

# Did Wordsworth Lie about *Lyrical Ballads*?

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**Abstract:** The aim of this essay is to reaffirm Wordsworth's literary and political integrity by proving the veracity of his claim that the poems in the Preface were experiments. It argues against the skepticism of the New Historicist position which holds that Wordsworth was always deeply conservative, even when considering his early work, *Lyrical Ballads*, and that, consequently, Wordsworth's claim that the *Ballads* is a literary experiment does nothing to guarantee his posthumous reputation as a poet with radical political ideas. This position on Wordsworth was compounded by Robert Mayo's groundbreaking argument that his poems are not new, especially if we compare them with the kind of poetry that was already being published in magazines, and thus the poet's claim can no longer be taken at face value. Theodor Adorno, however, views the meaning of experiment as a way of testing the unknown, a way of foregrounding unsanctioned technical procedures at a historical moment in literature as well as in music. Wordsworth's anxiety, shown in the Preface, about the experimental nature of these poems can be seen as genuine once we understand that he was addressing book readers, not magazine readers.

**Key words:** *Lyrical Ballads*; William Wordsworth; New Historicism; magazine poetry

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**标题：**《抒情歌谣集》：华兹华斯说谎了吗？

**内容摘要：**有学者从新历史主义出发，认为华兹华斯在骨子里一直是保守的，包括他早期的《抒情歌谣集》也是如此，因此他在该诗集的序中声称这部诗集是一个文学实验，并不能支撑他去世之后被认为是一位政治激进诗人的声誉。这一立场肇始于罗伯特·马约的爆炸性观点。他认为，华兹华斯的诗歌并无新意，尤其是与当时的杂志上发表的诗歌相比较而言，所以诗人的表面声言并不足信。本文对这一怀疑主义观点提出反对，通过论证华兹华斯在序中宣称诗集作品的实验性时的真诚态度，重新肯定了华兹华斯在诗歌和政治上的诚实品格。本文借用阿多诺有关实验的观点，即实验是对未知的测试、对文艺史上某一时期尚未得到认可的技术手段的凸显，认为诗人在该诗集的序中针对诗歌的实验性所流露出来焦虑无疑是一种真诚流露，尤其是当我们认识到一点的时候，即：诗人的这一宣示是面

对图书读者而非期刊读者。

**关键词：**《抒情歌谣集》；华兹华斯；新历史主义；杂志诗歌

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The phrasing of William Wordsworth's declaration in the Advertisement for *Lyrical Ballads*—"The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments"—has, over the course of time, become burdened with literary and political controversy. At its heart is the endless debate on proving or disproving Wordsworth's claim that the ballads are experiments. In one corner, we have the traditional critics who not only accept Wordsworth's claims that the poems were "a complete change" but also generally agree that the poems were reflective of the poet's radical politics.<sup>①</sup> In the other corner, we have those critics whose skepticism regarding the validity of the declaration has led them to cast a cynical Foucauldian eye on Wordsworth's radical political orientation. In other words, by dismissing the proposition that the *Ballads* were experiments, the corollary that Wordsworth was at heart a political conservative is reached. Among the textual naysayers is Marilyn Butler, who contends that there is really nothing radical about the poetic form used by Wordsworth in this collection: "[w]e should dismiss at the outset the belief, still widely held, that Wordsworth's contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798 represent an altogether new kind of poetry" (58). James Chandler takes an even stronger polemical position when he "rejects Hazlitt's claim about the motive for Wordsworth's poetical experiments" (6). Such skepticism on Wordsworth's statement has been in vogue since the apotheosis of New Historicism and lies behind Janice Peritz's assertion that it is almost "impossible to believe that Wordsworthian subjectivity corresponds to either a radical or a revolutionary political project" (559).<sup>②</sup>

Consequently, we are put into a situation where doubt must be cast not just on Wordsworth's political orientation but also his personal integrity. Is it still possible, then, to argue that the Preface's carefully phrased language is, consciously or subconsciously, part of a wider authorial concern: namely, that Wordsworth wanted his readers to consider his poems as literary experiments which would challenge prevailing poetic conventions? Or, to whittle the question down, did Wordsworth lie about the *Lyrical Ballads*? Rather than becoming mired in the arguments over the political content of the poems or his political performances, this essay endeavors to reaffirm the poet's literary and political integrity by proving the veracity of his claim that the poems were experiments.

