

## Wordsworth's Ambiguity towards the Public : A Study of the "Preface to Poems" and the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface."

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# Wordsworth's Ambiguity towards the Public : A Study of the "Preface to *Poems*" and the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface."

Kei Nijibayashi

## Introduction

"Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) is perhaps not only the most important of Wordsworth's prose works but among all of the prose works of the Romantic period. Critics agree that it is one of the most significant manifestations of Romantic literature. But "Wordsworth's second critical voice has been far less heeded by his readers."<sup>1</sup> Our interest in his later critical writings is not as strong as for the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (hereafter referred to as "Preface to LB"). The "Preface to LB" does not show pure Wordsworthian aesthetic theory but it is a work of collaboration with Coleridge, who said that the Preface was "half a child of my own Brain."<sup>2</sup> When we discuss Wordsworth's poetics, we should look at his later critical works more attentively to trace their development since the "Preface to LB." In this paper, we focus on how Wordsworth tried to establish his own poetic theory in the "Preface to Poems" (1815) and the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" (1815), and consider how successfully he copes with the problem of public reception. (We hereafter call them "Preface 1815" and "Essay.")

## 1 : Experiment and Confidence

We should always remember that *Lyrical Ballads* was an experiment. The

combination of “lyric” and “ballad” in the title suggests a subversion of the eighteenth-century view of literature. Lyrics were highly regarded as literary and artistic; on the other hand, ballads were ignored or rather disdained as non-literary and vulgar like “broad sheets.” (However, Thomas Percy found their beauty in the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, which influenced Wordsworth.) Therefore, the title, “Lyrical Ballads,” was an oxymoron suggesting new literary values. Wordsworth challenged the accepted codes of literature and expected public approbation: “...if the answer be favorable to the author’s wishes, that they should consent to be pleased in spite of that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision.” <sup>3</sup>But *Lyrical Ballads* was still a touchstone.

*Lyrical Ballads* indeed gained considerable popularity <sup>4</sup> and Wordsworth found confidence as a poet. This appeared partly in his revision of the “Preface to LB” in 1802. *Poems 1815* was published as a variant and enlarged edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. He wrote to Robert Gillies: “I cannot but flatter myself that this publication will interest you.” <sup>5</sup> Indeed Wordsworth’s confidence in his own poetry is one main cause of the great eloquence of the “Preface 1815” and the “Essay.”

With public acceptance of a new sensibility in *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth proceeds to a new theoretical stage in the “Preface 1815.” Unlike *Lyrical Ballads*, *Poems 1815* is a purely Wordsworthian body of works and totally different from the former collection.

The observations prefixed to that portion of these Volumes, which was published many years ago, under the title of ‘Lyrical Ballads,’ have so little of a special application to the greater part, perhaps, of this collection, as subsequently enlarged and diversified, that they could not with any propriety stand as an Introduction to it. (626)

We can see that Wordsworth aims at showing how the collection is different from *Lyrical Ballads* in the two prefaces. It is not only “enlarged” but also “diversified” in a particular way.

Estrangement between Wordsworth and Coleridge started as early as 1802. Their poetic principles grew apart. Coleridge says in his letter to Robert Southey on 29 July 1802: “...I rather suspect that somewhere or other there is a radical difference in our opinions respecting poetry....”<sup>6</sup> Wordsworth gradually reveals this by his omission of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* from *Lyrical Ballads* on its republication in 1800. In the “Preface 1815,” he declares his departure from Coleridge to fortify his own poetic theory. This again implies a confidence and independence in Wordsworth as a poet.

It remains that I should express my regret at the necessity of separating my compositions from some beautiful Poems of Mr. Coleridge, with which they have been long associated in publication. The feelings, with which that joint publication was made, have been gratified; its end is answered, and the time is come when considerations of general propriety dictate the separation. (639)

*Poems 1815* is not simply a republication or recollection of *Lyrical Ballads*. The collaboration and the experiment have ended. The poet seems to be ardently appealing to the public more as an individual and talented poet than as the author of *Lyrical Ballads*.

In the “Preface 1815,” Wordsworth himself discloses the scheme of his poetical writings. He tries to reorganize his poetry including *Lyrical Ballads* into an original poetic system in his *Poems 1815*. It is a system based on Wordsworthian aestheticism and philosophy, “On Man, On Nature, and On human Life.” (197) His life work, *The Recluse*, should be the core of the system and of his poetical art. The works in *Poems 1815*

are “diversified,” interacting with each other within Wordsworth’s overall poetic structure.

