



**TECHNIUM**  
**SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL**

**Vol. 8, 2020**

**A new decade  
for social changes**

[www.techniumscience.com](http://www.techniumscience.com)

ISSN 2668-7798



9 772668 779000

## **William Wordsworth's Theoretical Contribution to Canon of Literary Criticism in Light of *Preface to Lyrical Ballads***

**Ercüment Yaşar**

PhD Candidate in English Language and Literature, Istanbul Aydın University

ercumentyasar1986@gmail.com

**Abstract.** Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems* (1802) is both a revolutionary manifesto and a kind of foundational text in the context of the canon of Romantic poetry because of its normative analysis on the nature of poetry and its basic constituent parts although when compared to the systematic approaches in the twentieth century literary theory, Wordsworth does not present an autonomous critical method capable of providing universally valid principles in evaluation of the text. This paper mainly aims to discuss Wordsworth's contribution to canon of literary criticism on the theoretical level by giving concrete examples from *Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems* (1802) as well as scrutinizing Wordsworth's definition of poetry and the poet, his ideas on the origin of poetry, the subject matter of poetry, and the language of poetry respectively in order to show that it is revolutionary in terms of prescribing some principles in evaluation of a literary work.

**Keywords.** Wordsworth, Romanticism, Literary Criticism, Preface to Lyrical Ballads

### **William Wordsworth's Theoretical Contribution to Canon of Literary Criticism in Light of *Preface to Lyrical Ballads***

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) takes place on the top with some other great Romantic poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, John Keats, Lord Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelley since his poems reflect the most basic ones of the distinctive features of Romanticism successfully. In this sense, Wordsworth is a significant poet of the British Romanticism on the practical level. On the other hand, his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* is a cornerstone in the history of literary criticism because of its theoretical contribution to literary criticism. It is both a revolutionary manifesto and a kind of foundational text in the context of the canon of Romantic poetry because of its normative analysis on the nature of poetry and its basic constituent parts although when compared to the systematic approaches in the twentieth century literary theory, Wordsworth does not present an autonomous critical method capable of providing universally valid principles in evaluation of the text. As a literary critic specialised in this field, M.H. Abrams draws attention of the reader to some essential points in Wordsworth's revolutionary approach to support this aspect of the preface. Abrams (1999) states that Wordsworth's preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was

written “as a poetic ‘manifesto,’ or statement of revolutionary aims, in which he denounced the upper-class subjects and the *poetic diction* of the preceding century” (p. 177) because it “proposed to deal with materials from ‘common life’ in ‘a selection of language really used by men’” (Abrams, 1999, p. 177). The influence of this literary manifesto remains insufficiently low in terms of being a revolutionary text leading to political upheavals. It does not cause removal of the established political order but it brings a new understanding in evaluation of the text; therefore, it is likely to classify Wordsworth as an avant-gardist in literary criticism owing to his relatively author-oriented approach developed in corporation with Coleridge. In this sense, “Romanticism as a movement represents a literary revolution” (Pellicer, 2002, p. 224) and “Wordsworth and Coleridge represent its English avant-garde” (Pellicer, 2002, p. 224). This paper mainly aims to discuss Wordsworth’s contribution to canon of literary criticism on the theoretical level by giving concrete examples from *Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems* (1802) as well as scrutinizing Wordsworth’s definition of poetry and the poet, his ideas on the origin of poetry, the subject matter of poetry, and the language of poetry respectively in order to show that although this literary manifesto does not pave the way for a radical change in the standards of political institutions, it is revolutionary in terms of prescribing some principles in evaluation of a literary work.

Wordsworth’s *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* is a milestone in the history of literary criticism due to many reasons but the most fundamental one is his systematic approach to poetry while defining the basic principles of Romantic poetry against the existing paradigm of his time. He deviates from the Neo-Classical literary theory and he brings a new perspective, a less travelled way, or at least a manifesto-like approach. David H. Richter classifies it as a work of literary criticism reflecting the characteristics of a transition period. It reflects the gradual departure from one literary theory to another in terms of theoretical understanding covering the fundamental components of interpretation: “The *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* is a transitional work between the rhetorical/mimetic literary theory of the eighteenth century and the expressive theories of the nineteenth” (Richter, 2007, p. 304). In his Romantic theory, he underestimates the rules defended by the Neo-Classical point of view and he does not follow the steps of the Neo-Classical poets and authors in a couple of basic respects: the definition and origin of poetry, the task of the poet, the subject matter of poetry, and the language of poetry. The first step of his theoretical approach to the art of poetry is to give a specific definition of poetry having philosophical foundations:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity 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. (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1392)

