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Lyrical Ballads : a Collection of poems.

Before Wordsworth's time, a ballad was generally a short narrative poem, telling a story with directness. It rarely explained or commented on anything. It did not contain personal emotion and did not have any ornament. Usually, these old ballads were anonymous and preserved by word of mouth. The ballad form is the most simple of all poetic forms. A typical ballad stanza consists of four lines with the second and fourth, and also sometimes the first and the third, rhyming. The first and the third lines consist of four iambic feet each. The second and the fourth have only three feet. The typical ballad stanza has this rhyme scheme :

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but many times the old ballads had longer stanzas of six or eight lines or longer lines with six feet or shorter lines with only two feet.

Though a ballad is not written to arouse the reader's emotions, it actually does because most ballads tell about tragic events or situations. Some ballads like "Tam Lin" concern supernatural happenings and other like "Binnorie" concern magic. Because they were recited or sung before being recorded on paper, the more effective poetry remained as only the very good parts were remembered and handed down. Most of the old English ballads were composed in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ballads came to be called "artistic ballads" and the old ones "popular ballads." The artistic ballads are serious poetry. Poets following the example of Wordsworth and Coleridge choose the ballad form because they find in it freedom and vigor of expression. Since the publication of Lyrical Ballads, the ballad form has become one of the principal forms of narrative poetry. The ballads written by Wordsworth and his contemporaries had much influence on later poetry.

However, it was not Wordsworth's intention to invent a new kind of ballad. In fact, some of the collected poems are similar to traditional ballads in form and content.

Wordsworth and Coleridge called their collection of poems "Lyrical Ballads" — not just ballads, but lyrical ballads. The word "lyrical" suggests that the poems are full of music and feeling. Since a lyrical poem usually expresses the poet's thoughts and emotions the readers who were used to the ballads of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries might have expected to find in the collection more exciting stories written with more feeling and more music. But they found that only a few poems had the expected characteristics. Most of them were quite a new kind of ballad. To distinguish these new ballads from the traditional ones, the new "We Are Seven" and "Anecdote for Fathers" were written in four-line stanzas with the old ballad metre. "Anecdote for Fathers" begins with :

I have a boy of five years old;
His face is fair and fresh to see;
His limbs are cast in beauty's mould,
And dearly he loves me.

In "We Are Seven", we have :

I met a little cottage Girl:
She was eight years old, she said;
Her hair was thick with many a curl
That clustered round her head.

These two are narrative poems like old ballads. "We Are Seven" is a story about a beautiful little country girl who has rustic manners and is poorly dressed. She tells the poet that there are seven children in her family. She counts both the living and the dead because she is too simple-minded to know about death. "Anecdote for Fathers" is a story about a five years old boy who prefers a sea-side village to a farm because the farm has a weather-cock. These stories show Wordsworth's interest in the child's mind which is one of his favorite themes. In these two poems he did not show personal feeling. When she was asked how many brothers and sisters she had and where they lived, she simply answered :

"Seven are we;
And two of us at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea.

"Two of us in the church - yard lie,
 My sister and my brother;
 And in the church - yard cottage I
 Dwell near them with my mother."

When the girl would not believe that there are only five children living, the poet was not sorry for her ignorance. He only repeated,

"But they are dead; those two are dead!
 Their spirits are in heaven!"

and felt that it was like "throwing words away."

In some other poems, we notice that there is some change in Wordsworth's ballads. In the poems of this group, he still uses the popular ballad form. He still writes,

I heard a thousand blended notes,
 While in a grove I sate reclined,
 In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
 Bring sad thought to the mind.

We see at once that this has the ballad form, but at the same time we see that it is different. This stanza, like the whole poem and other poems, does not tell any story or describe any event. In content, these poems do not resemble the old ballads. There are no tragic or supernatural happenings in them. When we read through a poem like this, we find only beautiful descriptions of nature. In "Lines Written in Early Spring", there are pleasing lines such as

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower
 The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;

or

The budding twigs spread out their fan,
 To catch the breezy air;

The descriptions of birds are no less vivid :

The birds around me hopped and played,
 Their thoughts I cannot measure :-
 But the least motion which they made
 It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

(Lines Written in Early Spring)



and

It is the first mild day of March :
 Each minute sweeter than before
 The redbreast sings from the tall larch
 That stands beside our door.