In truth, the traditional view, which acknowledged the poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* as "experiments," had begun to lose its strength some time prior to the emergence of New Historicism. Robert Mayo was one of the first to proclaim this new orientation when he stated that the poems "were not such a 'complete change' as some writers would have us believe" (486). In the wake of Mayo's much heralded ground-breaking essay, Robert Hume triumphantly exclaimed,

“all of a sudden Wordsworth seems a great deal less of an innovator” (139). Since then, the floodgates have indeed been opened for a deluge of criticism which places a question mark over Wordsworth’s integrity as a poetic innovator with radical views. John Jordan is a good example of this line of thinking when he writes: “Wordsworth’s protestations of unpopular novelty seem perverse” because, as the poet clarifies himself in a letter, the only reason that the *Lyrical Ballads* were published was “to make money” (111).<sup>③</sup> It is true that Wordsworth was in financial difficulty at this time, but have we really become so cynical to believe that money was the only motive behind the publishing of these poems? We all know that the surest way for an artist to make money is to forgo the experimental for the popular. With all his financial worries, Wordsworth must have been sensible enough to know this. Jordan, perhaps realizing this, instantly contradicts himself when he concedes that: “It would have seemed more sensible for him to have tried to smooth over the differences and stress the similarities with the poetry people were then reading and buying” (111). In fact, Dorothy Wordsworth reveals that they did not expect the *Ballads* to sell well: “The first volume sold much better than we expected” (*Letters* 297). Why, then, did Wordsworth risk his financial status – including, as it turns out, his integrity as perceived by posterity – by overstating that the poems were experiments? By apprising modern readers of the fact that there were indeed similar poems in the current magazines, Mayo’s essay has undoubtedly placed a question mark in front of the hitherto claims of Wordsworth’s radical intentions. But true as Mayo’s investigations are, surely Wordsworth’s contemporary readers must have also known of the existence of similar poems in the magazines. In this case, why would the poet risk embarrassment by lying to such a knowledgeable audience? This is a significant question that needs answering. If he did lie, then we have to seriously consider his political and artistic integrity.

Some scholars have tried to save Wordsworth from the charge of dishonesty by focusing on the differences between the *Ballads* and the magazine poems. For the defense, Heather Glen puts forth the rough and ready quality of Wordsworth poems: “Where the magazine verse is elegant and finished, these poems are awkward and inconclusive.” Glen goes on to find a kindred spirit in Blake who used his own unconventional poetry as a vehicle for “challenging the ways of thinking and feeling which the readers he was addressing would have expected...” (50). To buttress such a position, Yu Liu, in his “Revaluating Revolution and Radicalness in the *Lyrical Ballads*,” argues that the *Ballads*’ untypical narrative scheme successfully synergizes the poet’s “radical poetics and radical politics” (757). And then we have Juan Pellicer who, in his recent essay “How Revolutionary Was *Lyrical Ballads* (1798-1800)?” exhumes, in a timely fashion, Raymond Williams’s notion of an actively sympathetic language redolent in the poet’s rural evocations.<sup>④</sup> For him, it is this experimenting with the ballad form that secures the proof that these poems were markedly different from the rural poems in the magazines. Pellicer goes only half-way here: although he helps rescue Wordsworth’s damaged poetic reputation, he does not convincingly repudiate the accusation of dishonesty.

