

William Wordsworth and Robert Frost

By Robert A. Jelliffe

I

As all students of literature know, Wordsworth made an extended pronouncement on poetry and poetic diction in his Preface to the second edition of "Lyrical Ballads" published in 1800. In that Preface he expressed his convictions about the proper subject matter to be treated by the poet, the manner of expression suitable for such material, the function of the imagination, and the priority of "feeling" over "action" in the poem itself. He emphasized his disapproval of what he chose to call "poetic diction" recommending instead a selection of language really used by men. And in conclusion he endeavored to justify his employment of metre, despite this reliance on the language of actual life, by regarding it as a "regularizing" influence, either to restrain an otherwise excessive intensity of expression or to increase the pitch of language that otherwise might seem too mild.

The incidents and the situations treated in his own poems, so he declared, were drawn from everyday life, as he advocated; and in them he sought to trace the "primary laws" of human nature. Humble and rustic life, so he averred, offered the best manifestations of the essential passions of the human heart, for in the lives of such lowly individuals as he chose to represent, elementary human feelings exist in a state of simplicity, and in such rustic surroundings as he chose to portray, the passions of men become an integral part of nature herself. The language of such individuals, moreover, derives, so he believed, from their native background: it is therefore simple, unsophisticated. Consequently, the poet would do well to draw on such language, making a selection of it that would create its own distinction, and varying the expression in general to conform with the particular passion involved.

In this extensive creed of poetry the most significant article is the insistence upon avoiding what Wordsworth referred to as "poetic

diction." To this artificial mode of expression he was utterly opposed. He professed his own belief, instead, in "a selection of language really used by men." In the matter of both substance and style, that is to say, he favored what a later critic, Walter Bagehot, was to designate as "pure" art in contradistinction to what he chose to call "ornate."

Thus, in all too summary a fashion, runs Wordsworth's statement of theory, a set of principles grounded on psychological bases. And in his own practice of poetry he undertook to live up to these precepts. Distrusting all dependence on a special idiom of poetic expression, affirming his perfect faith in the language of everyday life ("if selected truly and judiciously"), he disavowed the validity of a separate dialect for poetic composition. One concession only to the heightening of artistic effect he did permit himself, as setting his poetry apart from prose: the use of metre.

The serious student of poetry, carried along by the earnest eloquence of this Preface and by his respect for Wordsworth's eminence as a poet, may nevertheless be excused if he finds himself speculating as to which came first, the theory or the poems themselves. Prefaces are written quite often, as we know, at the end of a work rather than at the beginning; and Wordsworth may very well have composed his poems in the manner that seemed right to him without having first formulated his theory. The Preface of 1800, in other words, may well have merely codified the practice. If so, there is nothing at all blameworthy about such a procedure. Edgar Allan Poe has been instanced many times as having done the same thing; and no doubt many another poet, before and since, has had recourse to this ordering of his convictions. In the present instance we may have one further example of an artist's "rationalizing" his own creative impulse.

Whether Wordsworth did so or not, what is much more important is that most of his qualified readers are agreed that he is most genuinely poetic when he departs from his theory rather than when

he holds to it. The subject matter of such a poem as "We Are Seven," for example, accords completely with the poet's conviction as to the value of material drawn from simple, rustic life, and the primary passion of the poem is truthfully and sympathetically revealed. That much is readily acknowledged. But the language by which the sentiment is expressed, however accurately it may be thought to reproduce the exact speech of a child of the countryside, fails somehow or other to transmute the feeling into art. Such lines as the following, humble in vocabulary as they are, fall short of the pitch required of great poetry:

And often after sunset, sir,
When it is light and fair,
I take my little porringer,
And eat my supper there,

This style of expression may be thought to reflect the language of an eight-year old child, but as poetry it leaves something to be desired. Perhaps in this instance there should have been a more rigid "selection," or perhaps there might have been a more subtle variation of rhythm as an agency for heightening the pitch. In any case, it would seem that the poet's fidelity to his theory had on this occasion, as on others as well, brought him perilously close to the prosaic and the banal,

Quite otherwise, however, with such a truly great poem as "Tintern Abbey." Forsaking almost entirely his principles about simplicity of expression, Wordsworth has here achieved, as he has elsewhere also, a memorable success. Language, rhythm metre—all these elements combine to ennoble and enrich the theme:

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man . . .

In these magnificent lines there is no straining after a predetermined simplicity, there is no insistence on such artless diction as was found in "We Are Seven." On the contrary, we find what Matthew Arnold would have called the "grand style" - words like *a presence*, *sublime*, *interfused*, are not really used by ordinary men in their everyday intercourse with one another; they are rich, sonorous, mystical. The subject of this poem demands such a style, to be sure, and in this instance, fortunately, receives it.