(Lines Written at a Small Distance
 from My House, and Sent by My
 Little Boy to the Person to Whom
 They Are Addressed)

Besides descriptions of nature, the poet's feeling is expressed. He tells what he feels when he sees beautiful natural objects. In "Lines Written in Early Spring, the poet is pleased with the beauty of nature but at the same time he feels sad. He said he heard the harmonious music of nature while

" . . . in a grove I sate reclined,
 In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
 Bring sad thoughts to the mind."

In a March morning, he hears the birds' song and feels

"There is a blessing in the air,
 Which seems a sense of joy to yield
 To the bare trees and mountains bare,
 And grass in the green field."

as Wordsworth conceived it

Before Wordsworth, nature had never been a ballad subject. This was Wordsworth's original contribution to poetry.

Wordsworth chooses nature as his subject because he has strong sensibility toward nature. He says that nature links her objects with the human soul. In his opinion, every natural element has life in it. He thinks that "every flower enjoys the air it breathes", and the birds that play have thoughts. Nature is "the blessed power that rolls about, below, and above." It runs through natural objects and human beings. In beautiful natural surroundings, he tells Dorothy :

Love, now a universal birth,
 From heart to heart is stealing,
 From earth to man, from man to earth:
 — It is the hour of feeling.

In these ballads, Wordsworth develops his ideas about nature. Nature, he writes, is the greatest of all teachers. In "Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House, and sent by My Little Boy to the Person to Whom They Are Addressed", on the first mild day of March he invites his Sister to come out with him and enjoy the open air and tells her not to bring any books because

One moment now can give us more
Than years of toiling reason :
Our minds shall drink at every pore
The spirit of the season.

By so doing,

"Some silent laws our hearts will make,
Which they shall long obey:
We for the year to come may take
Our temper from to-day."

In "Expostulation and Reply", he says that people who study from books are those who

. . . drink the spirit breathed

From dead men to their kind.

He thinks that since our senses are ready to receive everything and since there are powers that are naturally present and ready to impress our senses we need not try to find knowledge from other sources. We will have knowledge if we passively receive what comes to us from nature.

The eye — it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will.

Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In wise passiveness.

In "The Tables Turned", he says

Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;
Or surely you'll grow double:
Up! up! my Friend; and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble?

A linnet's song contains more wisdom than books, which are dull things.^h
The singing throstle is also a good preacher. Wordsworth requests his friend to come forth and let nature be his teacher because

"She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless —
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness."

Wordsworth believes that :

"One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can."

He believes that Nature brings beautiful objects to man but man's "meddling intellect" deforms them and makes them ugly. The books about Science and Art are "barren leaves" or pieces of useless paper. Therefore, he says you should shut your books and :

"Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives."

In Lyrical Ballads, there is another group of poems not in the typical ballad form, but in a form which might be considered a variation of the ballad form. The language is still like the language of the country people. The difference is in the length of the stanza. Wordsworth sometimes lengthened the stanza as in "The Idiot Boy", where each stanza, except the first one consisting of six lines, has five lines :

— Why bustle thus about your door,
What means this bustle, Betty Foy?
Why are you in this mighty fret?
And why on horseback have you set
Him whom you love, your Idiot Boy?

In some other poems, the stanza has eight lines. "Simon Lee" begins with

In the sweet shire of Cardigan,
Not far from pleasant Ivor hall,
And old Man dwells, a little man, —
'Tis said he once was tall.
Full five - and - thirty years he lived

A running huntsman merry;
 And still the center of his cheek
 Is red as a ripe cherry.

In "Goody Blake and Harry Gill", a stanza is also composed of eight lines :

Young Harry was a lusty drover,
 And who so stout of limb as he?
 His cheeks were red as ruddy clover;
 His voice was like the voice of three.
 Old Goody Blake was old and poor;
 Ill fed she was, and thinly clad;
 And any man who passed her door
 Might see how poor a hut she had."