These advocates for the poet’s experiments seem to be less interested in recovering Wordsworth’s disputed integrity and more concerned with pushing the point home on how Wordsworth’s poems are different from those in the contemporary magazines. In short, they brush

aside the more important issue of demonstrating whether Wordsworth was true to his prefatory declaration that his poems are not only different but also represent new experiments in radical expression. Even Mayo concedes that the poems are qualitatively different from the kind published in magazines: “[t]he student who approaches the *Lyrical Ballads* by way of the magazines may be struck first by differences rather than by resemblances” because “[t]he ‘common taste’ of the miscellanies not only approved the ‘gaudy’ and ‘inane’; it was in most respects extremely conservative, if not antique” (488). On the basis that the magazines were inundated with popular poems which sought the critical imprimatur of venerated poets such as Alexander Pope and Dr. Johnson, Mayo concludes that it was the “the groundswell of popular favor” and “the backwash of Augustan era” poetry that elevated the *Lyrical Ballads* to literary eminence (489). Mayo’s charge against Wordsworth is that the form might be experimental but subject matter and expression are both commonplace and populist. In short, if Wordsworth had used the word “experiments” for poems that are different only in style or narrative, it would be hard to vindicate himself in the face of such widespread rural mimeses.

In the Advertisement, Wordsworth did not actually say the poems should be considered as a “complete change” as Mayo criticizes, but as “experiments.” The critics, who seemed to be shocked by the fact that they are not a “complete change,” appear to have problems understanding the semantic differences between this phrase and the word “experiments.” The literal meaning of experiment is “test” and not “complete change”; if we accept this definition, then provability rests on whether the poems are what they say they are: experiments. Critics like Mayo seem to believe that Wordsworth signally failed to live up to this intention (487). The question we should raise here, however, is whether it is fair to compare the *Lyrical Ballads*, a book of poems, to the numerous poems that were being published in magazines during the same time. More specifically, we need to determine if there were any qualitative differences, as Wordsworth suggests, between magazine readers and book readers. There are some critics who try to reveal what kind of readership Wordsworth had in mind in the *Lyrical Ballads*. In *The Hidden Wordsworth*, Kenneth Johnston, after delineating an exhaustive literary history on the subject, suggests that Wordsworth was responding in the Advertisement to the Anti-Jacobin movement’s call for “a strong national poet.” The invocation of “readers of superior judgment” should therefore be seen as a satirical expression against the philistine inference of: “lower-class bumpkins barging into a genteel eighteenth-century drawing room” (436).

A number of critics, however, disagree with Johnston’s identification of the type of reader that the collection was aimed at. Glen states that readers who sympathized with and subscribed to such a radical magazine as the *Monthly Magazine* might be expected to buy the *Ballads*: “They seem to have been liberal, educated men and women (the magazine displays some interest in the rights of women), who were prepared to read sober, philosophical discussion on moral and aesthetic subjects” (52). The magazine readers, however, were composed of more diverse groups than the book readers. In his book *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832*, Jon Klancher emphasizes a heterogeneous readership by showing how writers “distinguish[ed]” themselves “among conflicting audiences” (11). They were unlike the eighteenth-century journals

published after 1790, because, as they multiplied, both “the cultivated middle-class audience, and less sophisticated readerships” were included as their patrons (20). He continues to explain that among those writers, Wordsworth tried to distinguish two groups in the Preface of 1800: the rustic people and the middle-class audience “debased by popular cultural production” (37). However, he fails to elaborate on why Wordsworth would be so concerned with the reaction of those readers already familiar with how rural life was depicted in magazine poetry. Nikki Hessel investigates this issue in her essay “The Opposite of News: Rethinking the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* and the Mass Media,” highlighting “the battle between newspapers and books for readers” existing in 1800. She argues that during this period, Wordsworth began to acquire a “lifelong distaste” for “the growth of an unregulated reading public,” and when he attacked readers’ tastes, he was impugning the type who read newspapers and other forms of daily journalism rather than the type who consumed monthly reviews and magazines (332-33). Although she includes the magazines in the book category and separates newspapers from books, my argument goes further by insisting that book readers should be seen as a special case and therefore need to be treated differently from newspaper and magazine readers. The litmus test for proving Wordsworth’s experiments lies in the fact that books, unlike newspapers and magazines, were untried ground for political and artistic innovation.

