

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Lyrical Ballads; Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Tintern Abbey; Prelude(B, 1484-1592)

William Wordsworth was shaped by the Wye Valley and the Lake District of Northwest England. There he grew up freely in nature, comfortable enough in his family life and from early on sensitive to the still unspoiled peasant communities of his region. His relation to his sister Dorothy, and for a long time, during his most creative period, to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, were decisive foundations of his poetic genius. While he was in early life a passionate supporter of the French Revolution, like Mary Wollstonecraft, and while he was close to France for romantic and cultural reasons, Wordsworth grew more nearly mainline and conventional of philosophy, as he aged; one longs, in reading the older Wordsworth, for the simple genius of the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Question: What is the Genius Behind the Lyric Simplicity of Wordsworth's Early Poems?

The question before us was asked by many, at the time of Wordsworth's publication of *The Lyrical Ballads*, in 1800. The seemingly extreme simplicity of these poems appeared silly, unworthy of the great traditions of poetry. The fact is that Wordsworth and Coleridge were both in rebellion against the concept of the poem in the 18th century and earlier. (Think back to Dryden and Pope, for examples of that earlier poetry at its best. It is full of poetic diction, personified virtues with capital letters, a vocabulary level which belongs to educated speech, instead of to the voices of common people, as Wordsworth understood it.) The answer to our question seems to go in this direction: the lyric simplicity of Wordsworth—see "We are Seven"—is not simple at all. The complexity of this lyric balladry lies in the inner organic mystery of the poet's feelings. (See how many different issues are involved in whether "we are seven.") The description of the poet, in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, (1502), is of a person of "comprehensive soul," and of an imagination which makes wholes out of parts. Because he was this kind of person Wordsworth was able to write this kind of poetry.

Comparative Literature:

1. Wordsworth's place in the shaping of literary history is decisive. His views of the common voice, of the power of imagination, of the omnipotence of memory, of the impending threats of industrialism and vulgarity, all fall into line with perceptions and cultural developments which dominate Wordsworth's own time. From the Napoleonic Wars, to the French Revolution, to the mid-19th century growth of the middle class in Europe: all these events coincide with the powerful growth of Wordsworth's sensibility. I suggest you take a look at Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1944), for a broad survey of the cultural landscape in which Wordsworth lived. Geoffrey Hartman's *Wordsworth's Poetry* (1964) is a guide to the simple mysteries of Wordsworth's early lyrics.

2. Wordsworth's quality of imagination can suggest the work of Chuang-tsu, the 4th century B.C. Chinese poet, who worked in the philosophical vein of Lao-tsu. If you consult that quiet tweaker of language, you will see that, like Wordsworth, he leaves an after mood of puzzlement and learning, which is an intimate part of the power of his poetry. Compare him to Wordsworth. Then go back to Pope, and note how sharply *he* brings his poems to a point, a precise conclusion that says it all again.