

How Revolutionary Was *Lyrical Ballads* (1798-1800)?

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In the traditional account of literary Romanticism in Britain, *Lyrical Ballads* is considered the seminal, inspirational work. The first edition of October 1798, published anonymously in Bristol by the young Wordsworth and Coleridge, has been said to be 'the only literary publication (as opposed to political event or turn of a century) that has been used to mark the beginning of a period in either English or American literature' (Stillinger 2000: 70). The 'Advertisement' which headed the book stressed the experimental nature of the poems, which were claimed to have been

written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure. (ll. 7-10)¹

The book was not immediately perceived as a radical experiment. Though not a bestseller, it sold tolerably well, and went into four editions between 1798 and 1805. The reviews were mostly favorable, and the poems were much reprinted in magazines and miscellanies (Mayo 1972). But the work, as if to demonstrate its 'organic' character, did not remain unchanged. The second edition, which appeared in 1800, was augmented by the addition of a second volume, another 227 pages of newly composed verse—all of it by Wordsworth—and a strident, polemical Preface by Wordsworth, which he later expanded, and which arguably proved as influential as the verse. When we speak about *Lyrical Ballads* we commonly mean the work as it evolved from 1798 to 1805, and essentially as it appeared in 1800. I would add, 'Preface and all', as the Preface seems to me an integral part of the *Lyrical Ballads*, or at least such an important influence on its reception that it cannot be ignored. Such was the impact of the work in hindsight, then,

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¹ References throughout are to *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Michael Mason (London and New York: Longman, 1992).

that 1798 has commonly been taken to mark the beginning of the Romantic period, despite the fact that Wordsworth's Preface and the second volume were not yet written.

A 'revolutionary' work? The question need only imply that the book was 'revolutionary' in the long-established sense that it is 'an instance of great change or alteration in affairs or in some particular thing' (*OED*, 'revolution', III.6.b.). This is the sense in which Wordsworth uses the term in the Preface, when he speaks of 'retracing the revolutions not of literature alone but likewise of society itself' (ll. 52-3). Yet there is also the very palpable analogy with *political* revolutions, a pregnant analogy in the case of *Lyrical Ballads* because early Romanticism is so strongly associated with the ideals of the French Revolution, which Wordsworth and Coleridge had enthusiastically embraced as younger men. Although both poets had suffered disenchantment over political developments in France since the mid-1790s, their criticism of social conditions could still be considered seditious by critics who, like the *Edinburgh Review*'s Francis Jeffrey, feared that social unrest, fuelled by a series of bad harvests, would lead to large-scale upheaval on the French model (Perkins 1993: 88-91). By 1798, however, the anticipations of a new world order that had so agitated the early years of the decade had largely lost their charge, though conservative fears still ran high. There is wide agreement that Wordsworth and Coleridge finally shut the door on their 'radical years' in the summer of 1798 (Roe 1988: 262-75). A traditional view, both vehemently affirmed and strongly contested in recent criticism, sees *Lyrical Ballads* 'as the product of quietistic retreat' (Sheats 1991: 99).² More than one critic has recently called attention to the ambivalence that lies behind the composition date announced in the full title of 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798', a poem actually written over several days. The thirteenth of July was a date of rich personal significance for Wordsworth. It was the day Wordsworth and his sister completed their tour in 1798. It also commemorates the eve of the storming of the Bastille. Wordsworth landed in France on 13 July 1790, and moved into the house at Alfoxden in Somerset with his sister on 13 July 1797 (Benis 2000: 134; Johnston 1998: 232, 522). 'Five years have passed', the first line of 'Tintern Abbey'

² See also McGann 1983: 84-90, and Levinson 1986: 18-23. For the counter-argument that *Lyrical Ballads* represented 'the culmination of Wordsworth's development of a particular kind of English radicalism, one which used a view of rural landscape and society to make arguments about the government of the nation', see Fulford 1996: 161ff.

