finishing his address to the owner, Collins turns and addresses himself to the Thames River:

\[
\text{But thou, lorn stream, whose sullen tide} \\
\text{No sedge-crown'd sisters now attend,} \\
\text{Now waft me from the green hill's side,} \\
\text{Whose cold turf hides the buried friend! (qtd. in Wright 19)}
\]

It is here that individuals are able to see the similarity with Wordsworth. Wordsworth also addresses the Thames River in the first stanza of his poem, 'Remembrance of Collins:

\[
\text{Glide gently, thus for ever glide,} \\
\text{O Thames! that other bards may see} \\
\text{As lovely visions by thy side} \\
\text{As now, fair river! come to me.} \\
\text{O glide, fair stream! for ever so,} \\
\text{Thy quiet soul on all bestowing,} \\
\text{Till all our minds for ever flow} \\
\text{As thy deep waters now are flowing. (qtd. in Wright 107)}
\]

Thus in structures and technique, the two poems are identical. However, the thing that really separates the two poets are their style. Collins described a scene out of his own fantasy, whereas Wordsworth described the scene just as it laid before him. Collins equated Thompson with a Druid...
and used all types of poetic diction, whereas Wordsworth wrote in the "real language of men," a language that is simple and straight-forward. It is here that a glimpse of the future Wordsworth is seen as he begins to take on his own "voice" in his poetry and not merely mimic the style of poetry's past.

In the Lyrical Ballad of 1798, "Rememberance of Collins" is changed to "Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening." The title is an indication of Wordsworth becoming his own voice and not merely a "mirrored image" of Collins' work. Although the subject, diction, and style are now totally Wordsworthian, he still holds onto the structure and techniques of poetry's past: the use of an A-B-A-B pattern rhyme scheme and the use of both enjambment and apostrophe. Thus, Wordsworth truly demonstrates that he is indeed a link between the Romantic movement and poetry's past.

In the "Preface" of the revised edition of the Lyrical Ballads (1798), Wordsworth gives his readers seven objectives which he sought to fulfill in his work. It is these objectives which allow Wordsworth to exist as a link between poetry's past and the age of Romanticism.

His first objective was to publish his collection of poems as an experiment. Wordsworth states in the "Preface" of Lyrical Ballads that,

> The poems were 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 endeavor to impart. (qtd. in Owen 153)

Although the poems are an experiment, they are not an altogether new type of poetry, for Wordsworth still retains the structure and techniques of poetry's past. Marilyn Butler, in her book, Romantics, Rebels & Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background (1760--1830), states that

> We should dismiss at the outset the belief, still widely held, that Wordsworth's contributions to the Lyrical Ballads of 1798 represent an altogether new kind of poetry. Wordsworth's experiments with subjects from among the lower orders of society, in metres appropriately taken from popular poetry, follow thirty years of public interest in this manner, and are thus characteristic of the culture of the Enlightenment. (58)

The structure and the techniques are those of poetry's past, but the voice he uses for each of his poems, his diction (the "real language of men"), and style are what connects him to the era of Romanticism. Robery Mayo, in his article, "The Contemporaneity of the Lyrical Ballads," states that,

> ...the Ballads were not such a "complete change" as some writers would have us believe. Even their eccentricity has been exaggerated. Actually, there is a conditional side to the Lyrical Ballads, although it is usually overlooked. It is by way of the general taste for poetry in the 1790's that this essay will approach the poems, and it will attempt to show that they not only conformed in numerous ways to the modes of 1798, and reflected popular tastes and attitudes, but enjoyed a certain popularity in the magazines themselves. (401)

Thus, the Lyrical Ballads were a collection of poems that there published as an experiment, not due to the structure or techniques found in the poem, but because the poems spoke in a new "voice," a voice unheard until now—the voice of the man on the street, "the real language of men." It was this
new reality that the lower-class, street person could have a poetical voice and be able to teach the reader about him and about his world--it was this concept that made the experiment. It was this new style of writing in the language of the ordinary man that linked Wordsworth to the Romantic movement, yet it was his structure and technique that linked him to the Neoclassic era, thus again, serving him as a link between the two eras.