Kevin Gilmartin claims in his “Radical Print Culture in Periodical Form” that around 1800, “the weekly newspaper or pamphlet of political argument and comment was the most important print organ of radical protest” (39). If periodicals were a suitable form for publication on politically radical issues, it can be assumed that they were also a suitable form for radical literary works. In other words, books tended to be more conservative, politically and literarily, than periodicals during this period of time. It is therefore in this medium, the world of books, where Wordsworth’s disputed radicalism should be tested. According to Richard Altick, during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, books were “a luxury,” and those who purchased them were confined to a relatively small number of people. Economic purchasing power was a key factor in this: “The usual price of an octavo rose to 12s. or 14s., and that of a quarto to as much as two guineas” (260). The price of books, then, (if we factor in that the average wage for laborers was 10 shillings per week) would have been a major reason why they were beyond the purchasing power of ordinary households. As Alan Boehm points out, “finely printed books were produced for elites, and the trend excluded those who did not command the financial means to indulge large sums of money on books” (468). Book readers were a much more privileged class than the readers of any other printed forms in this period. On this basis, William Rowland’s assumption appears to be quite persuasive: “The advertisement to the 1798 edition seems confidently addressed to leisured upper- and middle-class readers” (39). Therefore, it can be said that in the Advertisement, Wordsworth was talking to the book reader rather than the general reader, who was unused to reading anything too out of the ordinary.

If we approach the issue in this context, then the word “experiments” is a legitimate one. Regarding the experiments, Mayo expresses his skepticism by using the polemically loaded word “complete”: “The question is not whether the *Ballads* were altogether conventional, which no

one would attempt to affirm, but whether they were completely out of touch with popular taste” (491). The word “completely” is a bit strong, but we can at least agree that generally the book readers were instinctively, if not completely, hostile to popular taste, and that the *Ballads* were indeed different from the expected norm. That they were well-educated and sophisticated is evident insofar as their privileged upbringing and reading habits made them thus. In this sense, their disapproval of the poetic style that was popular in the magazines, suggests that Wordsworth’s concern that the readers for the *Ballads* would have been out of touch with popular taste should be regarded as legitimate. Wordsworth would not have worried about the kind of readers who were already familiar with those poems in the magazines; nor would his friends have advised him “to prefix a systematic defense of the theory upon which the Poems were written” (242). He seemed to know that he was taking a risk because he was obviously aware of his book readers’ conservatism, political as well as literary.

When Wordsworth addresses his readers in the Advertisement, he seems to be at pains to distinguish them from the general reader: “Readers of superior judgement may disapprove of the style in which many of these pieces are executed; it must be expected that many lines and phrases will not exactly suit their taste. It will perhaps appear to them, that wishing to avoid the prevalent fault of the day, the author has sometimes descended too low, and that many of his expressions are too familiar, and not of sufficient dignity” (7).<sup>⑤</sup> Wordsworth is inserting his readers into a category of “superior judgement,” and then proceeds to suggest that “sufficient dignity” is a possible corollary of that judgement. One gets the sense here of a target audience far removed from the less discriminating general reader. Also, he is concerned that his poems will not “suit their taste” because he will deal with materials which are “too low,” “too familiar,” and “not of sufficient dignity.” It suggests, in a flattering way, that the reader, being furnished with “superior judgement” and “sufficient dignity,” will have the requisite cultural amplitude to admit something unconventional into his reading purview. Such implicit dismissal of the magazine/newspaper consumer clearly shows Wordsworth’s intention to demarcate his specialized audience from a general readership. It is evident from the Preface that the poet is worried that certain preconceptions about art and culture may influence his audience to the detriment. Unless his concern about giving offence is exaggerated, it is clear from the Preface’s tone that Wordsworth really did think he was throwing a proverbial grenade into a very conservative reading community. To add credence to this line of argument, such a conservative group would be obviously unfamiliar with experimental poetry and, moreover, would have little notion of what was meant by real language. That is why Wordsworth goes to great pains to forewarn his intended readers about what they were about to experience: “Poems so *materially* different from those upon which general approbation is at present bestowed”(243) (my italics). When he enquires after “general approbation,” it may sound that he is seeking sanction from his book readers. Critics like Mayo seem to underplay the significance of experimentation in the process of creating literary works, contending that modern readers have perhaps been misled by the ambiguities of the Advertisement of 1798, which seems to claim more than it actually does. In addition, he continues to express his skepticism about what is exactly experimental in the collection: “Is it the language alone? Or

is it the style in a larger sense? Or does it involve also the materials of poetry--‘human passions, human characters, and human incidents’?” (491).