tells us, 'five summers, with the length | Of five long winters' since Wordsworth visited the Wye as a young radical; if we measure the time exactly, as the date in the title invites us to do, it was five years to the day since the assassination of Marat on 13 July 1793, which marked the beginning of the Terror (Johnston 1998: 373). As James Heffernan observes, Wordsworth seems to be acknowledging his radical past even as he is saying, in effect, goodbye to all that (Heffernan 1998: 238). Critics have long acknowledged the strong elements of political as well as social protest in poems like 'The Female Vagrant' and 'The Last of the Flock', which deplore the effects of enclosure, rural poverty, and the repressive policies of the Tory government in the wake of Britain's wars against the American colonies and France. But humanitarian protest does not entail political radicalism, and even radicalism does not entail the support of revolution as a means of political action.³ The farmer-poet Thomas Batchelor protests even more explicitly than Wordsworth against the war and the distress of the rural population in his nearly contemporary georgic *The Progress of Agriculture* (1801, published 1804), in which the authorities come in for scathing rebuke. Yet though Batchelor is outspoken, his commitment to the practical business of rural life keeps him, like Wordsworth, from advocating any radical or revolutionary course of action.⁴

The fact that Wordsworth portrays his characters so vividly and sympathetically does lend his humanitarianism an emotional impetus which intensifies the political thrust of the poems. But his sharp focus on particularized individuals and their specific local contexts resists doctrinaire solutions, and thus most politically radical solutions, to social ills. The accusation that Wordsworth condones the poverty of the Old Cumberland Beggar is unjust, but he does suggest that mere legislation of any political stripe would be the wrong way to deal with him, as this would deny his actual moral function in the rural world. In sum, it seems hard to disagree with those critics to whom *Lyrical Ballads* represents a deliberate turning away from revolutionary politics and the city, and a commitment to

³ Even Godwin questioned the expediency of revolution as a political instrument; cf. *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. H. Brett and A. R. Jones, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), xxxiv; Prickett 1989: 111-15; Roe 1988: 11.

⁴ Thomas Batchelor, *Village Scenes, The Progress of Agriculture, and other poems* (London: Parnassian Press for Vernor and Hood, 1804). According to the preface, 'The Progress of Agriculture' was 'first written in 1801, but has since received many alterations'. See especially the peasant's complaint on the war against France, ll. 504-15 (p. 95).

engage with an emphatically English and provincial world in a manner which, as the Preface makes clear, is explicitly and self-consciously aesthetic (Heffernan 1998: 236). This is not to say that *Lyrical Ballads* is apolitical: Wordsworth's letter recommending the second edition to the radical Whig Charles James Fox of 14 January 1801 demonstrates just how politically he conceived some of his poems (Sambrook 1983: 127-8). But not all of them, and not in equal measure: the distressed woman of 'The Thorn', a poem I'll be returning to, has recently been discussed as a representative of the vagrant community—a sister of 'The Female Vagrant'—whereas it seems to me that she is not an itinerant person at all, and that her significance, as I shall argue later, has more to do with the sexual politics of sentimental literature than with social issues to be dealt with by political reform (Benis 2000: 96-113). The letter to Fox also shows that Wordsworth's political aims were not revolutionary, as indeed the reviewer in the Tory journal *The British Critic* admitted when he concluded that, despite traces of political disaffection in 'The Female Vagrant', *Lyrical Ballads* as a whole did not offer 'any offensive mixture of enmity to present institutions, except in one or two instances, which are so unobtrusive as hardly to deserve notice' (*British Critic* XIII, 1799, p. 369, cited in Stabler 1998: 217).

But if *Lyrical Ballads* cannot be said to be revolutionary in political terms, as tending towards the overthrow of existing institutions, another understanding of 'revolution' allows a different claim, namely that Romanticism as a movement represents a literary revolution, and that Wordsworth and Coleridge represent its English avant-garde. Viewing 1798 as a transposition of 1789, the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* would seem the literary equivalent of the storming of the Bastille, and Wordsworth's Preface of 1800 a manifesto heralding the overthrow of the *ancien régime* and the proclamation of a republic of letters along enlightened and egalitarian lines. In all events, the question before us implies that *Literary Ballads* was the agent of radical literary change.