So we find ourselves confronted by a seeming paradox: the theory of poetry proposed by Wordsworth is more honored by him in the breach than in the observance, if excellence of effect is the criterion of judgment. In other words, Wordsworth's best poems, in the opinion of his critics, contravene his own recommendations for poetry in general.

I I

Before leaving this section of our study, we may do well to clarify a little further the several elements of Wordsworth's theory by setting them over against the theory and the practice of certain other poets of the Western World. So will their radical innovations come into clearer perspective. We are well aware, to begin with, that Wordsworth was moved initially to oppose the poetic procedure of the age immediately preceding his own. The practice of his predecessors seemed to him aesthetically wrong, and he set himself to correct it. By temperament, moreover, he was no doubt disposed to favor the kind of subject matter and the manner of expression that he advocated in his Preface. The two forces operated together, temperament and revolt, to introduce this new mode of composition. The whole history of the changing nature of English

poetry has been brought about, indeed, by just such revolutions as this one. One age, with its own artistic predilections, gives way to another, with entirely different beliefs. Each period of time produces a pioneer spirit who enunciates for his generation the beliefs that commend themselves to his age. It will always be so. Wordsworth spoke out for those who shared his aims and ideals for poetry during the early part of the nineteenth century. In the cycle of poetic development he was the advocate of a new order. Our immediate concern, therefore, is to elucidate the major trends in his doctrine.

Let us review, then, the precepts he formulated in the Preface, taking them up in the order in which he presented them. In that order, the first one has to do with the substance of poetry. In that connection, as we have already observed, Wordsworth advocated the reliance upon incidents and situations drawn from common life. What he had in mind, it would seem, were such topics as he treated in "The Highland Girl," or "The Solitary Reaper," or "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"—material drawn from the seemingly unpromising, the almost casual, events of his daily life in the Lake country. Just what would the author of "Paradise Lost," we find ourselves wondering, have thought of such raw material for poetry? What would the author of "King Lear" have thought of it? To be sure, Wordsworth, by implication at least, was not to concern himself with the sublimity of epic poetry, in the Milton order, nor with the grandeur of tragedy, as Shakespeare did. Themes of such scope and magnitude were outside his province and intention. He chose to limit himself, for the most part, to relatively brief lyrics. Nevertheless, the statement of the Preface stands. Wordsworth has gone on record as favoring ordinary human activities as the suitable substance for poetry. The intrinsic importance of the event, in poems of this sort, will often be in inverse ratio to the total value of the work itself. It is the deeper significance of the happening, the significance as divined by the poet's imagination, that matters, not the happening itself.

In the second place, Wordsworth discusses the proper mode of expression for poetry of this sort. He sets his seal of approval on what he regards as "language used by men"—with one noteworthy proviso: it is to be "a selection" of such language, not a mechanical transcript of it. The poet, that is to say, is to draw his words from the reservoir of common speech, not from that filtered and chemically purified fountain of poetic diction. But he need not dip his bucket into brackish water, even so, nor include the sand and the gravel. The words he makes use of should retain the force and pungency of elemental speech; they need not, however, be coarse or vulgar. It is the poet's privilege, his obligation, indeed, to exercise the artist's prerogative of selection to the end that his expression may take on the dignity, the meaningfulness, implicit in his theme. Such a choice of language, so selected, Wordsworth believed, would bring about the elevation of tone that he sought. However, as we have already noted, Wordsworth was betrayed on occasion by too strict an adherence to his own theory, or else by an insufficient employment of the selective principle. The language of many of these poems was plain enough, certainly, but at times it was altogether too plain. It failed to rise to that level of elevation he and his readers desired. It remained earth-bound, uninspired, uninspiring.

Many another poet and many another theorist have taken issue with this doctrine. Robert Bridges, for one, has come out for richness of diction in poetry, citing "Lycidas" as one example of poetry that succeeds in large part by virtue of that very "poetic diction" that Wordsworth so vigorously opposed. Furthermore, we might refer to the incantation quality of such a poem as Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven" or Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel." Of course it must be kept in mind that substance and style should correspond, the one with the other. It would be absurd to employ the ornate and embellished style of Rossetti in such a homespun poem as Wordsworth's "Poor Susan." It would be equally incongruous to impose on one of the intricate sonnets in Rossetti's

“The House of Life” the unadorned language recommended by Wordsworth, To each his own. The root of the matter would seem to lie in the choice of subject, for it is the subject, to begin with, that will determine the manner of expression. Wordsworth did well, therefore, to begin his exposition of his theory by insisting on the particular type of subject matter he approved, and then—but not until then—to advocate “a selection of language really used by men.”

