

Introduction

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Fools have laughed at, wise men scarcely understand, them.

(William Hazlitt on *Lyrical Ballads*)¹

From the row of first editions in The Jerwood Centre at the Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere, the curator, lovingly takes down one of his favourite items. It is not much to look at, a slim volume still in its original card covers; cheap stained covers that should have been removed and thrown away when it was bound in leather to match the designs of a gentleman's library. The curator tells the paradoxical tale of an object so ordinary that it has become a rarity; the book whose pages remain untrimmed; the book that can never be read: a first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). But *Lyrical Ballads* has always been a volume of paradoxes, from its contradictory title, to the tensions between poems and prose, to the variable accounts by its two authors of its aims and origins, to the difficulty readers have with grasping how such slight poems can be accorded such high status. Perhaps it is *just this* sense of it – as something unable to be quite pinned down – that has made this unassuming volume such a major, lasting work of British Romanticism.

The tale of the volume's progress from inception to first (1798) and subsequent publication (1800, 1802, 1805) has been told many times but, for readers coming to the collection for the first time, a brief outline is sketched here.² Two young men, Coleridge and Wordsworth (aged twenty-five and twenty-eight, respectively) came up with the idea for the volume together while on a walking tour in 1797 during a period of intense symbiotic creative activity ('the *annus mirabilis* of English Romanticism' (*Cornell LB* 4)) when they were living as neighbours in Somerset. Accounts of origins vary to some degree, and are all retrospective and thus open to misremembering, but all agree that the 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' was the first poem planned and composed. Other poems were written over the spring of 1798 and the volume of nineteen poems by

Wordsworth and four by Coleridge was in preparation when William and Dorothy went on a walking tour of Wales in July. Returning to Bristol, Wordsworth finished 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', which was then added at the back of the edition. The volume was printed in five hundred copies by a friend, Joseph Cottle, in Bristol in September 1798 – Dorothy writes '[William's poems are] printed, but not published' on 13 September (*Letters EY* 227) – but, due to financial difficulties, Cottle sold the rights and the copies to a London firm, J & A. Arch, who finally published an octavo edition for 5 shillings on 4 October 1798. The second edition was enlarged considerably by the addition of a 'Preface' by Wordsworth and a second volume of thirty-seven poems also written by him in Goslar, Germany (October–February 1798–99), and then in Grasmere, where William and Dorothy settled from 20 December 1799. Poems in Volume I remained largely the same ('The Convict' was removed and replaced with Coleridge's poem 'Love' and 'Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening' split into two poems) but were re-arranged in terms of order. This edition was published in January 1801 for 10 shillings by Longman. The third edition (with some enlargement of the 'Preface') was published in June 1802 and the final edition in October 1805, after which the poems were separated and published by each poet in separate collections.

Does it really deserve all the acclaim? And how can it continue to be relevant to us today? In his perceptive essay on 'Mr. Wordsworth' in *The Spirit of the Age*, critic and writer William Hazlitt succinctly explains the way in which Wordsworth and *Lyrical Ballads* are both profoundly of their time, yet also universal. As he makes clear, the political fervour of the 1790s finds its focus in this volume:

The political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments. His Muse . . . is a levelling one. It proceeds on a principle of equality, and strives to reduce all things to the same standard. (139)

So, the 'experimental' nature of the poetic collection, declared in the 'Advertisement' to the 1798 volume, is an experiment not just of form or language but also of social values, validating the ordinary life, the everyday, in ways that we might take for granted but that find their roots in the democratic principles of the French Revolution. Hazlitt goes on to describe the poems as:

a test to prove that nature is always interesting from its inherent truth and beauty . . . Hence the unaccountable mixture of seeming simplicity and real

Introduction

3

abstruseness in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Fools have laughed at, wise men scarcely understand, them. He takes a subject or a story merely as pegs or loops to hang thought and feeling on; the incidents are trifling . . . the reflections are profound. (140)

Again, Hazlitt touches on something significant here – how easy it is to miss the point of these poems because ‘the incidents are trifling’. This has always been a problem for readers coming new to them. Where the subject and the style are slight, it is easy to undervalue the true message of the poem and it leaves those poems open to parody because if the emotion that underlies the action is forced or insincere, then poetry falls into bathos.