In this regard, he thinks that all poetry arises out of emotions. When considered from perspective of the twentieth century literary criticism, instead of objectivity of human reason, he depends upon subjectivity of emotions and psychology. Poetry is the manifestation of the overflow of the powerful feelings residing in human nature. It does not originate from universally valid principles. Wordsworth bases origins of poetry on personal experiences of the poet. In this respect, “poetry is not primarily a mirror of men in action; on the contrary, its essential component is the poet’s own feelings” (Abrams, 1999, p. 178). The poet does not draw his material from some aforethought ideas. Rather than being a carefully organized process, making of the poem is spontaneous. In this sense, Wordsworth opposes the Neo-Classical critics by giving priority to spontaneity in writing poetry: “The process of composition, since it is ‘spontaneous,’ is the opposite of the artful manipulations of means to

foreseen ends stressed by the neo-classic critics” (Abrams, 1999, p. 178). Furthermore, the mental peacefulness leads to the remembrance of the incidents in the past and they resurface in the poet’s mind by the help of imagination which is the faculty of man frequently praised by the Romantics. Imagination acts as a go-between and it provides a basis for transference of the powerful feelings from heart to the mind in the form of poetic images. Wordsworth speaks in praise of emotion and imagination. Metaphorically said, thanks to the wings of imagination, the poet loses his touch with the external reality of everyday life. As a result of their reluctance to depend upon reason, the Romantics degrade reason to an inferior position against the imagination and the five senses by which human get the knowledge of the physical world on the epistemological level. So, the praise of emotion as the origin of poetry is a distinctive character of the Romantics. They do not share the Neo-Classical poets’ tendency of glorifying reason, social order, and culture. On the other hand, Wordsworth (1993) states that “poetry is the first and last of all knowledge-it is as immortal as the hearth of man” (p. 1391). That poetry is identified with the hearth of man in terms of immortality reveals Wordsworth’s emotional touch with the art of poetry. He does not avoid attributing some philosophical and scientific meanings to poetry. Although it originates out of subjective emotions, poetry is capable of establishing universally agreed principles. He asserts that “poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1391). By making reference to Aristotle, Wordsworth claims that poetry is the most philosophical literary form. It presents philosophical ideas by benefitting from illustrative power of literature: “Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1389). These are relatively subjective claims which need to be proved rationally and so Wordsworth proclaims the mainstay behind his praise of poetry. Thus he bases his opinion on universality of poetry:

Its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the hearth by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives strength and divinity to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal. (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1389)

In this respect, he asserts that poetry deals with the universals instead of the particulars. Poetry is in search of the ultimate truth and so it is philosophical. Although scholars mostly aim to make an ontological distinction between philosophy and poetry, he thinks that poetry walks in hand in hand with philosophy owing to the fact that both of them aim to discover the universals rather than the particulars. They set their sight on the nature of immortal concepts instead of the realm of the material things.

Wordsworth describes the ideal poet in his mind and he discusses the task of the poet in a detailed way. His poet is an all-rounder who feels and thinks very differently from the others. The poet is a man whose special abilities make him the only one of its kind:

He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1388)

One of the primary tasks of the poet is to reflect the feelings of the ordinary people described in his poems. He should not isolate himself from the common people. Instead, he should share the same feelings with them because “the poets do not write for poets alone, but for men” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1392). Thus the poet “must express himself as other men express themselves” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1392). He is the spokesman of the people who