My title contains one further word that ought to be interrogated, the apparently innocent verb *was*. When 'was' *Lyrical Ballads* revolutionary? Robert Hume has commented incisively on this question in his recent book on historical methodology:

What is the right context? If you are coming to Wordsworth from Gray, Collins, Smart, Churchill, Cowper, Ossian, Chatterton, and Crabbe, then the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* seems as revolutionary as textbooks still make it sound. If, however, you do what Robert

Mayo did, and read extensively in magazines that published verse in the 1790s, then all of a sudden Wordsworth seems a great deal less of an innovator. In retrospect, one might have guessed this: context that does not come from within the decade at issue is unlikely to be anything but misleading. (Hume 1999: 139-40)

Hume's point strikes me as essential. Should we judge whether *Lyrical Ballads* was revolutionary from the viewpoint (which, as Hume emphasizes, we must as always construct for ourselves) of the decade before it was published and the first few years of its reception? Or looking back on the whole gamut of subsequent Romanticism, which, as Marilyn Butler reminds us, 'is a posthumous development'? (Butler 1981: 2). Jerome McGann embraces the anachronistic historical perspective we inevitably bring to older texts, saying that 'The significance of a book like *Lyrical Ballads* lies in its ability to look before and after' (McGann 1983: 107). This means *our* ability to look before and after, not that of Wordsworth or Coleridge or their contemporaries. We look in vain for a strictly contemporary 'revolution' caused by *Lyrical Ballads*. This does not mean that great changes are not discoverable in its wake. But reception history will tend to complicate rather than merely confirm the notion of *Lyrical Ballads*'s revolutionary trajectory. In either 1799 or 1801 (probably the latter) the teenage radical Thomas De Quincey read *Lyrical Ballads*, and wrote later that it was 'the greatest event in the unfolding of my own mind':

I found in these poems 'the ray of a new morning', and an absolute revelation of untrodden worlds teeming with power and beauty as yet unsuspected amongst men. (De Quincey 1973: 57)

But it is unwise to generalize too freely from such instances. If we didn't know otherwise, we might well imagine that John Clare, that great admirer of Wordsworth, might have similarly caught his first glimpse of 'the ray of a new morning' in *Lyrical Ballads*, or may have felt emboldened by the proposal in the 1802 Preface to speak 'the very language of men' (ll. 267-8). Certainly Wordsworth's Preface lastingly influenced Clare's reception (Storey 1994: 36-8, and Vardy 2000: *passim*). But as a teenager (*c.* 1806) Clare himself was initiated into poetry by the momentous experience of reading a work that had little to do with the avant-garde: Thomson's *The Seasons*. Three-quarters of a century after its first appearance, *The Seasons*—a work which strongly influenced Wordsworth,⁵ but which was

⁵ See Jacobus 1976: 39-44, 105-9, and Johnston 1998: 81-3, 85-6.

open to criticism for its obsolescent brand of 'poetic diction'—made a dramatic, I am almost tempted to say a revolutionary, impact on a major poet of the 'second' Romantic generation (Goodridge and Thornton 1994). The chance survival of such evidence as this reminds us that reception is only partly and uncertainly recoverable. And there is no way to accurately determine whether longer-term changes in literary history were actually caused by any work, whether by Thomson or Wordsworth or any other writer. Hume takes this to undermine the viability of any literary history that attempts to span more than a decade or so. I am in general sympathy with his argument, though the limits it insists on are considerable.

Hume's reference to Robert Mayo is actually more polemical than accurate. Mayo does in fact emphasize, in his famous article on 'The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*' (1954), that the work

was 'original' in various respects (as reviewers said it was), and that it was to be a leavening force of extraordinary power in the years to come. (Mayo 1972: 106)

Mayo even concedes that

From one point of view the *Lyrical Ballads* stand at the beginning of a new orientation of literary, social, ethical, and religious values; and they are unquestionably a pivotal work in the transition from one century to the next. (Mayo 1972: 106-7)

Yet from a strictly *contemporary* point of view, Mayo argues, the poems were not exceptional in anything but their excellence (110-11). Humanitarian verse was a staple of the magazines of the time. Nor was experimentation with the ballad form an innovation in itself (97-104). Most of the verse forms and the general topics of *Lyrical Ballads*, Mayo concludes, would have been familiar to contemporary readers. And yet he immediately adds the statement I have just quoted: that the work was 'original' in *various respects* and that *it was to be a leavening force of extraordinary power in the years to come*. In other words, the verse was superficially unexceptional, yet *Lyrical Ballads* was nonetheless original in its literary achievement and revolutionary in its long-term impact.