The second objective which Wordsworth sought to fulfill was that of trying to make the incidents of common life interesting. Wordsworth states in his "Preface,"

The principle object which I proposed to myself in these poems was to make the incidents of common life interesting (to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting). (qtd. in Owen 156)

An example of an incident in common life made interesting is Wordsworth's poem, "Lines Written at a Small distance from My House, and Sent by My Little Boy to the Person to Whom They Are Addressed." In the poem, Wordsworth asks his sister, Dorothy, in a note, to come outside with him and to enjoy the day with him. He writes,

My sister! (tis a wish of mine)  
Now that our morning meal is done,  
Make haste, your morning task resign;  
Come forth and feel the sun.  
Edward will come with you, and pray,  
Put on with speed your woodland dress,  
And bring no book, for this one day  
We'll give to idleness. (qtd. in Owen 55-56)

In this way, Wordsworth takes a common, ordinary experience, and adds interest to it by putting it into poetical form. Ian Scott-Kilvert, in his book, British Writers, states that Wordsworth's role was to present the ordinary so that the reader would see it with new eyes. He writes,

The result is that Lyrical Ballads contains many poems that are concerned with simple people in ordinary surroundings, who have problems that are common, sometimes universal: old age, poverty, pregnancy and betrayal, cold, bereavement. Their stories are narrated in a style that is simple and direct, influenced by the street ballads in its dramatic abruptness. (6)

It is this ability to be able to make the incidents of common life interesting and to bring out the baseness of reality that makes Wordsworth stand out as a Romantic poet.

The next objective which Wordsworth gives to his readers is that his poems are written with a specific purpose in mind. He states,

...the poems in these volumes will be found distinguished at least by one mark of difference, that each of them has a worthy purpose. Not that I mean to say, that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived; but I believe that my habits of meditation have so formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those
feelings, will be found to carry along with them a purpose... (qtd. in Owen 157)

A discovery of not only his own feelings, but allowing his readers to experience their own feelings in relation to the poem, as well as their feelings in relation to all humanity. Wordsworth was not only trying to get in touch with his own feelings, but he was trying to focus in on the simple, the direct, and the rustic life, rather than the complex, obscure, cluttered life of civilization. Scott-Kilvert states this by saying,

*It is clear that Wordsworth was attempting to return to what he saw as a correct simplicity and directness, and that the choice of humble and rustic life, together with a predilection for ordinary language, is connected with this. The poetic results show how unprejudiced Wordsworth was about the matter, and how the actual language of his poetry varied according to the needs of the poem in question:*...

It was his desire to return to the simple things in life, and this was reflected in his poetry. Simple in that it was not cluttered up with all the extra ideas, activities, and behaviors that can sometimes disguise or hide what is really going on inside of one's psyche, one's true feelings. It was Wordsworth's need to return to the basics, to move away from the 'excess' and to deal with what's really there that inspired his poetry. Scott-Kilvert describes this by saying,

*...his motives are clear and creditable: they are concerned with 'the essential patterns of the heart,' "elemental feelings," and 'the passions of men" which are 'incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.* (7)

It was getting in 'touch' with one's true feelings with one's 'nature' that was most important to Wordsworth, and to love and revere life, these qualities seemed to be the basic purpose behind the *Lyrical Ballads* . Scott-Kilvert supports this idea in his book, *British Writers* :

*The extraordinary feature of Lyrical Ballads is that they carry everywhere the evidence of the poet's love for life, for his fellow human beings, for those who are oppressed by society, for his sister, for the natural world around him. This energetic love of life is, in Wordsworth's eyes, evidence of a full humanity; in the 'Preface' he describes a poet as 'singing a song in which all human beings join with him.'* (7)

He goes on to complete this idea by saying,

*It is this respect for his fellow creatures, and this craft, that are the distinguishing marks of Lyrical Ballads: they are poems that challenge our very ideas about the nature of poetry and that also confound our expectations in other ways. (7)*

James Vinson, in his book, *Great Writers of the English Language: Poets*, expresses this same idea:

*Wordsworth concentrates in the simplest and most elemental passions of the human heart: the love of a mother for her idiot child, the compassion due to the aged and the poor, a mother's grief for her lost baby. It is this consistent, austere aim to portray universal and simple emotions which lies behind the much misunderstood 'Preface' to the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads, in which Wordsworth states as his aim the tracing of 'the*
primary laws of our nature." It is this which is responsible for his choice of "low and rustic life," since he believed that there "the essential passions of the heart" spoke more plainly, were more simple, and were more durable. (1094)

Thus, his purpose of writing in the "real language of men" and in dealing with the most base, elementary human passions is what separates Wordsworth from Neoclassicism and firmly plants him in the camp of Romanticism. He wants to do more than just deal with life objectively, observing it as a faithful scientist, and then reporting his findings to the general public; Wordsworth needed to really live "life;" to experience it intimately on a one-to-nature basis. It was his motivating need to experience the baseness of life and emotions that led him to propose his fourth and fifth objective.