It is worth pausing to look more closely at an example of what Hazlitt is describing. ‘The Childless Father’ is a poem to which few readers today pay much attention. In the 1802 ‘Preface’, Wordsworth states:

it is proper that 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. My meaning will be rendered perfectly intelligible by referring my Reader to the Poems entitled POOR SUSAN and the CHILDLESS FATHER, particularly to the last Stanza of the latter Poem. (*LB* 99)

This is a central concept for *Lyrical Ballads*, ‘that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling’. In other words, the primary effect is internal, unseen, but it is then played out in a certain scenario or directed towards a particular object which is made important only by the human story in which it participates. The subject matter is *deliberately* understated. Using extremely simplistic, largely monosyllabic language, and emphasising the song-like rhythms of the ballad, ‘The Childless Father’ is centred on a familiar micro-moment: locking the door as you leave the house. The old man, Timothy, sets off to take part in the excitement of the hunt that all the village are involved in:

Old Timothy took up his staff, and he shut
 With a leisurely motion the door of his hut.
 (Lines 13–14)

The father goes out, as he has done many times before, but suddenly he realises that this time he must take the house key *with* him. He has never before had to do this. Previously, he has left the house with his daughter in it, knowing she will be there when he comes home, but now things are

irrevocably changed, just as his identity has changed (he is now defined only by a lack). The last stanza reads:

Perhaps to himself at that moment he said
 'The key I must take, for my Ellen is dead.'
 But of this in my ears not a word did he speak,
 And he went to the chase with a tear on his cheek.
 (Lines 16–20)

The poem focuses on a small event – even half negates it in the utterance (perhaps he didn't think any of this) – but one that represents for this individual the absolute and terrible change that has occurred in his life. Wordsworth, as he often does, loads an ordinary everyday object (the house key) and an act that we all do every day without thinking (locking up) with a weight of human emotion. From the outside, looking on, there is literally nothing to see. The core event is entirely undramatic and relies on a highly receptive reader and poet-narrator, reading between the unemotive lines of the poem to sense the depths of loss beneath. The old man may not have the sophistication to express what he feels, he may need someone else to speak on his behalf, but nonetheless we can recognise that this is how life is – still, today. It's the little things that break our hearts.

Thus far I have focused on Wordsworth but, of course, the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was published anonymously and it had *two* authors: William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Another reason for lasting interest in this volume then, is its identity as a joint venture by two major figures of the period working together in a powerfully symbiotic relationship that brought out the best in both men early on (each often stimulated by and writing *for* the other), but that also already contained the seeds of its later destruction.³ From the start Coleridge recognised Wordsworth's powers as a poet ('The Giant Wordsworth – God love him' [*CL STC* I. 391]) but that very admiration destabilised his own ambition, as he made clear in a letter to Southey: 'Wordsworth is a very great man – the only man, to whom *at all times* & in *all modes of excellence* I feel myself inferior' (*CL STC* I. 334). A perceived inequity in the relationship present from the outset could only worsen over time and lead to resentments. However, rather than focus on the differences between Wordsworth and Coleridge here, I want to look at what their accounts of the origins of the collaborative project have *in common*. Famously, the first poem to be

Introduction

5

composed was 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' and close attention to Wordsworth's account of the organic way in which the entire volume developed *out of* this first poem (recalled much later in *The Fenwick Notes*) is illuminating. First, Wordsworth makes it clear that walking and writing were closely intertwined, indeed the motivation for writing together came from the need to cover the costs of a walking tour:

In the Spring of the year 1798, he [STC], my sister, & myself started from Alfoxden, pretty late in the afternoon, with a view to visit Linton & the Valley of Stones near it, and as our united funds were very small we agreed to defray the expence of the tour by writing a Poem to be sent to the *New Monthly Magazine*.⁴

Wordsworth then famously describes the shared conceptual origins of 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' in which Coleridge provides the core, Wordsworth the key elements of agency and the two poets begin by attempting to write the work together. However, the fantasy of literal co-composition is rapidly revealed as such, as Wordsworth makes clear:

As we endeavoured to proceed conjointly (I speak of the same evening) our respective manners proved so widely different that it would have been quite presumptuous in me to do anything but separate from an undertaking upon which I could only have been a clog. (3)

As interesting, however, as this well-known account of the writing of the first poem, is the development of the larger project out of it:

The Ancient Mariner grew & grew till it became too important for our first object . . . and we began to talk of a volume, which was to consist as Mr Coleridge has told the world, of Poems chiefly on supernatural subjects taken from common life but looked at, as much as might be, through an imaginative medium. Accordingly I wrote The Idiot Boy, Her Eyes are wild &c., We are Seven, The Thorn & some others. (3)

What this comment makes clear is the ad hoc nature of the volume as a whole (which is again both problematic and part of its charm) and the way in which 'The Rime of The Ancyent Marinere' determines the subject, viewpoint and purpose of many of the other ballad poems. The core of the original 1798 volume is succinctly given here: 'Poems chiefly on supernatural subjects taken from common life but looked at . . . through an imaginative medium'. Such a statement, as Wordsworth rather sharply notes, concurs with Coleridge's (also retrospective) account in *Biographia Literaria*. Coleridge takes the same core, shared idea but articulates two

different ways of dealing with it (the first relating to Coleridge's contributions, the second to Wordsworth's):

The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural . . . to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. . . . For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life . . . to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom. (*BL* II. 5–7)

The two poets thus address the same issue from two opposing directions, both reliant on the differing powers of imaginative creativity in each of them. Coleridge's challenge is to present supernatural events so convincingly that they can be experienced as if real; conversely, Wordsworth's is to show that everyday interactions and events between ordinary people (particularly in states of emotional and psychological extremes), can be as fascinating and elicit as strong an emotion as more exciting or titillating forms of writing. These two stances are potentially contradictory – and difficulties emerge as a result between the collaborators that indirectly bear upon their personal relationship. The relocation of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' from the opening poem in 1798 to the penultimate poem of the volume in 1800 is the most obvious and problematic outcome – understandably offensive to Coleridge when we see how the entire project evolved out of this poem (which was also presumably the reason it was initially positioned first).

Wordsworth's note to 'The Thorn' is also worth consideration here as an example of the original principles in action:

Arose out of my observing, on the ridge of Quantock Hill, on a stormy day a thorn which I had often past in calm and bright weather without noticing it. I said to myself, Cannot I by some invention do as much to make this thorn permanently an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes at this moment. (*LB* 14)

The poem finds its origins in an entirely ordinary natural object that would normally be overlooked. That object is imbued with a certain distinctiveness – a symbolic power – as a result of extreme weather conditions, and this leads the poet to develop a human narrative that corresponds to the natural. Without the power of the poet's imagination, of course, nothing can come of this. But with it, with Wordsworth's binding together of the

Introduction

7

insensate and the sentient, a new way of understanding the world and the dynamic between human and environment can be uncovered.

Previous collections of critical essays on *Lyrical Ballads* have been strongly centred upon how inclusive a critical volume should attempt to be and on which *Lyrical Ballads* is to be the focus: 1798 as the first edition but only including one volume; 1800 in two volumes with the 'Preface'; 1802 as the fullest version with significant additions to the 'Preface'.⁵ It is certainly important to be aware that the 1798 volume is a different beast from the later editions, indeed the only volume that can truly be said to be *shared*. The earliest edition contained around 3,000 lines (roughly one-third of which were Coleridge's), was published anonymously and was counter-gothic in focus – defining itself, in part at least, in relation to that mode of popular writing.⁶ In 1800 the emphasis and weight of the contributions shifted considerably, as did the generic focus – felt in Coleridge's description of it as 'a second Volume of Lyrical Ballads, & Pastorals' (*CL STC* I. 585). Wordsworth added that second volume and a 'Preface' and decided *not* to include a second, long poem of Coleridge's ('Christabel') which would have proportionately increased the latter's contribution to the second edition.⁷ When the volume was published in *Wordsworth's* name the move away from a joint collection was formally and publicly signalled.

Rather than being distracted by the need to hierarchize, this collection of essays has chosen to consider the three major editions of *Lyrical Ballads* quite fluidly as three parts within one whole, or as different versions. The contents of this collection of critical essays, then, are not determined by privileging one version of the text over another but determined strongly by the needs of the Companion reader. If you knew nothing about this collection and came to it cold what would you want to learn? In the light of this, the volume is organised into five main parts centred upon the most innovative and 'experimental' ideas at the heart of the poetic collection and on what Wordsworth calls 'the perception of similitude in dissimilitude' (*LB* 111) which he describes as 'the great spring of the activity of our minds' (111); a series of complex dialectics which run through the collection as a whole.