'Original' in what particular respects? The term was hazy then as now. Reviewers seem to have selected the compliment from the common

store, usually without meaning anything very specific,⁶ though Dr Burney offers a more precise application when he notes that Coleridge's 'The Nightingale' is 'Miltonic, yet original' (Burney 1972: 55). In his notorious hostile review, Southey predictably avoids the term (Southey 1972: 53-4). But he immediately draws attention to the striking fact that the 'Advertisement' to *Lyrical Ballads* presents the poems, or 'the majority' of them, as *experiments*. This was later developed as the cardinal point in Wordsworth's Preface, which insists that the poems are '*materially different* from those upon which general approbation is at present bestowed' (ll. 57-9, my emphasis). If the poems were so consonant with popular taste, and Mayo shows that on the whole they were, why does Wordsworth present them as so 'materially different' that they need a new theory to be understood?

This question is addressed most persuasively, in my opinion, in Brian Wilkie's article 'Wordsworth and the Tradition of Avant-Garde' (1973), which looks back at Wordsworth from the vantage-point of the wave of experimentalism in the arts of the 1950s and '60s. Wilkie takes Coleridge's view that the question of *Lyrical Ballads's* radical originality was raised by the Preface rather than the poems.⁷ Wilkie argues that the volume is set apart by the implications of explicitly proclaiming itself a vehicle for poetic experiment, and by Wordsworth's insistence in the Preface that readers must re-educate themselves in order to appreciate his achievement. This position, Wilkie argues, is familiar as the characteristic stance of the artistic avant-garde of every modern generation, and places Wordsworth very near the beginning of this emphatically modern tradition.

As critics have pointed out, most of Wordsworth's ideas in the Preface are not themselves original. The idea that the representation of rural life allows the poet to give the purest expression to universal passions (ll. 106-19)⁸ is a basic idea of pastoral, and the idea that poetry is concerned with permanent things, and that 'truth' is 'not individual and local, but general', was a commonplace of eighteenth-century criticism. Wordsworth was not the first to criticize empty diction; Pope and the Scriblerians did so too. Wordsworth's insistence that the poet should

⁶ See Jordan 1976: 56, 59. In the *Monthly Review* (1799) Dr Burney concludes that a great deal of 'genius and originality are discovered in this publication' (Burney 1972: 57).

⁷ See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. George Watson (London: Dent, 1965, repr. 1971), 42.

⁸ Wordsworth's observation that the language of ordinary men must be 'purified' of its 'defects' (l. 120) implies that representation must be stylized to a certain degree.

'choose incidents and situations from common life' (ll. 96-7) would surely have pleased Cowper, the poet of domestic life.⁹ Wordsworth's intention to use 'the language really used by men' (ll. 98-9) seems to owe something to Burns's example (*for a' that* Wordsworth is not a dialect poet), and his aim 'to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement' (ll. 177-9) draws on the same Lockean tradition as Sterne, who would surely have agreed that it is feeling that gives meaning to action, not vice versa (ll. 210-12). (As Samuel Johnson famously said about reading Richardson, one must 'consider the story as only giving occasion to the sentiment'.)¹⁰ Nor was Wordsworth's hostility to didactic verse on scientific topics in any way exceptional (ll. 587-613). What does seem new is his emphasis on a radical kind of *pleasure*. As early as the Advertisement of 1798 (quoted at beginning of this paper), Wordsworth says he aims 'to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure'. Lionel Trilling has drawn attention to Wordsworth's repeated emphasis in the Preface on 'giving pleasure' (l. 467), especially in the expanded 1802 version, in which he stresses the poet's 'necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a Human Being' (ll. 505-10). This necessity

is an acknowledgment of the beauty of the universe, an acknowledgment the more sincere, because it is not formal, but indirect; it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love; further, it is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves. (ll. 516-22).

Trilling points out that this statement is 'bold to the point of being shocking, for it echoes and controverts St. Paul's sentence which tells us that "we live, and move, and have our being" in God (Acts 17:28)' (Trilling 1966: 58). Wordsworth's description of giving poetic pleasure as 'a task light and easy' refers even more audaciously to Christ's words, 'For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:30). The implied idea of poetry as a secular religion *is* distinctly modern, and does *not* seem to be a great deal older than Wordsworth, and the changes attendant on

⁹ And the reviewer in the *British Critic* observed that Coleridge emulated *The Task* in his 'conversational' poem, 'The Nightingale'; *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Brett and Jones, 2nd edn, 329.