In "The Mad Mother", "The Last of the Flock" and "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman", the lines increase to ten in one stanza, The stanza is even longer in "The Thorn". It consists of eleven lines:

There is a Thorn - it looks so old,
 In truth, you'd find it hard to say
 How it could have been young,
 It looks so old and grey.
 Not higher than a two years' child
 It stands erect, this aged Thorn;
 No leaves it has, no prickly points;
 It is a mass of knotted joints,
 A wretched thing forlorn.
 It stands erect, and like a stone
 With lichens is it overgrown.

Except for their length, these stanzas are not different from ballad stanzas. They have the ballad tone and similar rhyme scheme. They contain simple narrative about people and situations.

Moreover, the themes of these poems and of traditional ballads are similar. "The Thorn" and "The Mad Mother" are about unhappy women betrayed by their lovers. "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" is about the power of a poor old woman's curse. "Simon Lee" is about an old man. "The Forsaken Indian Woman" is about a dying woman mourning for her child and "The Female Vagrant" is about a married woman who was forsaken and so became a vagrant. These tragic stories are pure ballad themes.

"The Thorn" is a story of an unhappy woman who was betrayed by the man by whom she had a baby and, as a result, went mad. Nobody knows how and when the baby died but they suspect that she killed the baby. They say that she buried it near an old thorn tree where she goes to sit and cry,

"Oh misery! oh misery!
Oh woe is me! oh misery!"

These two lines appear at the end of many stanzas and serve as a good ballad refrain. The mysterious manner of the woman who goes to cry on the mountain top when the storm is breaking and the uncertainty of the cause of the child's death are very typical of the old ballads. The lines like :

She hanged the baby on the tree;
Some say she drowned it in the pond,

or

I've heard, the moss is spotted red
With drops of that poor infant's blood;

excite the readers. Moreover supernatural happenings which are common in old ballad are found in this story :

Some say, if to the pond you go,
And fix on it a steady view,
The shadow of a babe you trace,
A baby and a baby's face,
And that it looks at you;
Whene'er you look on it, 'tis plain
The baby looks at you again.
and when people decided to seek for the baby's bones,
----- instantly the hill of moss
Before their eyes began to stir!
And, for full fifty yards around,
The grass - it shook upon the ground.

"The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman" is a story about an Indian who was too weak to follow her tribe which was moving. Her companions took her baby with them, leaving her dying in the snow. She lay complaining of her ill fate. She regretted that her child would be brought up by another woman who was not its mother. When they

pulled the baby from her arms, it looked at her in a strange way which made her feel as if

"Through his whole body something ran,
A most stranger working that I see;
— As if he strove to be a man,
That he might pull the sledge for me."

The baby stretched out its arms towards her when they took him away. She loved him so much that she did not want him to cry and grieve over her death. She was not afraid to die, but she wished to have her baby close to her so that she could die happily.

"The Mad Mother" is about a pitiful insane woman. When she was going to have a baby, her husband left her. She was so afflicted that she could not tell exactly what sickness she had. She could only say,

"A fire was once within my brain,
And in my heart a dull, dull pain,
And fiendish faces, one, two, three,
Hung at my breast, and pulled at me."

But when the baby was born, it brought her joy and calmed her madness. When the baby suckles, she feels that it draws ^{the} pain from her. The touch of the baby's lips and hands lessens the heaviness in her heart and cools her blood and brain. She calls the baby "my little life" and promises to protect him from all danger and to find a happy place for him to live in.

The story of "The Idiot Boy" is also a rather sad story though it does not end so tragically. The boy lives with his mother in a solitary place where they have only one neighbour. The mother loves him dearly though he is an idiot. Once the neighbour Susan was so sick that Betty Foy, the mother, had to send her idiot boy for the doctor. Because of his idiocy, the boy rode the horse to the waterfall, enjoyed the scenery at night and forgot about the doctor. Betty, after having waited long in anxiety, left Susan and went after her boy. She was afraid that he had met some danger. She felt that she would be unhappy all her life if anything had happened to the boy because he was her only child and she loved him dearly. After having looked everywhere, she found him at the waterfall,

laughing happily. She was so relieved to find him alive and uninjured that she shed tears of joy.