cannot reflect their feelings by writing. He uses his extraordinary artistic ability to reflect their feelings in the most philosophical literary form, poetry. In this context, the poet is supposed to bridge the gap between the reader and the poet in order to establish an organic relationship between them: "So that it will be the wish of the poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes" (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1389). So, his poet acts selflessly and ignores his artistic freedom in order to meet expectations of the common people. He does not speak to the cultivated reader of the high art in search of deeper meanings in the work of art. His addressee is the common people. Differently from the Neo-Classical poets, he excludes highly elaborated poetic style from his poetry because he wants to be understandable and natural in the best way possible. So, Wordsworth rejects the elevated language in poetry. He pushes ahead with defining the poet in details: "What then does the poet? He considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and re-acting upon each other" (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1390). His target is "to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure" (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1390). Wordsworth repeatedly insists on the principle of pleasure as one of the main targets of the good poet. The poet "considers man in his own nature and in his ordinary life as contemplating this with a certain quantity of immediate knowledge, with certain convictions, intuitions, and deductions which by habit become of the nature of intuitions" (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1390). So, Wordsworth's reference to intuition corroborates his belief in deep artistic reflections originating from emotion recollected in tranquillity, in Wordsworth's own words, and resurfacing by way of imagination.

Wordsworth makes a distinction between the poet and the man of science. In fact, it was a very famous classification in that period of time based on the idea that the poet differs from the man of thinking in many ways. Wordsworth seems to be in agreement with this classification totally. In this understanding, "the man of science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude" (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1391) whereas "the poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion" (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1391). So, the poet is more universal when compared to the man of science because of his way of searching the truth. Wordsworth adds one more distinctive feature of the poet. The poet's freedom in expressing himself makes him superior to the others. His rapidness in thinking and feeling deserves to be praised and in this way he has an advantage over the others: "The poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement, and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner" (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1392). Wordsworth frequently reminds the poet's ability to combine thought and emotion. From Wordsworth's standpoint, the poet combines two seemingly opposing entities in one: "The poet thinks and feels in the spirit of the passions of men" (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1392). Therefore, the passions of men are revealed to the reader in the form of poetical lines thanks to this poetical ability. It is true that the poet expresses himself in the form of poetry but his poetical articulations are not only feelings but also thoughts. Wordsworth (1993) adds that "the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time" (p. 1391) despite some demanding difficulties. He is capable of doing this "in spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs, in spite of things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed" (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1391). In this context, the poet is the man whose passion and knowledge help him to know the human society in all its aspects. Contrary to popular belief, passion does not dominate his understanding and he has a deeper understanding of human nature in this way.

The subject matter of poetry is another serious matter of debate in Wordsworth's analysis on the poetry. The poet must fix his attention on common life. The focus of the

poetry is the “incidents and situations from common life” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1383) and “low and rustic life” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1383). Besides this, he claims that “the manners of rural life” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1383) and “the beautiful and permanent forms of nature” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1383) are the most fundamental issues that must be studied by the poet. In Wordsworth’s approach, the poet directs his attention from city to nature. The Romantic poet does not focus on culture and life of the upper class. He directs his sight to the rural life: “Of all ideas commonly associated with Romanticism in the arts, the idea of nature is perhaps the most inclusive and the most evocative” (Schneider, 2008, p. 92). The forms of nature are permanent because of the never-ending restoration in nature. The poet must focus on these immortal forms rather than the cultural values and standards *fabricated* by human mind. He does not fit into society because he is devoted to nature. In this sense, nature is superior to culture according to Romantics and particularly to Wordsworth.

Wordsworth’s ideas on the language of poetry are in harmony with his ideas on the subject matter of poetry. The poet must use “the real language of men” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1381). This “language really used by men” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1383) brings the poet near to the ordinary people. The language of poetry is expected to reflect simplicity in nature. When compared to complexity in cultural life established by human reason, nature is thought to be a sample of simplicity in wisdom of the common man. In this respect, the language of the poet should have the simplicity of wisdom in order to attract attention of the common man: “Wordsworth’s comparable theory is his ‘real language of men,’ whose best source is ‘Low and rustic life.’ For in that condition, the ‘primary laws of our nature’ are most evident” (Tobe, 1995, p. 585). The use of “a plainer and more emphatic language” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1383) provides the poet with an opportunity to penetrate into conscious of the common man. Simplicity is fundamental to Wordsworth’s poetry but indeed he considers simplicity as the ultimate sophistication: “It is this mastery of both the transcendent and the immanent, the majestic and the most mundane simplicity, which justifies Wordsworth’s place among the greatest English poets” (*The Works*, pp. viii, 1994). Nevertheless, Wordsworth does not back down from the belief in essentiality of literariness in poetry. In this regard, the poet must use the simple language of everyday life but it is important that he must avoid the clichés because “ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1383). The poet is supposed to experiment the language of the man in the street with the purpose of renovating the *worn out* words. The use of language in fresh ways should be tested on conventional meanings of the words because the words lose their vividness in time. Simplicity is the primary target of the poet in presentation of the feelings and ideas. Negation of culture and civilization takes one of the primary positions in Wordsworth’s poetry since “he and other romantic poets were able to believe that an important part of valuable human experience was lost in the sophisticated urban civilization” (Golban, 2003, p. 64). The language of the ordinary people is simple because they are less dominated by the influence of social vanity: “From their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1383). Therefore, the good poet tends “to imitate, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men” (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1386). Closely observed, Wordsworth rejects the Neo-Classical idea that the poet must imitate the old good poets and their style to the highest degree possible. His poet does not imitate the good poets in the past. On the other side, Wordsworth compares the language of poetry and prose. This comparison makes the ideas on the language of poetry more visible. He thinks that poetry and prose are from the same substance. So, he rejects the opposition between them. Metaphorically said, they are two faces of the same coin. He uses a symbolic language to reveal his comparison clearly:

They both speak by and to the same organs; the bodies in which both of them are clothed may be said to be of the same substance, their affections are kindred and almost identical, not necessarily differing even in degree; poetry sheds no tears “such as Angels weep, “but natural and human tears; she can boast of no celestial ichor that distinguishes her vital juices from those of prose; the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both. (Wordsworth, 1993, p. 1388)

In this sense, Wordsworth innovatively does not accept the popular belief based on a sharp distinction between poetry and prose. He thinks that these two literary forms do not differ from each other ontologically. They originally do not stand in stark conflict with each other because, as Wordsworth has it, the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both. He depends on using analogies to support his argument; however, no analogy is ever truly correct although use of analogies makes the difficult ideas more visible for the reader. In this context, Wordsworth’s minor and major supports are deprived of strong philosophical foundations. He benefits from his artistic skills in order to convince the reader of invalidity of the conventional distinction between poetry and prose.

To conclude, Wordsworth praiseworthy contribution to British Romantic poetry mostly outweighs his contribution to literary criticism. Although he is an avant-gardist literary critic dealing with theoretical problems of literary criticism in his time, his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* has remained insufficiently known for the reading public. In fact, it is a prescriptive literary text which declares some certain rules about task of the poet, the origin of poetry, the subject matter of poetry, and the language of poetry. It defines the poetry, the poet, and task of the poet in a normative way. Wordsworth’s arguments can be acknowledged or rejected for several different reasons but his definitions and classifications are mostly original. In this way, Wordsworth constructs the Romantic standpoint in literary criticism step by step throughout the text. He presents his agreements and disagreements with Neo-Classical theory of literary criticism in light of his relevant arguments. In brief, Wordsworth’s manifesto consists of original theoretical judgments deserving to be scrutinized constantly by literary critics from different perspectives in order to understand transformation of literary criticism from past to today.

## References

- [1] Abrams, M.H. (1999). *A glossary of literary terms* (7th ed.). Heinle & Heinle.
- [2] Golban, P. (2003). *The Victorian bildungsroman*. Kütahya: Dumlupınar UP.
- [3] Pellicer, J. C. (2002). How revolutionary was lyrical ballads (1798-1800)?. *Nordic Journal of English Studies*.3, 221-239.
- [4] Richter, D.H. (2007). *William Wordsworth*. In D.H. Richter (Ed.). *The critical tradition: classic texts and contemporary trends*. (3rd ed.). Bedford/St. Martin's.
- [5] Schneider, H. J. (2008). *Nature*. In Marshall Brown (Ed.), *The Cambridge history of literary criticism* (Vol. 5, pp. 92-114). Cambridge University Press.
- [6] *The works of William Wordsworth with an introduction and bibliography* (1994). Hertfordshire: The Wordsworth Poetry Library.
- [7] Tobe, D. L. (1995). Wordsworth’s metaphysics of presence. *Studies in Romanticism*. 3, 583-613.
- [8] Wordsworth, W. (1993). *Preface to lyrical ballads, with pastoral and other poems*. In M.H. Abrams (Ed.), *The Norton anthology of English literature* (6th ed., pp. 1381-1394). Norton & Company.