



“Preface” by Wordsworth

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Benjamin Robert Haydon, *William Wordsworth*, 1842,
London, National Portrait Gallery.

Life

- Born in **Cockermouth** in Cumberland in **1770**.
- His father, a lawyer, taught him **poetry** and allowed him access to his **library**.
- 1791: B. A. Degree at **St John's College**, Cambridge.

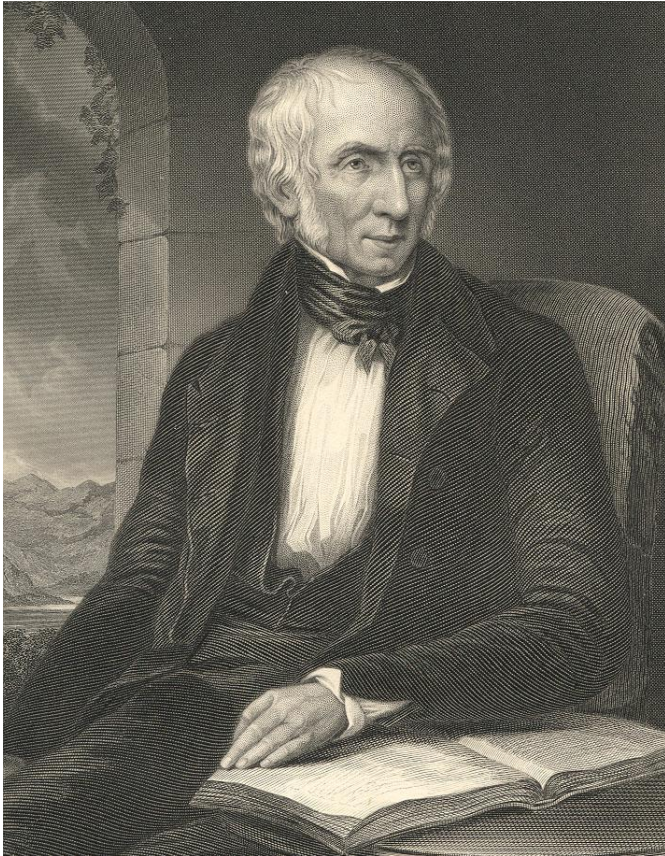


Wordsworth's House in Cockermouth, Cumberland

Life

- In 1791 he travelled to **Revolutionary France** and was fascinated by the **Republican movement**.
- The **Reign of Terror** led him to become estranged to the Republic, and the **war** between England and France caused him to **return to England**.
- In 1795 he developed a close friendship with **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**, with whom he collaborated in the 1797-1799 period to write *Lyrical Ballads*.
- In 1843 he became the **Poet Laureate**.
- He died in **1850**.

Main works



William Wordsworth, Shreveport, James Smith Noel Collection

- ***Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems*** (1798).
- ***Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems*** (1800). This edition contains the famous *Preface*, the Manifesto of English Romanticism.
- ***Poems***, in Two Volumes (1807).
- ***The Excursion*** (1814).
- ***The Prelude*** (1850).

Preface to the Lyrical Ballads

- Publications of the prefaces: 1798, 1800, 1802, 1815.
- Reasons: first; to justify the difference between classical and Romantic(his) poetry in subject, diction, function, process, etc.
- Second Ed.; to explain his ideas about poetic process & diction (as a reply to the criticism made by the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly* Reviews)
- It stands as a wall between the Classical Age & the Romantic Age. It is also called the unofficial manifesto of the Romanticism.
- An Epoch making document.

Preface to the Lyrical Ballads

- Impetus:

- 1)love of liberty (from regidity of classical rules) in English temperament.
- 2)too much classicism in English literature.(time for different taste)
- 3)The blowing of the wind of revolt in Europe & America.
- 4) To justify the different nature of his poetry.(as an advertisement).