¹⁰ Boswell 1887: II, 175. In McGann's opinion, 'Wordsworth's "Preface" [...] is a sentimental manifesto in the strictest sense'; 1996: 121.

this conception of literature *do* seem to merit the word 'revolutionary'. Wordsworth repeatedly emphasizes the novelty of what he is saying. 'A practical faith in the opinions which I am wishing to establish', he declares,

is almost unknown. If my conclusions are admitted, and carried out as far as they must be carried if admitted at all, our judgments concerning the works of the greatest Poets both ancient and modern will be far different from what they are at present [...] (ll. 412-14)

And the way in which he proceeds to discuss this new poetry of pleasure is itself very revealing. Wordsworth does not ask 'What is Poetry?', but 'What is a Poet?' (l. 422). The shift in focus from the poem to the poet, and from the poetic result to the creative process which brings it forth (ll. 422ff., 797ff.), is new. And as Wilkie points out, Wordsworth's tone itself—'militantly astrigent' (Danby 1960: 16) as well as anxious and enthusiastic—suggests a new relationship between the poet and his audience, in which the poet demands that the audience submit to a process of aesthetic self-discipline to make themselves ready to receive his Word. Jack Stillinger has recently claimed that *Lyrical Ballads*, with its deliberately 'mysterious and puzzling' poems, marks

the beginning of a kind of interpretative democracy in which it is the individual reader, rather than the author, who determines the meanings in a literary work. (Stillinger 2000: 71)

But the Preface seems equally novel in its insistence on the poet's authority to tell the reader how to read. In this blend of authorial assertiveness and passionate egalitarianism, *Lyrical Ballads* looks forward to the long prose preface of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855). As Wilkie suggests, the manifesto is no longer presented as detachable from the work of art, but as a path to its origins, and thus to its meaning. Wordsworth's Preface has shown a remarkable power to influence responses to *Lyrical Ballads*, as indeed to other works. When John Stuart Mill describes in his autobiography the importance of reading Wordsworth during the crisis in his youth, his prose is saturated with the language of the Preface:

What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not merely outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. (quoted in Danby 1960: 2)

This strikes Danby (1960: 2) as 'an odd way of describing Wordsworth's best achievements as a poet'. But it seems to me that Mill is subconsciously remembering Wordsworth's dictum that the purpose of his poetry is to show how our ideas and feelings are associated in a state of excitement (ll. 175-9). Mill has internalized the language of the Preface; it has colored his experience of the verse, and thus become integral to his view of Wordsworth's poetry.

One of Wordsworth's greatest claims to originality, in poetic theory as well as in practice, lies in fusing two traditions: on the one hand, the pastoral practice of using representations of rural simplicity to express universal passions in the purest form, and on the other, the austere realism of Crabbe's 'anti-pastoral' mode, with its firm commitment to what Crabbe considered lived experience (Barrell and Bull 1974: 427). 'Michael' is the great example of this synthetic achievement (Sambrook 1983: 126-7). But Wordsworth's experiments with the ballad form represent his most daring attempts to infuse the pastoral tradition with an unprecedentedly intimate, even humorous, sympathy with rural life and popular culture. It seems significant that the poems featuring Wordsworth's so-called 'simple' style, for instance 'Goody Blake', 'The Idiot Boy', and 'Simon Lee', are those which most sharply divided nineteenth-century taste, puzzling many readers and eliciting a great number of parodies. Even today these poems are sometimes read as experiments in cultivating real simplicity, either for its own sake or for realistic or humanitarian purposes, rather than as formally sophisticated experiments with traditional materials. Wilkie, for instance, speaks of Wordsworth's 'attempt to present rustics and their language and other even less arty subjects *virtually raw*' (Wilkie 1973: 207, my emphasis). The saving word here is 'virtually'. J. R. Watson's Longman survey of *English Poetry of the Romantic Period* tells us that, in order to convey the humanitarian concerns of the poems with the greatest possible immediacy, verbal and narrative art has been sacrificed in a 'radically new' way:

The language [of *Lyrical Ballads*...] intentionally undercuts the felicities of art. There is no elegance in 'The Thorn', because elegance is not required; there is no tale in 'Simon Lee', because a tale would allow the reader to enjoy something other than the dreadful contemplation of old age. (Watson 1989: 126)