As a way of getting through this impasse, it would perhaps be politic to take recourse to the aesthetic theory of musicologist and literary critic Theodor Adorno. Describing the method in which an artist chooses new materials in creating artworks, Adorno uses the term “material” in a broad sense. For him, it incorporates the very stuff that “artists work with... including words, colors, sounds, associations of every sort and every technique ever developed.” Thus the very notion of aesthetic form must also be placed within the category of materiality; such inclusiveness of form and content means that artists have to make a decision about everything needed to create a work of art (*Aesthetic Theory* [hereafter *AT*] 147-48). He insists that the meaning of experiment is really a way of testing the unknown, a way of foregrounding “unsanctioned technical procedures” (*AT* 23). The element of surprise in an experimental work is critical here; for the artistic evaluation of a work must entail “something qualitatively different: that the artistic subject employs methods whose objective results cannot be foreseen” (*AT* 24). This definition can be applied to Wordsworth’s experiments in the sense that he tries to test unsanctioned poems in the medium of books, and, since they are following no known paradigm, the results cannot be predicted.

According to Max Paddison, Adorno was against the conventional concept of what signifies a material entity, especially that which “seems to have been taken as a given, and either has remained largely unquestioned or has included a notion of the ‘material’ as ‘raw material’” (66). The composer who is in a dialectical relationship with musical material can compose “a radical music which attempts in various ways to negate the status quo” in which his/her “subjectivity, as spontaneity, serves to mediate the contradictions of the material, contradictions which are of themselves social and historical in origin” (102, 188). Specifically, the moment of making a decision is not natural but historical, as is the moment when an artist chooses his/her subjective artistic material at a variance with the conventional expectations of a social formation. In this sense, materials, as a formal language, can express themselves as social dissonance.

This notion of dissonance is analogous to what HaukeBrunkhorst describes as “experimental freedom.” Extrapolating on Adorno’s idea that “spontaneity is vitally contrary to oppression,” he perceives “experimental freedom” as “the creation of new alternatives which crumble the crust of convention” (124). Moreover, in the same way that Wordsworth emphasizes spontaneity in composing poetry, Adorno attests that “[g]enius is purported to be the individual whose spontaneity coincides with the action of the absolute subject. This is correct insofar as the individuation of artworks, mediated by spontaneity is that in them by which they are objectivated” (*AT* 170). He uses the term “originality” to express the spontaneous moment when a subject “no longer obeys what it has been associated with ever since it began to be self-consciously reflected upon.” For example, he suggests, this is one way of explaining “the difference between Bach and his contemporaries” (*AT* 172). Instead of the homophonic *style galant*, which was dominant in eighteenth century music, a polyphonic style was chosen by Bach in order “to resist the inexorable growth of the commodity-character of music” (*Prisms* 142).

Adorno’s idea that liberation from conventional forms reflects political inclination is

applicable to literature also. Although he explains the concept of experiments mainly for modern art forms, it can apply just as well to the Romantic period. He does not like Neoclassicism because it does not allow for experimentation: “Neoclassicism faltered because it deluded itself with the goal of achieving an ideal of objectivity” (AT 174). What he praises as experimental, whether in music or in literature, is the kind of art that brings to the surface the very real dichotomies existing in society. His point is that an experimental attempt should not be interpreted as an individual responding to social change, but rather should be seen as an instance of conjuncture whereby creative genius responds spontaneously to the historical moment.

Wordsworth’s experimental poems manifest themselves as the result of his conscious effort to express the historical moment of ordinary people using real language. David Simpson argues that this is one of the differences between Coleridge and Wordsworth: “Almost all of Coleridge’s objections to Wordsworth depend upon the degree to which certain features of his poetry inhibit or refuse the illusion of organic form” (215). Unlike Coleridge, Wordsworth, Simpson claims, tries to write poems “under particular constraints of time and place” because for him, “the poet is always positioned as speaking from within the community he observes” (220). Indeed, Wordsworth thinks that the process of producing poems is somewhat mechanical: “while [a poet] describes and imitates passion, his employment is in some degree mechanical” (256). For him, a poet is just a man speaking to men, not a genius.