So, Part I, 'Part and Whole', draws attention to the constructed nature of the volume over time and the tensions that exist between different elements; authorial contributions; prose and poetry; different poetic forms. The opening chapter picks up where the introduction leaves off to lead the reader through essential questions concerning the relationship between

different editions of *Lyrical Ballads* and its reception, while those of Atkin and Fulford look at the writing of the volume as a collaborative act, not only with Coleridge, but within the larger Wordsworth circle of men and women. Atkin focuses on the domestic process of poetic production and the role of Dorothy Wordsworth as creative partner, as well as the support of John Wordsworth in a 'co-mingling' that brings the work into being. Fulford considers the collection specifically from a Coleridgean point of view as a typical project of co-writing for him (whereas for Wordsworth this was highly unusual) but also notes that when the collection was 'claimed' by Wordsworth as author in 1800 this damaged Coleridge considerably. The final chapter in Part I is centred on the titular contradiction. Newbon offers a full analysis of the distinction between lyric and ballad voice in the context of their separate traditions and of the ballad revival in the late eighteenth century.

In contrast to the inward-looking approach of Part I, the final section, Part V, of the book looks forward and outward, considering the wider impact and influence of the collection from a twenty-first-century global perspective. What happens when we release *Lyrical Ballads* from its canonical status in Britain? How did it fare in other cultures and traditions, for readers who had no knowledge or understanding of its subjects? McKusick provides an illuminating overview of the popular eco-critical approach to Romanticism that emerged in the late twentieth century and applies such a reading to the 'Rime' as 'a parable of ecological transgression', while his interpretation of 'Expostulation and Reply' as a 'radical credo of ecological awareness' opens into a larger exploration of human experiences of the wild across the collection. The next chapter, by Pace, takes us across the Atlantic, grounding the American perspective in the publication of the 1802 American edition of *Lyrical Ballads* by James Humphreys and the adaptation of the volume's original political resonances to a post-Revolutionary United States. The final chapter in Part V, and of the whole volume, takes us the furthest afield as Hessel considers the shaping of the canon in the colonies and the status of *Lyrical Ballads* in relation to indigenous print culture. As Hessel makes clear: 'indigenous translations of *Lyrical Ballads* did not merely transmit or imitate; they *indigenised*'. *Lyrical Ballads* becomes something else, something new, for a different culture.

Between these two framing parts, three internal parts delineate core concerns that lie at the centre of the collection ('Subjects and Situations from Common Life'; 'Feeling and Thought'; and 'Language and the Human Mind'). In the 1800 'Preface' Wordsworth declares:

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or

Introduction

9

describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men. (*LB* 96–97)

In the account of his aims given here, Wordsworth positions the poet as mediator, a scribe acting on behalf of others – relating or describing their stories for them in language as close as possible to actual utterance (exactly as the poet-narrator does for ‘Timothy’ in ‘The Childless Father’). The poet is not raised above other men but speaks on their behalf, employing his skills for the good of others. As we have seen, such a stance aligns Wordsworth with the radical principles of the French Revolution – most obviously that of ‘Egalité’. Not only is the middle-class writer associating himself with the ordinary man, he is willing to allow that figure and the language of that figure to determine the subject and style of his verse.

The three chapters in ‘Subjects and Situations from Common Life’ explore the different ways in which *Lyrical Ballads* is centred upon reciprocity between individuals or between men and women and their environment. In the first chapter Ferguson compares the model of conversation within *Lyrical Ballads* with earlier eighteenth-century forms of ‘conversational poetry’ and explores the ways in which various poems explore multiple voices and differing dynamics between speakers. In the next, Fry considers Wordsworthian interest in the power of things for humans, when they engage with them knowingly as objects, but also in ways that try to get at the ‘thingness’ of things – the essential attributes of things beyond and above the mind’s attempts to know them. Poems such as ‘Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’ or the ‘Lucy Poems’ perfectly embody this ‘sense sublime of / Something far more deeply interfused’ (Lines 96–97) in the most transcendent moments when the boundary between outer and inner worlds, between material and ideal, collapse into a unity of being. In the third chapter in Part II, Shaw focuses on encounters with those marginalised by society and the way in which the collection seeks to recentre them and compel readers to engage with the overlooked. Running across all three volumes of *Lyrical Ballads*, the chapter uncovers the socio-economic causes that themselves lie half-hidden within the text through an exploration of ‘biopower’ – the use of technologies and disciplinary structures to increase the productive force of the human body.