My guiding wish was, that the small pieces of which these volumes consist, thus discriminated, might be regarded under a two-fold view; as composing an entire work within themselves, and as adjuncts to the philosophical poem, ‘The Recluse.’ (628)

Wordsworth had an obsession with writing a new kind of epic, “*The Recluse, or views of Nature, Man and Society*,”<sup>7</sup> of which he in fact composed some parts as *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*. This systematic project of the epic and lyrics suggests that he believed that his own original poetry, the poetry of imagination, was to be directed towards the public.

He classifies poetry into several genres in the “Preface 1815” and says, “None of the other Classes, except those of Fancy and Imagination, require any particular notice.” (629) *Lyrical Ballads* made Wordsworth confident, and a sense of self-righteousness about his own poetry seems to have led him to a historical identification of himself with great poets.

When Wordsworth explains the poetry of “Fancy and Imagination,” he mentions the Holy Bible, Spenser and Milton as “The grand store-house of enthusiastic and meditative Imagination” (634) and Shakespeare as “an inexhaustible source” of “the human and dramatic Imagination.” (635) He was inspired by these writers in his own compositions. Here we can sense that he aligns his own works with the great tradition of poetry. He seems to emphasize his capability and sense of independence from *Lyrical Ballads*, or from Coleridge by showing the sources of his inspiration.

More apparently in the “Essay,” Wordsworth discusses and defines genius:

Of genius the only proof is, the act of doing well what is worthy to be done, and what was never done before: Of genius, in the fine arts, the only infallible sign is the widening the sphere of human sensibility, for the delight, honor, and benefit of human nature. Genius is the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe.... What is all this but an advantage, or a conquest, made by the soul of the Poet? (659)

This is not just an explanation of great poets. Wordsworth implicitly describes himself in this quotation. He self-assertively regards himself as a genius. He says later that *Poems 1815* “will operate in their degree, to extend the domain of sensibility for the delight, the honor, and the benefit of human nature....” (662) This is his self-belief as a poet which Hazlitt and De Quincey took as “pride.” Hazlitt describes Wordsworth’s attack on eighteenth-century literature: “The author tramples on the pride of art with greater pride.”<sup>8</sup> De Quincey explains one of the causes of his estrangement from Wordsworth as his pride: “...Never describe Wordsworth as equal in pride to Lucifer: no; but, if you have occasion to write a life of Lucifer, set down that by possibility, in respect to pride, he might be some type of Wordsworth.”<sup>9</sup> Wordsworth’s tone almost sounds as if he had been already justified by public response and history. This is certainly one of Wordsworth’s attitudes towards the public.

The whole structure of *Poems 1815* can be seen from this point of view. The book in two volumes has the “Preface 1815” at the beginning and the “Essay” is inserted at the end of the first volume. And, significantly, the corrected and enlarged part of the “Preface to LB” in 1802 is reprinted at the end of the second volume.

The “Preface 1815” is about how poetry is produced and what kind of poetry Wordsworth appreciates. In other words, we may summarize that it is about how he writes poetry. The “Essay” is basically an attack on the

contemporary literary scene, simultaneously protecting his own poetical practice. The “Essay” also argues how poetry should be read and estimated, and the poet esteems “studying” poetry as the ideal attitude for the reader. *Poems 1815* as a whole reveals Wordsworth’s method and idea of poetic composition, shows it by practice in the first volume, makes the reader conscious of the proper way of reading at the end of the first volume, leads him to appreciate the poems in the second volume, and makes him reaffirm Wordsworthian poetics at the very end. The book is instructive and persuasive; the reader is expected to be involved in the Wordsworthian poetic system. The author’s confidence powerfully constructs the whole body of this collection.

As we have seen so far, *Poms 1815* is very important in Wordsworth’s career and the two writings seem to be essential to his poetics. His sense of self-righteousness about his own poetry is emphasized far more than in the “Preface to LB.”

## 2 : Anxiety about Reception

We have observed how consistent and ardent Wordsworth’s challenge to the public is in the “Preface 1815” and the “Essay.” It is derived from his conviction in his poetic theory and practice. But is this the only reason for him to have added such extensive prose accounts of his beliefs to *Poems 1815* ? Why does he need a “supplementary” essay to the “Preface 1815” ? There seems to be emerging another reason for this when we look at the “Essay” and its biographical background.