Wordsworth’s experiments seemed to have transgressed the apparently harmonious literary conventions of his time. The book readers, the conservative group who would not welcome any friction in tradition, were likely to attack his experiments. Notwithstanding his gloomy prediction that he may be vulnerable to “the most dishonourable accusations” from the readers, he still daringly proclaims the two basic principles of his poetics: firstly, “Humble and rustic life was generally chosen”; and secondly, through the peroration of, “The language, too, of these men has been adopted . . . because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived” (245). Wordsworth’s attempt to write experimental poems should be viewed as the result of his conscious desire to express the dissonances in his society. It is this conviction, rather than the mere play of the poet’s experimental mind or, concomitantly, the attempt to somehow show off his creative ability, that vindicates the poems as both political and poetic experiments.

When Wordsworth said that he would use “language really used by men,” modern readers do not seem to take on board the amount of personal risk in this declaration. Olivia Smith elaborates on the relationship between language and social ideology in her book *The Politics of Language 1791-1819*. In the eighteenth century, she explains, the use of language divided its society into two classes: “the vulgar and the refined” or “the barbaric and the civilized.” Only those who spoke the refined language were believed to be “rational, moral, civilized, and capable of abstract thinking”; thus, to use vulgar language connoted a person’s lower class status, thereby incapable of speaking the “higher” language. This dividing of the population into two cultural extremes means that, “ideas about language firmly distinguished those who were within the civilized world from those who were entirely outside it” (3). The criticism of *Edinburgh Review* (October, 1802) against



Wordsworth's use of everyday language proves that Smith's claims are true: "The love, or grief or indignation of a different language, but is in itself a different emotion from the love, or grief, or anger of a clown, a tradesman, or a market-wench" (66). Considering the very real fact that social background often determines how you speak and how language often reflects social antagonisms, we can see how Wordsworth's insertion of common language into these poems tallies with his egalitarian political ideals. Smith points out that in Wordsworth's society to "write a clear argument in favour of the intellectual capability of the lower and middle classes and to criticize roundly an élitist tradition of literature might well have been considered risky" (208). In this respect, it would have been quite a shock for book readers to read a poet who used the common language for poems. For this reason alone it would be fair to say that the poet had every right to consider them as experiments.

In order to validate Wordsworth's claim that his poems were experiments, it would be more appropriate to compare the *Ballads* with other poetry books rather than magazine poetry. As Altick notes, during the Napoleonic Wars, there were not many poetry books published because "between 1793 and 1801 alone the price of paper doubled" and by dint of this books were "conspicuous tokens of wealth"(261-62). The major works that were published around this time catered for a traditional higher class readership. It would be fair to say, then, that not one of these books contained anything close to "conversation in the middle and lower classes of society," as Wordsworth put it in the Advertisement. A notable exception to this is Robert Southey's *Poems*. Published in 1797, it is the only collection that is able to stand comparison with Wordsworth's because, like the *Ballads*, its poems addressed the concerns of ordinary people. This is true as far as it goes, but the differences in voice and quality are miles apart. This is of fundamental importance. Aside from his observation that "Southey's volume moves with an amateurish abruptness from one manner and one subject to another," Mayo avoids making a clear value-judgment in his appraisal of the respective qualities inherent in Southey's and Wordsworth's poems about ordinary people (490). But it is precisely the use of ordinary people's voices—to allow them to tell their own tales—that make the latter's poems stand out from those of the former.