The title of Part III, ‘Feeling and Thought’, takes us to one of the most famous statements of the ‘Preface’:

For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. (98)

Poetry is redefined as primarily expressive – proceeding directly from the self and as an outpouring ('overflow') of emotion. However, the statement not only immediately qualifies itself ('but though this be true'), it complicates its own initial account of poetry as the external expression of the inner self, upwelling from an act of heightened mental activity. Not everyone is capable of this kind of utterance and there is a need for a prior context of preparation, a grounding of the imagination. As Andrew Bennett makes clear, feeling, in the form of sympathy (or the lack of it), is a 'central organising impulse of almost every poem in the collection' as well as a core element in Wordsworth's definition of the role of the poet. Bennett works out of the pre-existing eighteenth-century context not only to explore the origins of such ideas, but also to show the ways in which *Lyrical Ballads* moves beyond the straightforward to complicate feeling with thought. Silent sympathy, in particular, becomes a disruptive force that challenges and subverts in situations where the feeling that should be present is absent. Alongside and following on from this, Wolfson's chapter considers the importance of domestic ties and family feeling, not just locally, but politically and nationally, with *Lyrical Ballads* drawn into an idealised depiction of hearth and home as 'the patriotic heart of England'. However, in a way comparable to Bennett, she goes on to reveal how 'Homebody-Wordsworth' actually takes this concept and pushes it to its limits, or inverts it, in repeated portraits of homelessness and dispossession.

The final core concept drawn upon here – 'Language and the Human Mind' – concerns the relationship between human universals and the connection between mind and world, the 'deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it' (100) but also the choice of certain forms of language to express higher ideas as directly as possible. This part therefore moves into a more abstract territory, albeit one that returns us to the human collaboration that underpins the volume. What *exactly* was the difference between Wordsworth and Coleridge in terms of their understanding of poetic language, metre and principle? O'Donnell leads us masterfully through this complex territory that many readers struggle to understand. He seeks to show that Coleridge's influential critique of Wordsworth in terms of metre should be set against the democratic principles that underlie linguistic communication in the poems, allowing for a complex dynamic between speakers (in ways that look back to Ferguson's chapter). Following on from him, Regier teases out another tricky concept implicit in the differences between co-creators: the relationship between poetry and philosophy. What kind

Introduction

11

of *unsystematic* philosophy is this? Regier argues that the collection ultimately puts forward a relationship of awkwardness, a 'deeper dimension that never quite fits' so that poetry itself becomes a kind of philosophy, one that gives awkwardness meaning; that is self-consciously 'strange'.

What has always struck me about *Lyrical Ballads* is its capacity to touch upon almost all of the concerns of the age, as the wide-ranging chapters of this collection so clearly demonstrate. It doesn't set out to do this, and it doesn't do things in a particularly orderly way. Parts are thrown together and contradict each other – 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' is written last and so it surprises at the end of the volume instead of standing nobly at the start; 'The Rime of The Ancyent Marinere' is moved from opening poem to penultimate; the second volume has significantly different aims and tone from the first; the principles of the 'Preface' neither map directly onto the poems nor stand for the ideas of both its authors. But in the end, this collection both stands for, and itself embodies, the ordinary made extraordinary, the valuing of what otherwise might be overlooked. This is where we began. And this is what *Lyrical Ballads* is all about.

Endnotes

- 1 William Hazlitt, 'Mr Wordsworth', *The Spirit of the Age or Contemporary Portraits*, ed. E. D. Mackerness (Plymouth: The Guernsey Press, 1969), 139.
- 2 For a full and thorough account see 'Introduction', *Cornell LB* 3–33.
- 3 After a period of strained relations, Wordsworth and Coleridge finally fell out irrevocably in 1810 as a result of miscommunication between the two men by means of a third party (Basil Montagu). See Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 287–293.
- 4 *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. Jared Curtis (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 2.
- 5 See discussion in 'A Guide to Further Reading' at the back of this book.
- 6 Michael Mason, 'Introduction,' *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Michael Mason (London and New York: Longman, 1992), 4.
- 7 We know exactly when the decision was made thanks to Dorothy Wordsworth's Journal which records the Wordsworths' pleasure in 'Christabel' on 4 and 5 October 1800, followed by the decision: 'Determined not to print Christabel with the LB' (*DWJ* 24). See also *Cornell LB* 29–30.