The “Essay” begins with Wordsworth’s angry response to his opponents who attacked him basically for his poetic principles. His retort is challenging, but this fact indicates that he had difficulties with informing the public correctly about his poetics. Interestingly he cautions the reader who first looks at this collection not to be persuaded by his enemies. He

discriminates between good and bad readers:

By this time, I trust that the judicious Reader, who has now first become acquainted with these poems, is persuaded that a very senseless outcry has been raised against them and their Author. ...But the ignorance of those who have chosen to stand forth as my enemies, as far as I am acquainted with their enmity, has unfortunately been still more gross than their disingenuousness, and their incompetence more flagrant than their malice. (640)

Certainly this “outcry” must be another motivation for the “Essay.” It is not only general criticism against Wordsworth’s denial of poetic diction, but also a particular attack on his major achievement in 1814: *The Excursion*. *The Excursion* was criticized and attacked by his enemies like Francis Jeffrey, and even by his admirers like Coleridge and Hazlitt.<sup>10</sup> (Wordsworth reacted to it vehemently in his letter to Catherine Clarkson with violent rage against Francis Jeffery: “As to the Ed. Review I hold the Author of it in entire contempt. And therefore shall not pollute my fingers with the touch of it.”<sup>11</sup>) His first attempt at *The Recluse* must have looked baffling to him. Wordsworth could not help being serious in this situation. He anxiously asks Coleridge about the poem: “Pray point out to me the most striking instances where I have failed....”<sup>12</sup> Thinking of this background for the “Essay,” we can understand why Wordsworth needed to add it to the “Preface 1815” and why he had to defend his “poetic system” by responding vigorously to the contemporary code of its reception. The “Essay,” in this sense indeed, treats the relationship between the public reception and a poet’s personal creed.

Wordsworth believes in public approbation to some extent: “And how does it [good poetry] survive but through the People? what preserves it but their intellect and their wisdom.” (661) Poetry must be estimated by

readers, and, if a poem is genuinely great, it must be received and evaluated eventually. If not so, Wordsworth thinks, the fault is with the reader not with the poet. Unfortunately, he cannot but disbelieve certain kinds of readers. He condemns the public "ignorance" about literature which, he thinks, is aggravated by the public code of reading: "...but merely think of the pure absolute honest ignorance, in which all worldlings of every rank and situation must be enveloped, with respect to the thoughts, feelings and images, on which the life of my poems depends." <sup>13</sup> In the "Preface 1815," he suggests he can endure any opponent opinion of his poetry as long as the hostility is properly based on correct information and logic. What he cannot bear is that people tend to be easily influenced by a particular opinion only because it is popular. He dreaded the possibility that people mistake popularity for poetic quality. Wordsworth's attitude towards the public is ambiguous.

Wordsworth's attack on such public ignorance, however, seems natural. In the early nineteenth century almost all magazines were politically or religiously biased. Literature was considered to involve art, politics and religion at the same time. His caution for religious readers, who tend to exclude works against their creed, seems to be proper in this sense. (See 643) Wordsworth chooses the reader, who studies poetry, as ideal because poetry should be objectively observed and evaluated. It is disagreeable for him that bias should prevent adequate estimation of poetry:

If the number of judges who can be confidently relied upon be in reality so small, it ought to follow that partial notice only, or neglect, perhaps long continued, or attention wholly inadequate to their merits—must have been the fate of most works in the higher departments of poetry; and that, on the other hand, numerous productions have blazed into popularity, and have passed away, leaving scarcely a trace behind them.... (645)

Wordsworth's concern is not only about his own career as a poet but also about the general progression of English poetry. He emphasizes his own poetic theory because his poetry, he believes, is great enough to be counted among the great classics. If he has "genius" and his poetry is aesthetically valuable, the question is how he should cope with his readers.

The unexpected attack on *The Excursion* seems to lead Wordsworth to reconsider his view of readers.<sup>14</sup> First, in the "Essay" he denies popularity as a poetic achievement: "Away, then with the senseless iteration of the word, popular, applied to new works in Poetry, as if there were no test of excellence in this first of the fine arts but that all Men should run after its productions, as if urged by an appetite, or constrained by a spell!" (660) He looks back over the history of English literature to see how the public has ignored great works and has celebrated second-rate poems. Wordsworth's discontent with the reader's blindness over popularity is common with other Romantic poets, as we see in the cases of Shelley and Keats. Wordsworth felt that his poetry was falsely treated by the public.