Key concepts in the preface

- Attack on Neo-classical Diction & subject
- Definition of poetry
- Process of poetic creation (4 stages)
- Themes / subjects of poetry
- Language / Diction of poetry
- Nature of a poet
- Function of a poet / poetry

Difference between Classical & Romantic Dictions

Classical Diction

- Use of archaism, epithets, Latin or Greek words
- Gaudy and inane phrases; artificial figurative language
- Elaborate and roundabout way of expression.
- Objective feelings
- Unnatural, artificial, complex
- Followed 'nature methodised' (rules by ancients)
- City life

Romantic Diction

- Use of language really spoken by rustic men.
- Simple language, understood & enjoyed by simple people.
- Direct way of expression
- Subjective
- Spontaneous & natural
- Not followed any rules by ancients, but human & external nature.
- Rustic life

Definition of poetry

From the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*

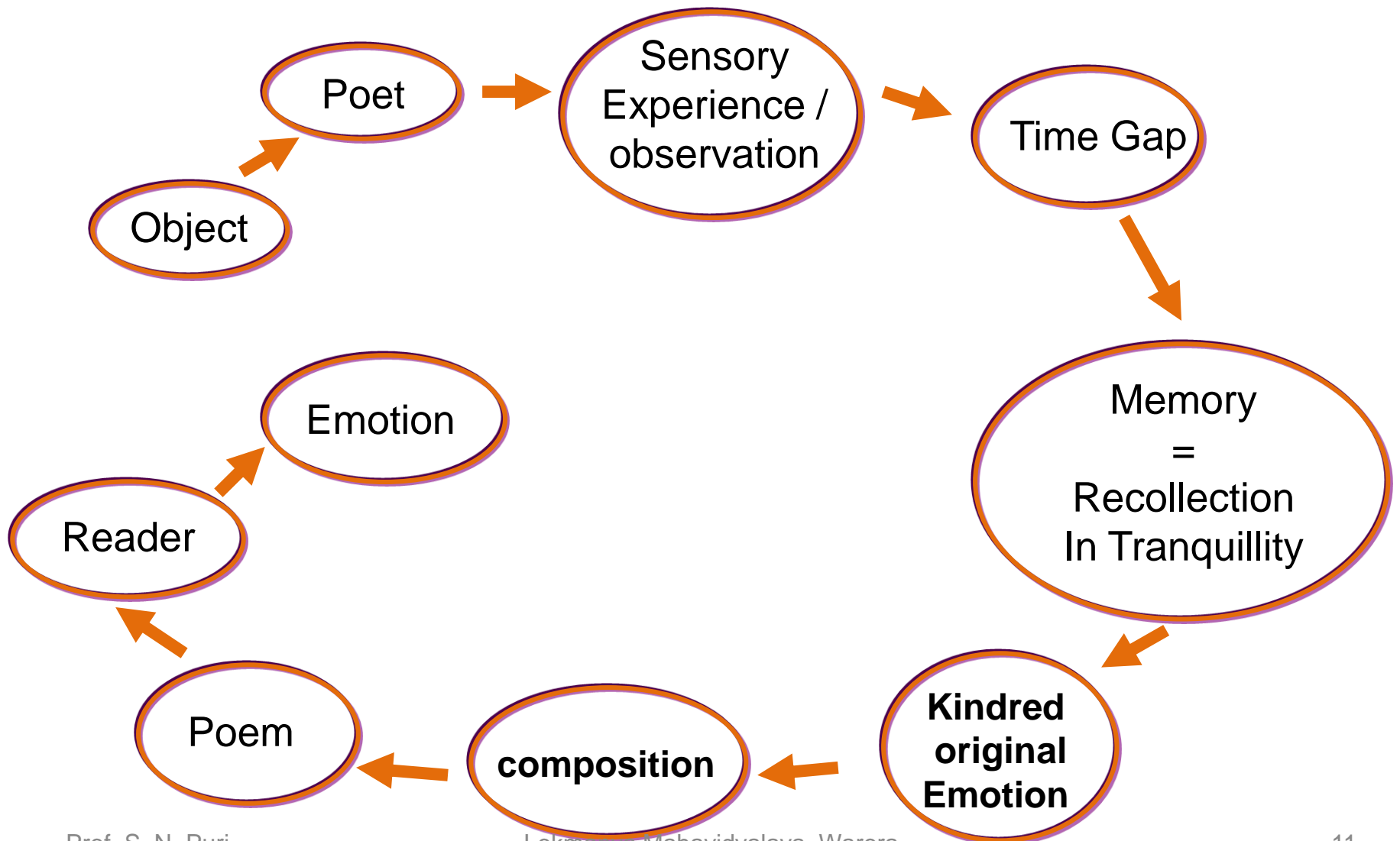
“Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind”.