One further element remains to be considered: the representation of the “primary laws” of human nature. Wordsworth was disposed to concern himself with the fundamental passions of the human heart, with joy, simple and deep, with the sorrow of separation, with homesickness, family ties, sudden visitations of the beauties of nature. Therefore (so he declared) he felt constrained to portray the lives of humble folk in their rustic settings. He wished to disclose the elemental passions unalloyed by the sophistication of urban culture. He chose to expound the heartbreak of a Michael, not the inferiority complex of a Prufrock. T. S. Eliot, in his choice of subjects, in his manner of expression, and especially in his analysis of human nature, would have been anathema to Wordsworth. For the latter, the solitary reaper offered far more opportunity for poetic treatment than Apeneck Sweeney and his cronies. The solitary lass of the Highlands seemed to him to be more truly inspired by the primary laws of our human nature than, let us say, Rachel Rabinovitch was. So Wordsworth devoted himself in his art to the service of delineating characters of humble and rustic life.

The question at issue is not whether Wordsworth was right or wrong. We do not need to decide at the moment whether we, ourselves, subscribe to Wordsworth’s doctrine or not. It may very well be that the iridescent psychology of a T. S. Eliot appeals to us more than the basic concentration on human nature that we find in Wordsworth’s poems. We may happen to prefer the rolling sonority of such lines as “this, my hand, will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine....” to the subdued utterance of “The music in

my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more." We may even find ourselves more at home, at least in these modern days, with the ironic undertones and overtones of a frustrated love affair than with the unaffected contemplation of blue lake water and golden daffodils. In such matters as these there is certainly no disputing individual taste. All we are required to note for the moment is exactly what Wordsworth had in mind by his statement of belief regarding the proper objects of poetry, the proper language, the proper persons. These beliefs of his define themselves more explicitly when, in some such fashion as this, we confront them with conflicting views and opinions.

III

Does it follow, then, that any such idea of poetry as that recommended by Wordsworth is doomed? Must we look for excellence in poetry only in such writings as exemplify, in so far as subject matter is concerned, not Wordsworth's belief in situations drawn from humble life but rather, as Matthew Arnold declared, in the employment of a "great action"? Arnold insisted that the action is paramount, that the style of expression may be allowed to take care of itself. And must we, foregoing all Wordsworthian rusticity of theme and style, devote ourselves to what Lascelles Abercrombie has referred to and recommended as the "incantation" quality of language and rhythm? Should we set our seal of approval on such poems only as Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven," with its hypnotic lyricism, and deny it to such poems as "Michael"? Are the elemental passions outmoded? Is the language of our daily lives to be relegated to prose alone?

As if in direct reply to such questions as those raised in the preceding paragraph, the poetry of Robert Frost, appearing a hundred years and more after the controversial Preface of 1800, presents itself for our serious and sympathetic consideration. His poems sound, indeed, as if he had been an apt pupil of the Wordsworthian theory, schooling himself in its discipline and even at times surpassing the

master himself. A New Englander by allegiance though not by birth, a countryman by choice, a poet by divine dispensation, Robert Frost has devoted himself throughout his entire life to the delineation and the interpretation of rustic living and humble folk. His poems breathe the very air and fragrance of New Hampshire and Vermont, the states he loves most. Exemplifying all the doctrines set forth by Wordsworth as regards substance, form, and style, they have achieved the highest measure of excellence in art and artistry.

This is not at all to say, however, that Frost has consciously modelled his work on that of his predecessor or on his teaching. These American poems are in no wise imitations of the Wordsworth originals. Robert Frost is eminently and recognizably American in everything he says and writes: there is nothing derivative, in the usual sense of that term, in his work. Longfellow and Lowell, of an earlier generation, have sometimes been accused of being more European in their compositions than American—in form and substance, that is, if not always in spirit. But Frost is American to the marrow.

Undoubtedly, however, he was familiar with the Preface to the "Lyrical Ballads," and he may well have felt some natural affinity of artistic spirit between Wordsworth's attitude toward poetry and his own. He may have felt drawn to a representation of the manners and mores of his favorite countryside, just as Wordsworth had had his spiritual and artistic being in Westmoreland. But each of these two poets worked out his "line" in his own way and in his own time, the one quite as individual in his manner as the other.