I have said that each of these poems have a purpose. I have also informed my reader what this purpose will be principally to be: namely to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement. But, speaking in languages somewhat more appropriate, it is to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature. This object I have endeavored in these short essays to attain by various means; by tracing the maternal passion through many of its more subtle windings ("Idiot Boy," "Mad Mother"); by accompanying the last struggles of a human being at the approach of death, cleaving in solitude to life and society; by showing the perplexity and obscurity which in childhood attend our notion of death, or rather our utter inability to admit that notion; or by displaying the strength of fraternal, or to speak philosophically of moral attachment when early associated with the great and beautiful objects of nature; and by placing my reader in the way of receiving from ordinary moral sensations another and more salutary impression than we are accustomed to receiving from them. (qtd. in Owen 158)

Fifthly, he writes,

One other circumstances 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. (qtd. in Owen 159)

Wordsworth chooses, then, to examine human passions in a "state of excitement," in a condition where one is close to death or in an extreme emotional crisis, for he believed that in such conditions, human beings become poetical. That one is able to symbolize their circumstances in terms of ultimate realities, and it was these "realities" that Wordsworth wished to emphasize and examine in his collection. He examined these "realities" by describing characters in relation to their crisis. It is his characters' reaction to their crisis that demonstrates "reality" and gives his poems the necessary appeal to his readers. In order to get the necessary impact, then, Wordsworth had to give a realistic sketch of his characters. For by giving realistic, base characters, Wordsworth opens poetry to a wider audience and gives them someone to associate with, and to live through, so that they may widen their own realm of experiences. Wordsworth states this objective by stating,

It has also been part of my general purpose to attempt to sketch characters under the influence of less impassioned feelings,... characters of which the elements are simple, belonging rather to nature than to manners, such as exist now, and will probably always exist, and which from their constitution may be distinctly and profitably
The more base the individual, the closer the individual is to nature and to those qualities that are worth learning and mimicking. His emphasis upon the natural, base individual makes him a Romantic poet, for "the cult of sensibility is associated with genteel figures, often provincial clergy and their families,..." (Butler 34). Thus linking Wordsworth with the romantic movement. In David Wright's book, *English Romantic Verse*, he states that

**Wordsworth may be said to have been more or less obsessed with the figure of the solitary, who in various guises is the theme of many of his shorter poems.** (xxii)

The solitary figure is more base, in Wordsworth's view, and as such, is closer to nature and "true reality."

Through the struggle of the solitary, Wordsworth is able to work through his own troubled communion with nature. Marilyn Butler, in her book, *Romantics, Rebels & Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background*, states,

> Wordsworth from 1797-98 ceases to see others as social phenomena; they are objects from contemplation, images of apparent alienation which the poet's imagination translates into private emblems of his troubled communion with nature. (67)

The characters are symbols of his own difficulties in experiencing 'life' and 'ultimate reality,' which is received through a unity and intimacy with nature. Therefore, Wordsworth chooses characters which he perceives to be closest to nature, and thereby closest to the essence of humanity. Wordsworth states in his 'Preface' of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) that

> 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; because in that condition life our elementary feelings co-exist 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, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended; and more durable; and lastly, because in that condition, the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (qtd. in Owen 156)

The subject, then, is very important to the success of Wordsworth's poems, for upon it rests the reality of his characters and solution to their crisis. In describing the general importance of his subjects, Wordsworth states the following:

> ...that I point my reader's attention to this mark of distinction far less for the sake of these particular poems than from the general importance of the subject. The subject is indeed important! For the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know that one being is elevated above another in proportion as he possesses this capability. It has therefore appeared to me, that to endeavor to produce or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a writer can be engaged. (qtd. in Owen 159)
Wordsworth as a poet, then, exists as a link between the Neoclassical and the Romantic movement. Through his structure and poetical techniques, he is able to maintain the orderliness of the Neoclassics, giving complete form and pattern to his work, increasing the acceptance and readability of his work. Through his objectives, he is able to add to the realm of the poets, opening doors to untried possibilities for all those of his time and those who should follow. Wordsworth's poetry, although an experiment in meeting day-to-day life head on, is written with purpose and in the "real language of men." Emotions and feelings are not to be relegated back behind the scenes but are more important than either action or situation. Finally, it is the subject that holds the work together and acts as the poet's foundation on which he is able to build his creative world. It is these seven objectives which linked Wordsworth with the Romantic poets, and thus gave him the recognition of being one of the leaders of the Romantic literature, and of defining poetry for the ordinary man. Wordsworth took a field of study which before had been reserved for the upper, genteel classes, and through his objectives, Wordsworth was able to redefine it for the man on the streets and opened the door to a much larger field of study for the English poet. Wordsworth had the insight to look beyond the parlors and studies of the upper classes, who were for the Industrial Revolution, and its wiping away of his natural world for a world of soot, wasteless activity, and the excess clutter of capitalistic materialism, and saw on that old rustic bridge, the autumn leaf gliding along the river, the faint movement of the trees against the wind, and a lone canoe paddling in the distance. These simple common life incidents were what was important, and what held in their image the shadows of "ultimate reality" and true happiness.
Works Cited


