Summary

Wordsworth explains that the first edition of Lyrical Ballads was published as a sort of experiment to test the public reception of poems that use “the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation.” The experiment was successful, better than Wordsworth was expecting, and many were pleased with the poems.

Wordsworth acknowledges that his friend (Samuel Taylor Coleridge) supplied several poems in the collection, including Rime of the Ancient Mariner. He then relates that he and his friends wish to start a new type of poetry, poetry of the sort seen in Lyrical Ballads. Wordsworth notes that he was initially unwilling to write the preface as some sort of systemic defense of this new genre, because he doesn’t want to reason anyone into liking these poems. He also says the motives behind starting this new genre of poetry are too complex to fully articulate in so few words. Still, he has decided to furnish a preface: his poems are so different from the poems of his age that they require at least a brief explanation as to their conception.

Wordsworth claims that just as authors have a right to use certain ideas and techniques, they also have a right to exclude other ideas and techniques. In every age, different styles of poetry arise, and people expect different things from poetry. He goes on to cite many great yet different poets of old, from Catullus Terence to Alexander Pope. Wordsworth wants to use the preface to explain why he writes poetry the way he does, so that people don’t see his nonconformity as laziness.

Wordsworth relates that his principal goal in writing the poems in the Lyrical Ballads was to portray common life in an interesting and honest way, and to appeal to readers’ emotions by generating “a state of excitement.” He chose to depict common life because in that situation, people are generally more self-aware and more honest. The feelings that arise in that condition are simpler, more understandable, and more durable. Furthermore, the language of the peasantry is pure, as common people are in constant communication with nature and far away from “social vanity.”

The language of the peasantry carries a certain permanence, unlike the lofty language of the late-Neoclassical writers. The late-Neoclassical poets believe that the lofty poetry they write bring them as well as poetry itself honor. However, Wordsworth perceives many things to be wrong with these poets and their lofty language: “they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites of their own creation.” To Wordsworth, these poets are utterly unrelatable for the general literate masses

On the other hand, Wordsworth states that triviality and lack of profound thought is a larger problem than lofty language among his contemporary poets. He prides himself in the fact that his poems actually have “a worthy purpose.” His poetry—like all good poetry—“is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Of course, it is also necessary that the poet “thought long and deeply” prior to writing the poem. Wordsworth believes that if someone continuously observes and contemplates their feelings, they will be enlightened, develop better taste, and have their “affections ameliorated”; someone who processes their feelings will become a better person. This process of observance and profound thought is necessary, as the poet must have their “taste exalted”. The poet is, in a sense, elevated from their peers.

Wordsworth then declares the purpose of his poems: “to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated under a state of excitement,” or, more specifically, “to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature.” The purpose of his poems is to depict the thoughts and feelings present during certain emotional experiences. Wordsworth then cites a few of his ballads and relays how those particular poems follow this purpose. He declares that “the feeling [developed in his poems] gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.” He claims that readers will understand his statement better after reading two of his ballads, “Poor Susan” and “Childless Father.”

Wordsworth strongly believes that “the human mind is capable of excitement without the application of gross and violent stimulants.” It is the writer’s job “to produce or enlarge this capability,” especially during Wordsworth’s present day, as there are many modern forces and “great national events” dulling human minds. Modernity leads humans to crave sensationalism and instant gratification. This manifests in literary trends: people of Wordsworth’s era crave the “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” of the late-Neoclassical writers rather than the invaluable works of writers like Shakespeare and Milton. Wordsworth is disgusted with these trends and their mind-dulling force, but still believes that given “certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind” and the power of nature, there is hope for revival.

Wordsworth turns to the subject of style. He notes that in the Lyrical Ballads, he avoids personifying abstract ideas because he wants to use the language of the common man and “keep [his] Reader in the company of flesh and blood.” Wordsworth also avoids what he calls “poetic diction” in order to keep the language in his poetry as simple and as honest as possible—he sees this as “good sense.” This avoidance prevents him from using from phrases and figures of speech that are considered to be “the common inheritance of Poets,” but it also prevents him from using phrases that have become vulgar from overuse by bad poets.

Wordsworth observes that there are many critics who disapprove of poems in which the language, “according to the strict laws of metre, does not differ from that of prose.” However, Wordsworth approves of these “prosaisms,” as they can be found in many great poems, including those by the great poet Milton. He cites a sonnet by John Gray, “On the Death of Richard West,” as an example of a poem whose most effective lines are written in a prosaic style.

