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A SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF WORDSWORTH'S PREFACE TO LYRICAL BALLADS

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The second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was published in 1800. A special feature to this edition was the substitution of the "Advertisement" for the first edition by a lengthy preface. In this Preface, Wordsworth described his poetic theory in a well-articulated manner. He starts his preface by explaining that the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was published as an experiment to see that how this new kind of poetry which used the "real language of men" (Wordsworth 1) will be received by the readers. He suggested that he was not all that confident that the readers would receive them warmly. The experiment was more than successful than the authors' expectations.

Wordsworth was not alone in his attempt to start this new kind of poetry. He acknowledges that his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge supplied some of the poems in the collection, including "Rime of the Ancient Mariner". Although Wordsworth says that his friend and his own writing style and subject of poetry are completely similar but Coleridge in his interpretation of Preface is out there to refute Wordsworth and his endeavor to write a defense of his new kind of poetry. (Bialostosky). Wordsworth notes that he was not willing initially to write the preface as any kind of systematic defense of this new type of poetry because he does not want to reason or rather convince anyone into liking these poems. He believed that those who would like these poems will read them with interest and take pleasure out of them. He was also well aware that those who would not like these poems will dislike them more than commonly. Another reason why he was not willing to write a defense is that a defense of this new kind of poetry would have required much larger space than that appropriate to a preface.

Wordsworth implies that at different times, different styles were considered great. He claims that that the writers have a right to use certain ideas and techniques and in the same way, they also have a right to exclude other ideas and techniques. Each generation lives in an exceedingly different scenario and so, naturally prefers a special variety of poetry that somehow aligns with or responds to the time. He goes on to cite many great yet disparate poets of old times, from Catallus, Terrence, and Lucretius to Pope and Dryden. Wordsworth wants to use his preface to explain why he writes the poetry the way he does. He writes differently from the writers of his time not because he is lazy but because he senses that the changing times need a new style of poetry.

Then, Wordsworth says that "the principal object proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life" (Wordsworth 2) and describe or relate with them in an interesting and honest way. He also decides to use "the language really used by men" in his poetry with "a certain coloring of imagination". His purpose is to present these "ordinary things" in an unusual aspect to the mind. He explains

that he has chosen humble and rustic life to be portrayed in his poetry because in that situation, people are generally more self-aware and more honest.

The “essential passions of the heart” are easily expressed and the feelings that arise in that condition of life are simpler, more understandable, and last longer. He feels that rustic life has unsophisticated (in a good sense) and simple language. There is no “social vanity”. These people convey their emotions in simple and unelaborated expressions and thus, their language become unrestrained and more philosophical. Wordsworth has not used the rustic language as it is, rather he has “adopted” the language and made selections in it. He has purified the language from its real defects and omitted everything which may become any cause of dislike or disgust. He feels that this language is more permanent than the lofty language of late neo-classical writers who believe that the lofty poetry they write bring them and the poetry itself honor. Wordsworth criticizes these poets as-

“... as they separate themselves from sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression...” (3)

Wordsworth views this kind of ignorance and inconstancy as self-serving and utterly unrelatable for the general literate masses. He believes that poetry ought to be serious and profound. He finds it as a “defect” in the poetry of some of his contemporaries that their “material compositions” lack in profound thought and language. He believes that poems need to have a purpose and can not be merely intended for shallow entertainment. He feels proud of the fact that his poems actually have “a worthy purpose”. His poetry, like all good poetry, “is spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”. At the same time, emotions can not be separated from thought and it is necessary that the poet “thought long and deeply” prior to writing the poem. He believes that this kind of poetry will enlighten the readers and strengthen and purify their emotions.

Wordsworth calls upon the reader’s sensibility so that they can find appeal in the commonest of things. He intends to use nature to bring readers back to their senses and away from cheap sensationalism. He asserts the fact that “the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants” (Wordsworth 4). It appears to him that the best thing a writer can do is “to endeavour to produce or enlarge this capability,” especially during Wordsworth’s present times, as there are many modern forces and “great national events” making human minds dull. This modernity leads human to crave instant gratification which manifests in literary trends, thus people of his times neglect works of Shakespeare and Milton and crave “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluge of idle and extravagant stories in verse” (5). But Wordsworth believes that there is hope for revival because of “certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind” and the power of nature.

Having talked about the subjects and aim of this kind of poetry, he turns to the style of these poems. He says that the reader will find upon reading these poems that devices like personification are rejected in these poems. Wordsworth feels that it is “an ordinary device to elevate the style and raise it above prose”. His purpose was to adopt and use the common language of men, and such devices are surely not used in that very language, and “keep reader in company of flesh and blood”. He has taken great pain to avoid the use of all these devices which are names as poetic diction. He says that he has done this to bring the language nearer to the language really spoken by men. He hopes that there is no “falsehood of description” in his poems, and he has used language fit for his ideas.