This puritanical severity compares oddly with Wordsworth's remark that he 'never wrote anything with so much glee' as 'The Idiot Boy' (Jacobus 1976: 250), and with the explicit hedonism of the Preface. But though I

wonder whether 'elegance' can be said to have been sacrificed in 'The Thorn', which strikes me as an extremely elegant poem (not least in formal terms), I will offer a reading of some of its lines which suggests a conclusion similar to Watson's. Wordsworth's ballad imitations *do* use exceptionally simple language, and this *was* 'radically new', though simple language was hardly novel in itself, especially in popular verse. Wordsworth's use of simple language was new in part *because* it was elegant: it was designed to give sophisticated pleasure. That partly explains why it also caused, and continues to cause, acute embarrassment. 'The Thorn' presents the clearest instance of this readerly discomfort. As Stephen Gill observes, 'readers have generally found [the poem] one of the most uncomfortable of all the lyrical ballads' (1989: 187), and the rhyming couplet which ends the third stanza is the locus classicus of Wordsworthian embarrassment. Wordsworth himself finally succumbed to this pudor and altered the lines in 1820. The offending couplet describes a muddy pond:

I've measured it from side to side:

'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide. (32-3)

Wordsworth's disciple Henry Crabb Robinson told the poet that 'he dared not read those lines aloud for fear of ridicule' (Darbishire 1950: 48-9). Many twentieth-century critics have cringed at their 'unendurable banality' (Gill 1989: 187). But Wordsworth's terse reply to Robinson was adamant: *They ought to be liked* (Darbishire 1950: 49).

Nevertheless, he had anticipated criticism. In the 1798 Advertisement he warned readers that the narrator of 'The Thorn' was not to be associated with the author himself, and in 1800 he added a fulsome note explaining that the poem was (in effect) a dramatic monologue. The question of whether this is really so is too complex to discuss here;¹¹ I

¹¹ I share Jacobus's view that 'The Thorn' is not, or not merely, a dramatic monologue: that the interest is primarily geared towards the tale and not the teller; see Jacobus 1976: 248, but see also Parrish's influential discussion, 1973: 97-112. The issue is crucial, and one is easily confused by the many versions of the text: in Duncan Wu's recent student anthology, which would appear to follow the 1798 edition, we find the whole poem bracketed by inverted commas, as it did not appear until 1815; see *Romanticism: An Anthology*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 234-40. The *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, gen. eds M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt, 7th edn (2000), vol. II, also dates its text 1798 while silently adopting the inverted commas.

mention Wordsworth's note to draw attention to his anxiousness about 'The Thorn's' reception.

Criticism duly came from many quarters, not least from Francis Jeffrey, famous to posterity as the scourge of what he called the 'Lake School'. Paradoxically, perhaps, Jeffrey's dismissive criticism of 'The Thorn' (in 1808) seems to me a very accurate reflection of Wordsworth's brilliant achievement in that poem:

A frail damsel is a character common enough in most poems; and one upon which many fine and pathetic lines have been expended. Mr. Wordsworth has written more than three hundred lines on that subject: but, instead of new images of tenderness, or delicate representation of intelligible feelings, he has contrived to tell us nothing whatever of the unfortunate fair one, but that her name is Martha Ray; and that she goes up to the top of a hill, in a red cloak, and cries 'Oh misery!' All the rest of the poem is filled with a description of an old thorn and a pond, and of the silly stories which the neighbouring old women told about them.¹²

There we have the poem in a nutshell. As later critics have also observed, it is an 'anti-ballad' (Gravil 1982).¹³ More specifically, it seems, Jeffrey was outraged that Wordsworth had not written a 'sentimental' poem in the tradition of the literature of 'sensibility'. *New images of tenderness, the delicate representation of intelligible feelings*: these are the stock-in-trade of sentimental literature. The assumption in this kind of literature is that there is a language of the feelings, that this language is 'intelligible', and that it can be mastered by interpreting its physical manifestations (Fairer 1999: 132-6). It is by means of this attention to the body in sentimental literature that moral feeling (such as virtuous outrage) is commonly eroticized (McGann 1996: 7; Goring 2001: xi-xxxvi), as in the seduction scene of Wordsworth's German source. This popular literary ballad by Gottfried Bürger, translated into English as 'The Lass of Fair Wone' in 1796, tells the story of a minister's daughter who is seduced, gives birth to a child, kills it, repents, buries the infant, is hanged in view of its grave, and haunts the spot as a ghost. In the seduction scene the physical signs of the maiden's distress—her heart beating, her breast heaving—powerfully

¹² *Edinburgh Review* XII (April 1808), 135, in Arthur Pollard, ed., *Crabbe: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 57.