"The Last of the Flock" is about a poor countryman. The poet met him crying in the road, his face wet with tears. The man explained that he had once had a big flock of beautiful sheep and he loved them. But he had had to sell them one by one for food for his six children. He was sad to do so because, he said,

"Sir! 'twas a precious flock to me
As dear as my own children be;"

"Simon Lee" is about an old man who had been a very good huntsman when he was young. He had been very happy in that occupation. Years passed. He was left in poverty, old and sick, with only his aged wife as a companion. He became so weak that he could not even cut the root of a rotten tree stump. The poet helped him to cut it. He was so grateful that he thanked the poet with tears in his eyes. The poet was touched and he felt sad because of the old man's gratitude.

"Goody Blake and Harry Gill" is the story of a poor old woman who was bullied by a well-to-do countryman. Goody lived in a poor hut. She worked hard but could not afford enough food and clothes. She did not even have money to buy candles to light at night. On winter nights, she was so cold that she had to go to gather broken boughs from Harry Gill's garden to build a fire to warm herself. The miser was angry to know this and he watched to catch her. Once when she came to gather sticks, he caught her and frightened her. Goody knelt on the ground and prayed that Harry might never be warm again. The curse was effective. From that day on Harry always felt cold. Though he was strong and wore all the clothes he had, he still shivered and his teeth chattered with the cold. The working of the curse makes this a real ballad story.

All these poems have the characteristics of the popular ballads. They also show Wordsworth's special interests. He was interested in the life of countrymen and people whom others did not pay attention to. He observed them and wrote about them with accurate details. He sympathized with their feelings. Maternal love is one of his favorite themes. He was interested in country mothers,

especially those who were mad. He found that their love for their children was as strong as any mother's love. Their children were their pride and joy. They loved the children, wanted them to be happy and were afraid of losing them. He observed children's minds, too. He explained thoroughly an idiot boy's feeling when he enjoyed himself in nature and mistook the owl for a cock and the moon for the sun and told his mother :

The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
And the sun did shine so cold!

He was very sensitive to small trivial things. An old man's thanks for his help made him feel sad and write :

Alas! the gratitude of men
Hath oftener left me mourning.

In these poems which are typical ballads in theme, Wordsworth inserted his interest in nature which was a new thing for ballads. In most of them, there are long passages of description of nature which are the background of the story. These descriptions are accurate and show that Wordsworth observed what he described very closely. The realistic descriptions are pleasing and add more charm to the story. In "The Idiot Boy" there are such pleasant lines as

'Tis eight o'clock, —a clear March night
The moon is up, —the sky is blue,
The owlet, in the moonlight air,
Shouts from nobody knows where;
He lengthens out his lonely shout,
Halloo! halloo! a long halloo!

In "The Thorn", the central "character" is a tree, not the woman or the child. The old, gloomy and sad looking tree suggests sad feeling. The poet described it in minute detail :

Like rock or stone, it is o'ergrown,
With lichens to the very top,
And hung with heavy tufts of moss,
A melancholy crop:
Up from the earth these mosses creep,
And this poor Thorn they clasp it round
So close, you'd say that they are bent
With plain and manifest intent

To drag it to the ground;
 And all have joined in one endeavour
 To bury this poor Thorn for ever

Near the tree, the baby's grave was

A beauteous heap, a hill of moss,
 Just half a foot in height.
 All lovely colours there you see,
 All colours that were ever seen;
 The mossy network too is there,
 As if by hand of lady fair
 The work had woven been;
 And cups, the darlings of the eye,
 So deep is their vermillion dye.

But in the last poem of Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth broke away entirely from the ballad, both in form and content. "Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey" was written in blank verse. This form is very different from the ballad form. It is usually used to explain or discuss serious ideas. Shakespeare and Milton always express their philosophical ideas in blank verse. Dramatists also use this form of poetry. The language Wordsworth used is also different from what he used in the ballads. He did not use the language used by common people because common people do not use words like "sweet sensation", "tranquil restoration" or "corporeal frame" in everyday conversation.

The theme is different from the ballad themes. No story is told in this poem. It expresses his ideas about nature which is the most original of all his ideas. It repeats his idea about the power of natural objects which he had shown in "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned". The idea in this poem is more serious and deeper than that expressed in those two poems. "Tintern Abbey" which contains the essence of Wordsworth's idea about nature states in brief form the ideas later developed at length in "The Prelude", the long and serious poem in which he traced the growth of a poet's mind.