As we have discussed, Wordsworth's identification with the great poets of the past implies a confidence in his own poetry. But, at the same time, it is for self-protection. In the "Essay" he tries to demonstrate how he was wrongly treated by the public exemplifying various poets' cases. They are neglected by the contemporary audience but re-estimated by posterity. Wordsworth's dramatic identification with Milton insinuates that he is another Milton who has genius but is struggling with the public ignorance to attain real "fame" in the future. He defends and justifies his poetics by examining retrospectively historical evidence.

We are authorized, then, to affirm that the reception of the *Paradise Lost*, and the slow progress of its fame, are proofs as striking as can

be desired that *the positions which I am attempting to establish are not erroneous*. [Italics mine] (649)

Wordsworth's attitude here seems to be very assertive and challenging. His attack on eighteenth-century literature seems to be against the control of public opinion. For him there is no reason that their works without originality should be regarded as great. Many contemporary works, too, are undeservedly applauded. Wordsworth, however, is not wholly pessimistic about this situation. He paradoxically believes in the public transmission of great art in his own way.

Wordsworth believes that great poets (including himself) always create their own "tastes" reanimating poetry. They must be original and individual even if they are influenced by past writers. The works of great poets, like Shakespeare and Milton, have attained this and therefore remain for a long time. Wordsworth claims that, even if people ignore great poetry, it will survive other second-rate works by this individuality.

...there never has been a period, and perhaps never will be, in which vicious poetry, of some kind or other, has not excited more zealous admiration, and been far more generally read, than good; but this advantage attends the good, that the *individual*, as well as the species, survives from age to age.... (661)

In this way, Wordsworth responds to the public reaction to his poetry exhibiting both his concern about critical attacks and confidence in his aesthetics. The "Essay" mainly treats the problem of the reader. His works, which are original and great, should be accepted by the contemporary public. It is the readers' fault that they are neglected, and the poet cannot but expect popularity in the future with a strong conviction in his poetic theory. Here comes the most important question for him in the

“Essay”: it is selecting ideal readers.

Wordsworth says in the “Preface 1815” that he likes best the reader who has “a natural sensibility that has been tutored into correctness without losing any thing of its quickness” and “active faculties capable of answering the demands which an Author of original imagination shall make upon them.”(644) He defines the ideal reader utterly from the writer’s point of view. It almost sounds as if this reader were Wordsworth himself. As he asks his muse, “fit audience find, though few,” <sup>15</sup> he proceeds to a discrimination between readers in the “Essay.”

Towards the Public, the Writer hopes that he feels as much deference as it is intitled to: but to the People, philosophically characterized, and to the embodied spirit of their knowledge, so far as it exists and moves, at the present, faithfully supported by its two wings, the past and the future, his devout respect, his reverence, is due. (662)

Wordsworth is subtle enough here not to allow us an easy interpretation. But we sense in his tone that he is sceptical of public approbation; he “hopes” feeling “as much deference as it is intitled to.” Contrarily he ardently appeals to his ideal reader with “devout respect,” “reverence” and “due.” Using Hazlitt’s words, the poet’s tone is of “a proud humility.”<sup>16</sup> Wordsworth’s poetic principle has a “levelling” effect in its practice, but in its theory it has potentiality to establish another kind of hierarchy by an exclusive treatment of select readers. Wordsworth discarded the idea of general readers and his ideal readers are literary educated intellectuals. <sup>17</sup> It is typical of Romantic poets that they declare the limitation of readers in their prose writings. But Wordsworth’s case here is much more radical for his distinction between the general and the good reader. It indicates not only that the poet entrusts only small numbers of people with the transmission of his poetry, but also that he

demands readers to be ideal for him.<sup>18</sup> This limitation and control of readers seems to show exceeding self-belief: it might be the result of his excessive concern about public reception. Hazlitt's analysis is always acute:

Mr Wordsworth has thought too much of contemporary critics and criticism; and less than he ought of the award of posterity, and of the opinion, we do not say of private friends, but of those who were made so by their admiration of his genius. He did not court popularity by a conformity to established models, and he ought not to have been surprised that his originality was not understood as a matter of course.<sup>19</sup>

There were many critical attacks on the classification of readers both from his enemies and from his friends. Especially Blake's comment on this part of the "Essay" is understandable; in a sense it recognizes the paradox within Wordsworth's poetic practice of levelling "high literature": "I do not know who wrote these Prefaces: they are very mischievous & direct contrary to Wordsworth's own Practise."<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

We have discussed how Wordsworth develops his poetics from *Lyrical Ballads* to *Poems 1815*. In the "Preface to LB" he needed confirmation about the new direction of literature. In the "Preface 1815," he becomes determined, emphasizing independence and separation from Coleridge. In expectation of his great epic, *The Recluse*, he publicizes his own poetic system. Contrarily, in the "Essay," he reveals his fear and anger against the public attack on his works (especially, *The Excursion*). He analyzes the public receptive system by looking back over the history of English literature to solve the problem of popularity theoretically. This ends with

his negation of popularity and with the limitation of readers.