It is true that Southey, who at this time was still a political-radical, criticizes the slave trade in the sonnets in this volume. Even so, in more than 200 pages there are only three short poems—amounting to just five pages—that are directly about people from the lower class: "The Soldier's Wife," "The Widow," and "The Pauper's Funeral." The brevity of them must have been intentional since he complains at one point that "The Idiot Boy" runs to "nearly five hundred lines" (Woof 66). In other words, he seems to believe that the topics covered in these poems are not worthy enough for the lofty-seriousness of the long poem form. Moreover, he does not dispute Wordsworth's claim, made in the Advertisement, that the expressions in the poems are "not of sufficient dignity" (7):

The other ballads of this kind are as bald in story, and are not so highly embellished in narration. With that which is entitled the Thorn, we were altogether displeased. The

advertisement says, it is not told in the person of the author, but in that of some loquacious narrator.... The “experiment,” we think, has failed, not because the language of conversation is little adapted to “the purposes of poetic pleasure,” but because it has been tried upon uninteresting subjects.(Woof 66-67)

Furthermore, Southey does not seem all that impressed by Wordsworth’s notion of “the language of conversation”: the pejorative tone underscoring “bald” and “not so highly embellished” lend credence to the feeling that he is dismissing such an idea. The inference seems to be: Yes, the lives of the poor are a suitable subject for poetry, but poetry should never allow the poor to speak for themselves. This is why he takes the position of the narrator in *Poems*. In “The Pauper’s Funeral” it is he and not the pauper who speaks: “Poor wretched Outcast! I will weep for thee” (5). This distancing device alters the whole style: even though the topic is about people from the lower class, it is rendered in the poet’s sophisticated language. Again in “The Soldier’s Wife” the widowed woman’s voice is not heard; it is the poet who speaks of her distressed situation. It is only in “The Widow” that the woman finally has a chance to speak but only in a limited way: “Once I had friends,—but they have all forsook me! / Once I had parents, -- they are now in Heaven! / I had a home once—I had once a husband— / Pity me Strangers!” (13-16). Wordsworth insisted that the voices of ordinary people should be rendered in real language; Southey, on the other hand, does not allow the true demotic voice of the widow to speak, first-hand, of her distressed situation. The result is emotionally disengaging: the above fragment only serving to make her sound infantile and complaining. There is, in short, little context to her story: she is miserable without explaining why, and does not even explain why she was widowed. To compound things, the information that is given to us about her plight is perfunctory at best: she once had a husband, home, parents, and friends but now she is alone.

This nebulous treatment of a woman’s life and circumstance is completely different from the “The Female Vagrant” (91-99) in the *Ballads*. In this poem, unlike the widow, who repeats “pity me” four times in the short 21 lines, the “loquacious narrator” in the Wordsworth’s poem recounts her story for full-on 270 lines; this gives her ample time to elaborate on her life and the circumstances that led to her vagrancy. She even appears to criticize society for forcing her husband to join the army because of family impoverishment. In “The Last of the Flock”, and “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman,” the wretched women all speak for themselves. In “Anecdote for Fathers” and “We Are Seven,” Wordsworth even permits little rustic children to be the focal voice. This is unusual: poetry is not supposed to do this, Southey seems to fulminate. In terms of posterity, what is clear about this is that Wordsworth is still read, while Southey isn’t. In order to understand why that is so, Paul Dean makes the insightful and helpful distinction between Southey’s narrative method and that of Wordsworth: “Melodrama and pathos are all that Southey has to offer, but Wordsworth uses his[speaker’s] situation to prompt larger questions about human destiny” (69). Wordsworth, unlike Southey, does not take the place of narrator, but allows his characters to speak for themselves. This seems to reflect Wordsworth’s belief in the power of real language, a language which Southey wanted to excise completely from his poetry.