"Tintern Abbey" was composed during his walking tour along the River Wye. He went there after five years absence. He sat under a sycamore tree and looked at the tall cliffs, the clear sky, the

cottage } ground and green orchards. He heard the melodious sound of the mountain } springs. He had seen these things before he went away. His mind was impressed by them and when he was away in the noisy city, he could still see them in his imagination. He said to himself,

"These beautiful forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:"

Wordsworth had a good memory. Natural objects impressed themselves on his mind so deeply that he could see them when the objects were absent. The recollection of these natural forms made him feel happy and restored his mind from the tiredness caused by city life.

He said,

". . . in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration :-"

His sensitivity towards them was so very strong that he remembered unimportant things which he called "unremembered pleasure". He believed that such pleasure and small acts of kindness and of love had great influence on man's moral character. Moreover nature's beautiful forms gave him another gift which was even more sublime. They gave him :

that blessed mood
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened :- that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on, -
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul :

He believed that natural objects could give us pleasure which would lighten our worldly burthen and lead us on until we are no longer aware of our body, but only of our soul. In this condition we are then able

to see "into the life of things". We become aware of the essence of things. Wordsworth had an idea that if we contemplated *anything* with tranquillity and a feeling of pleasure, we would come to know the essential characteristic of that thing. He said that when he was unhappy he often thought of the scenery along the river.

As time passed, the forms that he saw before began to fade. But now that he was near the river once more, he was full of joy. It was double joy because he felt happy at that moment to see the forms with his own eyes again and furthermore he had :

pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years.

He knew that the same scenery which he now enjoyed, when he was away and saw it no more, would later again give him pleasure when recollected. Therefore, what he saw was like life and food by which he could live in the future.

While he was thinking he was aware that his feeling towards nature had changed. As a boy he went to nature because he could be happy there. He had "coarser pleasures" and enjoyed "animal movements in nature. He said nature then,

To me was all in all. — I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite.

Now as a grown-up man, he could not feel the "aching joys" or "dizzy raptures" any more. But he was not sorry for the loss because he had a new gift to make up for it. He had learned to look thoughtfully at nature. He had come to a deeper understanding of human beings which had a calming, purifying effect upon him. He could now hear :

The still sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue.

Moreover, he felt :

A presence that disturbs me with joy

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

That "presence" in nature is the motive power of all things and rolls through all things. Therefore, he still loved nature. He said he was

" well pleased to recognise
 In nature and the language of sense, nurse
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart and soul
 Of all my moral being.

He told Dorothy who was with him on the bank of the river that if he had not received this new gift from nature, he would have been very sad because he could see that she was happy to be there as he had been as a boy but he could not feel that way any more. He could tell from "the shooting lights" in her "wild eyes" that the pleasure which she was experiencing was like a child's. He told her to enjoy nature to the full because "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her. Nature would always lead them, unaffected by the evils of daily life, from joy to joy and

"So feed
 With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
 Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
 Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
 The dreary intercourse of daily life,
 Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
 Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
 Is full of blessings.

Finally he said that if in future he could not see his sister again, he would remember that he, a worshipper of nature, who was never tired of worshipping her but had deep enthusiasm and holy love for her, once stood on that bank with his sister. He would remember that after long years of absence; he came back to the spot and found that it was more beautiful than ever both for itself and for his sister's sake.

This poem can be considered his best poem. All his main

ideas about nature are included in this beautiful poem. All the words in the poem are effective. They convey directly his intense feelings. When we read, we can feel that they came spontaneously from real passion. Unlike other poems which he composed and constantly revised, "Tintern Abbey" is a real "overflow" of his "powerful feelings". In his note to this poem, Wordsworth wrote that he composed the poem in his mind while he was on a walking tour to Bristol. He composed it with greatest pleasure. When he arrived at his destination he sat down and wrote it out and never altered it. He was truly inspired when he wrote these lines. They are full of feeling. It is interesting to note that when he was truly inspired, he chose to express his intense feelings and original thoughts, not in the ballad metre, but in dignified blank verse.