¹³ According to Parrish, 'The difference between Bürger's "Lass of Fair Wone" and "The Thorn" is plainly the difference between a ballad and a lyrical ballad'; Parrish 1973: 109.

charge the description of her rape; her innocence is 'blasted' not merely by male lust but by 'the glowing *breath* of lust'.¹⁴ As critics have noted, Wordsworth 'deplored the sensationalism of Bürger's poems' (Gravil 1982: 49). He may well have been thinking of 'The Lass of Fair Wone' when he denounced, as a specifically urban phenomenon, the 'degrading thirst for outrageous stimulation' (ll. 230-58) which, according to the Preface, characterized popular taste.¹⁵ Wordsworth explicitly identifies the poems of *Lyrical Ballads* as the tangible efforts of his endeavour 'to counteract' this taste (ll. 247-8).¹⁶ And nowhere, I think, does he succeed as spectacularly as in 'The Thorn'.

The main contrast between 'The Lass of Fair Wone' and 'The Thorn' is well understood (Averill 1980: 199). The contrast between the dewy sensationalism of the German ballad and Wordsworth's dry restraint is immediately evident. In Bürger's ballad every detail of the woman's physical suffering and mental anguish is described in disagreeably sensuous detail. We are made to observe the robes growing tight around her pregnant belly, the 'bloody wales' her father raises on 'her lily skin' when he discovers the pregnancy, and the 'rending pains and darting throes' which 'assail her shuddering frame' as she gives birth. We hear the newborn baby's cry, and witness the mother's piercing the infant's 'tender heart' with her hairpin, then her digging of a shallow grave 'with bloody nails'. To top it off we are given her cries of repentance and her admission that she deserves to be picked clean by ravens on the gibbet, from which her skull, afterwards, 'seems to eye the barren grave'. Bürger not only eroticizes the suffering woman, but, as Mary Jacobus has pointed out, 'his interest in the mother's sin leaves no room for her suffering'. In contrast, what do we find in Wordsworth?

High on a mountain's highest ridge,
Where oft the stormy winter gale
Cuts like a scythe, while through the clouds
It sweeps from vale to vale,

¹⁴ 'The Lass of Fair Wone' appeared in *Monthly Magazine* I (April 1796), 223-4, and is printed in Jacobus 1976: 284-88. The emphasis on 'breath' is mine.

¹⁵ Averill 1980: 183. Jacobus 1976: 224 suggests that Wordsworth had Bürger's 'Lenore' in mind.

¹⁶ For an argument that 'the pursuit of poetic pleasure rather than the arousal of excitement [...] links Wordsworth to sensationalist literature', see Izenberg 1998: 120.

How Revolutionary Was *Lyrical Ballads* (1798-1800)?

Not five yards from the mountain path,
This Thorn you on your left espy;
And to the left, three yards beyond,
You see a little muddy Pond
Of water never dry;
I've measured it from side to side:
'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide. ('The Thorn', stanza III: lines 23-33)

Critics have observed the way in which the first four lines, describing the mountain's height and the limitless space of the skies and the storms which sweep the valleys, contrast with the description of the small spot in the remaining seven lines, with those famously minute directions and measurements which admit of such mortifying accuracy. Five yards off the path, three yards to the left, three feet long, two feet wide.¹⁷ 'Of water never dry' tells us that the little muddy pond is deep; it may be puddle-sized in surface area, but not in depth. Even if contemporary readers hadn't already guessed the poem's theme—and the may tree, as Jacobus points out, was commonly associated in literature with illegitimate birth and infanticide (Jacobus 1976: 241)—they would know, as I think all readers do instinctively, that the gratuitous placing of details like the height of the thorn ('Not higher than a two years' child'), the comparison of the mound of moss to an infant's grave in size, and (especially) the exact measurements of the pool—this placing of details promises that the scene of a crime will duly be revealed. The spot on which the German ballad turns measures 'three spans in length', under which the baby is buried and on which no grass ever grows. It is *because* Wordsworth counts on his readers' expectations of a story about a child murder that he waits until the end of the poem to have the narrator confess that nobody knows what actually happened, and the local people only agree, but cannot prove, that a child is buried under the mound of moss. In 'The Thorn' we do not even know whether 'a child was born or no' (l. 159). But the little muddy pond is never dry. 'Tis three feet long and two feet wide. We are made to *imagine*, not merely witness, a mother's murder of her child, simply because we are given precise measurements and nothing else.