The poetic process

There are 4 stages:

1. Observation: much earlier in life
2. Recollection in tranquility: after a gap of 5 to 10 years
3. Renewal (to feel) the originality of earlier emotion: to arouse the intensity of emotion (powerful feelings)
4. Composition: selection of refined language from rural people

The poetic process



The object / Subject of poetry

“The principal object [...] was to choose incidents and situations from common life.”

because:

1. The people express their feelings freely & frankly.
2. Their feelings are more simple, so are expressed more accurately and forcefully
3. Their manners are simple, not sophisticated.
4. They are in connection with the grand and noble objects in nature; so their passions are more noble and permanent

The language of poetry

From the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*

“The language [...] of these men is adopted [...] because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived”.

“ [...] and because, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions”.

The language / diction of poetry

- He attacked the abuse of diction in neo-classical age.
- “He chooses incidents and situations from common life” as his subjects of poetry. So, he “selected language really spoken by men.”
- But he allowed certain colouring of imagination to that language, only to make common objects of poetry seem unusual.
- Because, when men are emotionally excited, they use a dignified and emotional language suitable for poetic purposes. At that time it is not prosaic but poetic.

The language / diction of poetry

- The language of common persons is free from outside influences (artificial sophistication). So, they honestly express their experiences and feelings in “simple and unelaborated expressions.
- It is more philosophic than the artificial language used by earlier poets.
- “There neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition.”(criticised by Coleridge & Eliot)
- But defends metre** (his weakness): i) It is pleasure super-added. ii) traditions of poets have used it. iii) It controls emotions and keeps it within limits. iv) it helps things seem real. v) increases emotional intensity.

Who is the poet?

From the *Preface* to *Lyrical Ballads*

“What is a poet? [...] He is a man speaking to men: a man [...] endowed with more lively sensibility who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind”.

Who is the poet?

A poet is a man speaking to men. He differs from a common man not only in nature, but also in:

- Has greater and more lively sensibility.
- Has greater power of imagination.
- Has greater knowledge of human nature
- Has more comprehensive soul to sympathies and feel for others
- Has greater zeal for life
- Has greater power to communicate direct & indirect experiences and feelings.

The poet's task

The poet = a teacher



- Shows men how to understand their feelings and improve their moral being.
- Draws attention to the ordinary things of life where the deepest emotions are to be found.

The Function of Poetry

1) To please is the primary function of poetry; because

- It imitated nature and things well. Well imitation gives pleasure.

- It increases our knowledge and understanding of the primary nature of man

- It helps us understand the essential identity of man and nature.

- Poetry aims “to console the afflicted; to add the sunshine to daylight by making happy happier; “

2) Teaching is the second aim of poetry. But poetry teaches through pleasure.

- “every great poet is a teacher; I wish either to be considered as a teacher or as nothing.”

Poetry and other Subjects

Philosophy and History: the truth in poetry is more philosophic than the truth in philosophy and History. Because Philosophy deals with abstract truth; history with particular truth.

Poetry deals with both abstract & universal truth and illustrates them through particular examples.

Science: 1) truth in science is particular and individual. But poetic truth is universal and general, so enjoyed by all.

2) Science appeals mind, poetry heart and soul.

3) Truth in science is dry & superficial(not for humanity), but poetry is full of emotions & imagination that touches the soul of imitated object.

4) Science can be written in poetry.

So, poetry is “the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge.”

Man and nature

- Man and nature are **inseparable**.
- **Pantheistic view** of nature: it is the seat of the spirit of the universe.
- Nature **comforts** man in sorrow, it is a **source of joy** and pleasure, it **teaches man to love, to act in a moral way**.



John Constable, *The White Horse*, 1819,
New York, The Frick Collection.

The senses and memory

- Wordsworth exploited the **sensibility of the eye and ear** to perceive the beauty of nature.
- He believed that the **moral character develops during childhood** → influence of David Hartley (1705-1757).



William Hawell, *Waterfall at Ambleside seen through a window*, 1807, Wordsworth Trust.

The senses and memory

- The sensations caused by **physical experience lead to simple thoughts.**
- These simple thoughts later **combine into complex and organised ideas.**
- **Memory** is a major force in the process of growth.



The Chancel and Crossing of Tintern Abbey, Looking towards the East Window by J. M. V. Turner, 1794.

Wordsworth's style

- Abandoned 18th-century poetic diction.
- Almost always used **blank verse**.
- Proved skilful at verse forms such as **sonnets**, **odes**, **ballads** and **lyrics**.



View of Buttermere, Crummock Water and the surrounding Fells from Fleetwith Pike in the English Lake District

Disclaimer

Thank You