Wordsworth asserts that there is no essential difference between the language of prose and poetry except for the use of metre which is just used to superadd pleasure. Wordsworth quotes Gray and says that he believes that there is and must be difference in the language of poetry and prose. He quotes a part of Gray’s sonnet – “In vain to me the smiling mornings shine” and says that after reading this part, the reader can well perceive that except for the use of rhyme there is no difference in the language of these lines and that of prose.

Then, he takes up the question of “What is a poet?” The one thing he says about poet is that:

“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...” (8)

Wordsworth gave the definition of poet which later became popular as the Romantic definition of poet. He says that a poet is essentially a man speaking to men. A poet writes not for his own pleasure, but he writes to communicate or convey his emotions and ideas to others. A poet has more lively organic sensibility. He reacts more strongly or powerfully to external impressions than a common man. He has greater power of imagination, better understanding of human nature and a more comprehensive soul. He has greater zest for life than an ordinary man and understands nature well. He is a man who has greater power of communication: he can communicate even those feelings which arise in him without external impression. But what is the effect of this greater sensibility and enthusiasm and imagination on the words that he creates? To mildly add a conjecture here, if an expression does not fit our own imagination, we may find it absurd in a way that we can not relate to it. I am to relate only to (and thus, like) those interpretations of natural glimpses, for example, which I myself feel could be true.

Wordsworth further says that there is a notion that poets use mechanical language. He feels that “to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes”, it is suggested to modify the language. Thus, the poet will apply the “principle of selection”, i.e., to remove vulgar, disgusting, or painful words as the primary function of poetry is to impart pleasure. There is no need to elevate the language by using any poetic diction. A poet should truthfully and faithfully communicate his ideas. But, later on, Wordsworth reduces this faithfulness which he talks about here by saying that the language should be purged of all that is inappropriate. It is really important to purge the language of all the expressions which may seem vulgar, but the faithfulness that he talks about here does not remain entire.

Wordsworth says that Aristotle considered poetry “most philosophic of all the writings”. He also feels that it is true because the object of poetry is truth “not individual and local, but general”. Poetry is different from history and philosophy as history is a presentation of particular facts and philosophy is multiplication of general ideas and deals with abstract truth. Poetry deals with both general and particular. Poetic truth is universal truth, i.e., it has a universal appeal and thus, it gives pleasure. Poetry is an image of men and nature and thus a faithful reproduction of reality. Poetic truth is a combination of particular, general, and abstract truth. The obstacle which stands in the way of a poet is poetic diction which needs to be avoided.

He further says that the function of poetry to give pleasure should not be regarded as a degradation of poet’s art. It is only through pleasure that man feels and lives. Sympathy with nature makes us realize empathy. Poetry makes us realize absolute truth. Knowledge is pleasure and where there is no pleasure, there is no knowledge.

Wordsworth states that poet deals with “man and nature as essentially adapted to each other” which means that he deals with man combined with his surroundings. He says that the man of science has gained much knowledge by studying some particular parts of nature and this knowledge gives him pleasure. But as a poet’s object of study is man and he talks about general nature, the pleasure of that knowledge also becomes an important part of our existence and thus he shares his pleasure of knowledge with all. Whereas the pleasure of man of science is personal and if it becomes general, it comes slow to us and it does not connect man with his surroundings. Wordsworth says:

“Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge- it is as immortal as heart of man.”

He says that poetry will endow the achievements of science with emotions and feelings.

Further, Wordsworth defends his use of metre but avoiding poetic diction. He says that the rules for metre are regular, uniform, and fixed but poetic diction depends on the choice of poet, and the reader “is utterly at the mercy of the Poet respecting what imagery or diction he may choose to connect with the passion”. He has used metre to add pleasure so that the language is liked by all men. He also feels that metre has a tempering effect (to maintain overbalance of pleasure) and a dispensing effect (to solace harsh or painful words).

Then, Wordsworth proceeds to explain the process of poetic creation. He starts by saying that:

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

Wordsworth feels that poetry written in the heat of moment may be too overwhelming for the reader. So, the poet must first recall his emotions in “tranquility” and “contemplate” those emotions in peace until they dissolve away and a new, kindred emotion comes in place. In this way, they are again in a moment of emotional excitement of same kind. These emotions are anew and purged of what was disgusting and temporary and whatever remains is universal. Then the poet can begin the process of composition. Thus, the creation becomes universalized. He wants to show that this kind poetry offer pleasure “of a purer, more lasting, and more exquisite nature”. He feels that if his purpose is fulfilled a genuine species of poetry would be produced.

Wordsworth declares that after what he has said and after reading his poetry in *Lyrical Ballads*, the reader will be able to understand his goal of writing this kind of poetry clearly and to determine that how far he has been able to achieve his goal and whether his goal was worth attaining.

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