Even so, the reader of poetry is struck by the many resemblances between the principles of the Preface and the practice of Frost's poems. That resemblance is on occasion so close, so exact, as to provoke the whimsical notion of an actual collaboration—as if Wordsworth had proposed the procedure and Frost had put it into execution. No such collaboration did take place, of course, but the correspon-

dence is remarkable, none the less. between the several features of the one and of the other. In a word, it would seem as if Frost were a better exponent of this theory of poetry, a more faithful one, than Wordsworth himself. Incidents and situations from common life, a selection of the language really used by men, the coloring of the imagination (in the Wordsworthian sense of that term), the essential passions of the heart, the priority of "feeling"—they are all to be found in these American poems.

It remains to say that whenever Robert Frost is most successful, when some one or another of his poems suddenly clutches our hearts, makes us catch our breath, because of its magical revelation of beauty and truth—such a poem, for instance, as "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"—its success need not be ascribed to the fact that the author has obeyed the injunctions of the Preface. Frost's most significant, most illuminating poems are impressive and thrilling not necessarily because he has followed any particular recipe, Wordsworth's or any other. No major poem was ever concocted in any such mechanical fashion. Frost's poetry has the very tone and touch of greatness not because he became an avowed disciple of Wordsworth's theory of poetry but because, as Browning once said of his own method of poetic composition, he "fused [his] soul and that inert stuff." On the raw material of poetry, that is to say, on the substance of it, Frost has impressed his own vision and understanding.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that there is clearly observable in much that he has written a remarkably close correspondence between his treatment and Wordsworth's concept. Consciously or not, the American poet has translated many of these precepts into his own practice. And whenever he has done so, the result is almost always eminently successful—more often so, indeed, than when Wordsworth has undertaken, himself, to live up to his own counsel. The "coloring of the imagination," as Frost has employed that pigment, gives his writing particular distinction and individuality. It creates an atmosphere of exceptional significance and meaning for

even the apparently most unpretentious incident or situation. It exercises a spell that transforms common life into a representation of profound truth. It invests the seemingly commonplace with the enchantment of mystery.

To find an illustrative example of these remarks, we may turn the pages of any collected edition of this poet's work almost at random and select almost any one of the poems. But to be more specific, we may glance for a moment at his very well-known composition, "The Death of the Hired Man." The opening lines arrest our attention if only by their utter simplicity of expression:

Mary sat musing on the lamp flame at the table,
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tiptoe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news
And put him on his guard. "Silas is back."

With the possible exception of the one word *musings*, there is nothing in the diction of these lines that might not pass the challenge of language "really used by men"; nothing in the order of words, even; no employment of figurative expression; no metronome quality of rhythm. In every respect, the style accords with the mood and purport of the situation: the rhythm is colloquial, not mannered; the vocabulary is bare without becoming base; the idiom is that of its own locality.

To make this comment even more obvious than it perhaps needs to be made, we might subject these lines to the indignity of translating them into "poetic diction." They might be made to read as follows:

Bemused in thought, intent upon the light
That shone, a captive flame within the prison
Of her lamp, sat Mary waiting for her spouse.
His footfall heard, lightly she ran adown
The passage shrouded now in murky gloom
Him to forestall upon the threshold dim
And break to him the tidings fraught with fear.

Such a mockery of the true simplicity of the original makes evident its grotesque absurdity; but it may serve in its synthetic way to call attention, by contrast, to the nobility of Frost's own lines. In this caricature of poetic diction we may note the preposterous diction, the labored metaphor, the pretentious idiom, the inverted order of expression, the rigidity of the rhythm. From all these improprieties Frost's poem is mercifully free. And throughout the entire account that reports the human relationship of these three New England characters, Mary, Warren, and Silas, the quiet dignity of expression, exactly suited to their natures, powerfully interprets the essential passions of their hearts. Wordsworth would have been proud, if he had lived, of this piece of work. (He once praised Tennyson most generously—perhaps too highly—for his poem "Dora," commending it as successfully achieving what he himself had so often striven to do. He might well have felt the same way about this American poem.)

Wordsworth would have appreciated especially the exquisite adaptation of rhythm to expression, both in the narrative as a whole and particularly in the brief passage of lyrical beauty representing Mary as she sits on the porch steps, the moonlight shimmering through the morning-glory vines. The mood of the moment fully justifies the delicacy and imaginative fancy it receives in the style. The expression as a whole, as Wordsworth affirmed in his Preface, varies with the passion; in this instance it does so.

But we come back at last, while freely acknowledging all these points of resemblance between the two poets, to the renewed conviction that what gives such a poem as this its unforgettable hold on our minds and hearts is not its employment of the Wordsworthian technique but rather its possession and projection of a tone and spirit altogether its own. It bears the stamp of its author. Suggestive and provocative as these resemblances may be, illuminating, indeed, in the study of poetic theory and practice, the chief value inherent in such a poem as this is to be found in its manifestation of an altogether individual insight into the mystery of human life and a completely personal interpretation of human passion.