The measurements make us think logically about the murder, and in doing so it seems to me we inevitably imagine ourselves performing the

¹⁷ I am paraphrasing Bateson 1965: 6.

action. Is it possible to drown a baby in a pool of such-and-such dimensions (helpfully specified)? We imagine ourselves doing it. Wordsworth thus diverts attention from the mother just as the crime is placed before the reader's imagination: we imagine the sin, as it were, without the sinner, or rather *in the sinner's place*. This, as much as the deliberate shock of bathetic indecorum, is probably what has made so many readers feel uneasy: empathy is enforced while access to the object of empathy is denied. As Jeffrey says, Wordsworth

has contrived to tell us nothing whatever of the unfortunate fair one, but that her name is Martha Ray; and that she goes up to the top of a hill, in a red cloak, and cries 'Oh misery!'

The effect of this, as Paul Sheats has noticed, confers 'power', not 'pity', on the awesome figure of Martha Ray (Sheats 1991: 99). Jeffrey's reference to 'the fair one' interestingly betrays his own assumption that she is indeed 'fair', as convention demands. In fact Wordsworth does not give a single hint about her physical appearance. The narrator says that when he saw her face, 'that was enough for me', and he turned around (ll. 200-1). All we know is that the woman's presence makes a powerful impression on the narrator. What Wordsworth does tell us is that she once was happy, and that she now is 'wretched'. Her wretchedness is the poem's mystery, and it is essential to the poem that her wretchedness resist the demands of sentimental analysis, and remain impenetrable. As Jeffrey points out, her words are opaque: they consist of the single refrain, 'Oh woe is me! Oh misery!' Beyond this cliché, Jeffrey complains, her feelings remain 'unintelligible'. But they are intelligible to the *imagination*, as Wordsworth surely wished. In 'Hart's Leap Well'—another poem modelled on yet departing from a Bürger ballad—the narrator declares that

The moving accident is not my trade:
To freeze the blood I have no ready arts:
'Tis my delight, alone in summer shade,
To pipe a simple song to thinking hearts (ll. 97-100)¹⁸

Thinking hearts: this paradoxical phrase says much about the Romantic ideal of the imagination. What Wordsworth achieves in 'The Thorn' is to

¹⁸ See discussion in Izenberg 1998: 119.

render the woman's feelings not unintelligible to emotive thought but *impregnable*: resistant to the discourse of sentimental analysis. The salient features of the German ballad all conspire to gratify readerly desires to finger the woman's guilty secret, desires which Wordsworth clearly thinks ought *not* to be gratified. That is why I too feel his chillingly bathetic line—"Tis three feet long, and two feet wide"—*should be liked*.

I hope to have suggested, then, with my remarks on these famous lines, that Wordsworth accomplishes at least four things in 'The Thorn'. In the first place he de-eroticizes the figure of the woman. Secondly, he renders her anguish and her person inscrutable, while giving her figure a powerful presence through narrative. In the third place he ensures that the reader's sympathetic response must be projected by his or her own imagination, virtually unmediated by direct description. And finally he achieves this in a relentlessly minimalist fashion, which is not primitive but very consciously designed and artfully achieved.

My reading of 'The Thorn' runs parallel to Sheats's much fuller reading (1991). He argues that the bathos of the famous lines has a *political* dimension which suggests that Wordsworth's 'commitment to the humanitarian ends of the French Revolution had not diminished in 1798' (100). This sounds fair enough to me, though I am less confident that 'the form and rhetoric' of Wordsworth's ballads actually 'reincarnates the heuristic violence of 1792', or that Wordsworth's use of aesthetic shock tactics risked 'once again the hopes of 1789' (100). I, too, read 'The Thorn' as an 'attempt to purify Martha Ray's suffering', though in a way that relates specifically to *sexual* politics. By concentrating on the demonstrable changes Wordsworth made to his source, we are able to trace his deliberate and radical intervention in sexual politics, or the sexual politics of sentimental literature.

I am by no means about to suggest that Wordsworth was a revolutionary proto-feminist. But in its artful resistance to sentimentalism and to the male forms of power on which the literature of sensibility depends, 'The Thorn' does represent a radical experiment. In this connection 'revolutionary' might be hyperbolic, but not quite unjustified.

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How Revolutionary Was *Lyrical Ballads* (1798-1800)?

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