Wordsworth reiterates that there is no essential difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose. People often personify poetry and painting as sisters, but Wordsworth thinks poetry and prose are even closer: “they both speak by and to the same organs […] their affections are kindred and almost identical, not necessarily differing even in degree.” He explains that poetry and prose are both altogether human: “Poetry sheds no tears ‘such as Angels weep,’ but natural and human tears.” Likewise, poetry and prose both bleeds real, human blood; poetry “can boast of no celestial Ichor.”

Wordsworth realizes that some people may think rhyme and meter distinguish poetry from prose, but he thinks that this sort of “regular and uniform” distinction is different from that between common language and poetic diction. In the latter case, the reader “is utterly at the mercy of the Poet respecting what imagery or diction he may choose to connect with the passion”; in the former case, both poet and reader submit to a certain form and there is no interference. Why, then, has Wordsworth chosen to write poetry instead of prose? Simply because he finds metrical language more charming. Furthermore, if meter restricts him, Wordsworth has “the entire world of nature” to write about. To those who criticize Wordsworth for using rhyme and meter but not poetic diction, he replies that readers have read with pleasure poems with simpler language than the language in his ballads.

Wordsworth also sees a great benefit in using rhyme and meter: poems can excite painful emotions, and the presence of something “regular” may help soften and restrain those painful emotions “by an intertexture of ordinary feeling.” This is why people feel they can reread the tragic parts of Shakespeare, but not of Clarissa Harlowe or of James Shirley: Shakespeare tempers his work with rhyme and meter, so that in the end, his works still gives more pleasure than pain. Furthermore, readers generally associate certain types of meters with certain emotions. The poet can use these associations to his or her advantage and affect certain emotions, especially if the poet’s diction is insufficiently evocative.

Wordsworth remarks that if the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” were a sort of systemic defense for his poetic theory, then he would need to go through all the ways that metrical language can lead to pleasure. As the preface is not intended to be such a thorough defense, he will simply say that one of the chief pleasures of metrical language is “the pleasure which the mind derives from the perception of similitude in dissimilitude.” Wordsworth briefly elaborates, saying that “this principle is the great spring of the activity of our minds and their chief feeder,” before claiming that the limits of the preface prohibit him from speaking more on the subject, and “[he] must content [himself] with a general summary.”

Wordsworth proceeds to explain the process of poetic creation. The poet must first recall their emotions in “tranquility” and contemplate those emotions in peace until they dissolve away and a new, kindred emotion comes into place. Then the poet can begin the composition process, and the poet will feel pleasure. The poet must always be careful that readers of their poem will feel more pleasure than the deeper passions that the poem addresses. People tend to read poetry, and not prose, over and over again because of this pleasure. Wordsworth cites Alexander Pope as an example of a poet who produces pleasurable poems from “the plainest common sense.” Poetry can be a vehicle to convey truth in a pleasurable way.

Wordsworth addresses possible faults of his ballads: he may have written on an unworthy subject, and he may have made arbitrary connections between things that no one would understand except himself. He is not sure yet which of his expressions are faulty; thus, he refrains from correcting anything. Wordsworth believes that a poet who corrects his own work too often could easily lose his or her confidence. Furthermore, the imperfect reader may also perceive certain poems as faulty when they are actually fine.

There is one fault that Wordsworth assures readers they will never find in his poetry: the fault of writing about a trivializing poetry. Samuel Johnson’s poem “I put my hat upon my head,” lampooning the basic ballad meter, exemplifies this fault. Wordsworth terms this lampoon “a mode of false criticism”: ballad meter is intended to be simple, but that doesn’t mean it cannot be a medium for serious subjects. Wordsworth then cites a stanza from another poem by Johnson, “The Babes in the Wood,” to show an example of simple meter communicating a worthy subject. Through quoting and analyzing these two poems by Johnson, Wordsworth shows that it is the subject, not the meter, of a poem that decides whether it is trivial.

Wordsworth asks readers to form their own feelings and opinions, and not go by what others think, when judging his poetry. Wordsworth also tells readers that if they thought one poem was good and others were bad, they should go back and review those they thought were bad. Reading and judging poetry is an acquired talent, and a review would only be just to the poet. Wordsworth doesn’t want readers to make quick judgments about his poetry, as such judgments are often wrong.

Wordsworth declares that there is nothing more he can do but let the reader read his ballads and experience the pleasure they offer firsthand. He realizes that asking readers to try his experimental ballads means that they must “give up much of what [they] ordinarily enjoy” in poetry. Wordsworth wants to show that his poetry is better and offers pleasure “of a purer, more lasting, and more exquisite nature.” It is not his intention to denounce other forms of poetry; rather, Wordsworth wishes to promote a new genre of poetry that he feels will help keep humans human. He awaits to hear from readers whether they think he has achieved his purpose, and whether that purpose was worth achieving.