When Southey says that the experiment was a failure because of its “uninteresting subjects,” he is not disputing the experimental dimension of the *Ballads* per se, but merely expressing dissatisfaction with the poems’ diverse subject matter. It is also possible to view the negative term “uninteresting,” as Southey’s way of acknowledging that the circumstances of the poor are unusual subjects for poetry; for prior to this observation he writes that Wordsworth “should [never] have condescended to write such pieces as the Last of the Flock, the Convict, and most of the ballads” (Woof 67). Such matters can be mulled upon and disputed over. Yet, when Southey says “most” it becomes palpable that he is dismissing the *Ballads* in its entirety: the collection contains too many poems of similar subjects—for instance, “The Female Vagrant,” “The Thorn,” “Goody Blake and Harry Gill,” “Old Man Travelling,” “The Mad Mother,” and so on—for the qualifier to mean anything else. Interestingly, in the *Monthly Magazine* of 1797, Southey himself published “Hannah: A Plaintive Tale,” a poem about an abandoned woman who is quite similar to Martha Ray in “The Thorn.” This contradiction can only be explained by impugning the poet for having double standards. As Mary Jacobus puts it, Wordsworth is treating the materials in the prevalent magazine poetry “as a vehicle for serious poetry,” a vehicle, moreover, that is indeed quite suitable for book poetry (35). As the Advertisement strongly suggests, it was in the world of books where Wordsworth wanted his experiment to be felt. Southey’s snooty objection that magazines were the only suitable milieu for poems about the poor is shattered by the irruption the *Ballads* made into the book world. Moreover, if Southey believed that all poetic evocations of the poor should stay within the parameters of magazine poetry, then it is clear that Wordsworth did not lie when he said in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that his poems were a radical experiment in form and content.

Commenting on Romantic poetry, Scott Boehnen argues that for Wordsworth and for his audience, the poetic is “already the political” in that Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* “attempts to produce a ‘more salutary impression’ of paupers as opposed to the ‘ordinary’ or expected ‘moral sensation’ experienced by the upper-class reader” (291, 300). As we can see, the *Ballads* was considered by his contemporary critics as a collection written by a radical poet but, ironically, after two hundred years, the poet is regarded as a conservative by some modern critics such as Chandler and Butler. Although these modern critics are reluctant to accept the poet’s declaration that his poems were experiments, Wordsworth’s contemporary critics did not find it difficult to recognize them as such. In Wordsworth’s own time, the *Ballads* was either rejected or welcomed according to the magazine’s politics: for example, Jordan notes that “Wordsworth’s poems did not appear in the conservative *Gentleman’s Magazine*, and they were probably not in as much general demand as were Southey’s ballads” (113). The *New Annual Register* in 1799 states “[W]ith others we have been less satisfied, considering them to be unfortunate experiments, on which genius and labour have been misemployed.” On January 1799, the *New London Review* comments that “[T]he language of conversation, and that too of the lower classes, can never be considered as the language of poetry”; “We hope, that by this time, he is convinced of the failure of these ‘Experiments.’” The *Edinburgh Review* (October 1802) describes the emerging experimental poets as “dissenters from the established systems in poetry and criticism,” criticizing them for “[t]

he antisocial principles” and “discontent with the present constitution of society” (Smith 63-64). Interestingly, unlike the modern critics, these magazines are not that bothered with determining whether the poems are experiments or not, or indeed if they are radical enough; instead, they are only interested in judging how successful the experiments are. The poems in the *Ballads* may not seem to be experimental enough by today’s standards. However, it would be wise to take Wordsworth’s contemporary critics at their word rather than letting politically obsessed postmodern critics have the final say.

### Notes

- ① Elsie Smith writes, “it[*Lyrical Ballads*] marked a complete change from anything that had appeared before” (33). Margaret Drabble states that “they were completely new” (20). Both agree with the poet’s politically radical inclination around 1800.
- ② Many critics remain skeptical the radical nature of the poet’s political and literary leanings circa 1800. Among them are Marjorie Levinson in *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems: Four essays*, and Jerome McGann in *The Romantic Ideology*.
- ③ Wordsworth writes in his letter to Joseph Cottle that “He knew that I published those poems for money and money alone” (*Letters* 267).
- ④ Williams notes how Wordsworth’s version of the pastoral is full of “active sympathy” for the plight of rural workers, showing that “an alternative principle was to be powerfully asserted: a confidence in nature, in its own workings, which at least at the beginning was also a broader, a more humane confidence in men” (127). He sees a “green language,” operating in Wordsworth’s recurring image of the wandering laborer “merged with his landscape.” In a political sense, “green language” envisions a “green pastoral landscape” (132) where the alienated, but active, worker might at last find a home and community again.
- ⑤ Throughout my discussion of *Lyrical Ballads*, I use Brett and Jones’s edition.

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