We can see how Wordsworth was bewildered by public opinions in his challenge against the contemporary literary codes. His reputation gained through *Lyrical Ballads* was not enough to make “popular” his new poetic criterion. The balance between writers’ leadership and public critical force always tormented him as well as other Romantic poets. The “Preface 1815” and the “Essay” clearly display the development of his poetic theory, which became increasingly adamant. But they are not simple but a complex mixture of the poet’s challenge and anxiety. Wordsworth’s challenge is not really a success; rather it shows how difficult it was for a poet to defend his own artistic originality in the early nineteenth century. Wordsworth’s attitude in the two essays, however, is candid and ambitious including his ambiguity towards the public “as a *mixed* creature, made up of special infirmity and special strength.” <sup>21</sup>

- 1 M. H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze* (W. W. Norton: New York, 1984) 146. Hereafter referred to as *Correspondent*.
- 2 Earl Leslie Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Volume II* (OUP, 1956) 830. Hereafter abbreviated as *STC*.
- 3 Stephen Gill, ed., *William Wordsworth* (OUP, 1990) 591. Hereafter all quotations from this book are indicated by the numbers in parentheses.
- 4 Even Francis Jeffrey, Wordsworth’s enemy, admits this. See Graham McMaster, ed., *William Wordsworth: A Critical Anthology* (Penguin, 1972) 92. Hereafter abbreviated as *Critical*.
- 5 Ernest De Selincourt, ed., *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years: Volumell* (OUP, 1937) 666.
- 6 See *STC*, Volume II, 830.
- 7 Ernest De Selincourt, ed., *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth* (OUP, 1935) 190.
- 8 Ronald Blythe, ed., *William Hazlitt: Selected Writings* (Penguin, 1987) 221. Hereafter abbreviated as *Hazlitt*.
- 9 David Wright, ed., *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* (Penguin, 1970)

381. Hereafter referred to as *Recollections*.
- 10 Coleridge divines Wordsworth's egoistic tendency in the poem full of "....doctrines and words, which come almost as Truisms or Common-place to others." See *STC*, Volume IV 564. Hazlitt guesses the poem's failure at the very beginning of its production. See *Hazlitt*, 225-6.
  - 11 Ernest De Selincourt, ed., *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Ages: Volume II* (OUP, 1937) 620.
  - 12 *ibid.*, 669-70
  - 13 Ernest De Selincourt, ed., *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Ages: Volume I* (OUP, 1937) 125.
  - 14 In fact, his negation of popularity is paradoxically counterparted with his eagerness to regain his reputation. See Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (OUP, 1990) 300.
  - 15 *Paradise Lost*, Book VII, l. 31. Wordsworth quotes this line in "Prospectus to *The Recluse*." Wordsworth's self-identification with Milton recurs both in his prose writings and letters. M. H. Abrams's study of the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" argues that Wordsworth's revolutionary view of changing readers resembles in its theory a Christian mission. See *Correspondent*, 146. It is probable that Wordsworth's sense of challenge was almost a religious zeal.
  - 16 *Hazlitt*, 220.
  - 17 F. W. Bateson regards Wordsworth's ideal readers from the perspective of the oral effect of his poetry, and his "ballad-audience," he defines, are "Lamb, Hazlitt, John Wilson, De Quincey, Sir George Beaumont, Haydon, Crabb Robinson, Henry Taylor and Talfourd." See *Critical*, 383.
  - 18 M. H. Abrams's view, again, is interesting here: "And his chief enterprise as a poet is expressed in a Christian paradox—he must cast his readers down in order to raise them up: their spirits 'are to be humbled and humanized, in order that they may be purified and exalted.'" But, as we have seen, it is rather tricky to interpret Wordsworth's limitation of his readers as wholly with good intentions. See M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (W. W. Norton: New York, 1973) 397 and, especially, *Correspondent*, 147.
  - 19 *Hazlitt*, 230-1
  - 20 Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *William Blake: Complete Writings* (OUP, 1990) 783.
  - 21 *Recollections*, 384.