

The Break with the Augustan Past Common and Uncommon in the Wordsworthian Poetics

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Abstract:

The present study aims at investigating, in the larger context of the Romantic break with the Augustan past, Wordsworth's completely new approach to the writing of English poetry, focusing on issues related to the *common* and the *uncommon* aspects of his different and original kind of poetry which was innovative not only in subject matter, but also in form and language. Through simple, meticulous poetic description of common day life activities, human figures and situations, Wordsworth managed to give uncommon aesthetic significance to, as he puts it, *simple and unelaborated expressions*. By means of poetry, Wordsworth succeeded to inspire transcendental consciousness through the poetic examination of immediate life. Therefore, the issue of common and uncommon becomes a central leitmotiv when it comes to analyzing the whole range of meanings within wordsworthian poetry.

Keywords: Romanticism, poetry, common, uncommon, Wordsworth, novelty

The writers of the Augustan age struggled to rediscovered and to resurrect the old poetic principles of the best periods of Greek and Roman literature, characterized by harmony, concision, elegance and technical perfection, and based their literary style on imitating the symmetrical precision of this classical literature. The Romantic poets abandoned these formal conventions for writing established in the first half of the eighteenth century. They rejected the artificial poetic composition of their predecessors and chose to replace the Classical preferences for reason and intellect, with a new approach towards life and poetry, one based on instincts, emotions, and imagination. Romanticism was a health-restoring revival of the instinctual life, in contradistinction to eighteenth-century restrains that sought to sublimate the instincts in the united names of reason and society (Bloom, 1980: 4). It has been said that Romantic poets were often at the mercy of their

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inspiration, while Augustan poets were mostly the masters of their inspiration, that Augustan poetry embodied the repose of the world, while Romantic poetry the restless of the world.

The Romantic poet was a solitary visionary drawing nourishment from the true, natural beauty of the world that surrounded him, finding deeper meanings in the inner worlds created by his mind. Romantic poets condemned the metaphysical poets of the previous century, like John Donne and Andrew Marvell, for abandoning the passion and passionate flow of poetry, to *the subtleties of intellect*, and to *the stars of wit*. Turning away from the crisp wit of the classics, the Romantic poets sought to explore the power of imagination, a power that could enable them to become new, authentic creators capable of imitating the process of divine creativity. Imagination was the special faculty which set the artist apart from his fellow men.

Unlike the poets of the Augustan age, who saw the artist as an interpreter concerned with imitating and showing the beauty of what was already known, the Romantics viewed the artist as a creator, who used his imagination to explore the unfamiliar, the unseen and the uncommon. The poetry was no longer concerned with the *imitation* of the human nature, but a form of *expressing* the poet's personal emotions and feelings. The Classic style has well been referred to as sculpturesque, and the Romantic style picturesques (Fletcher, 2006: 21). This applies to poetry too.

A classic work of art is like a Greek temple; it stands or falls but its perfect fitness in the relations of its parts to the whole; it is right as a whole and has due proportions as a whole. A Romantic work of art is like a Gothic cathedral; it impresses not by its mass effect, but by its detail and variety (Gerrit de Maar, 1970: 873).

The Romantics rejected the Augustan analytic rationalism and spiritual emptiness associating it with the coldly, rigid mentality of the contemporary politics, industrialization and cultural philosophy. The works of the Romantics foster messages that transmit a warning against the destructive tendency of meddling intellect to intrude upon the sanctities of the human heart. Wordsworth even argued that that the opposite of poetry was not prose but science (Drabble, 2007: 872).

Although some Romantic poets (Keats and Shelly) adapted the classical form of the *ode* and used elements of the Greek mythology in their work, they rejected the idea of imitating classical models as too restrictive of the creative imagination. They wrote in the simple *language really used by men* (Wordsworth); they captured the intense emotion of individual experience in language, which was intended to be closer to everyday speech and more accessible to the general reader.

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The first generation of Romantics – such men as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey tried to find a substitute for the ugly industrial life that worked such hardships on certain classes and wrote poems about supernatural dreams, fantasy, and idyllic worlds. They came up with a new approach to poetry and to its subject matter. By the touch of imagination they've tried to make the common look uncommon. They looked beyond the stylish life of educated men to a wilder and cruder ways of living. They manifested interest for old ballads and folk poetry and considered them as representing something more genuinely poetic than any other fashionable form of literature. Romantics aimed to write for and about the gentry, especially commercial and entrepreneurial classes and their ordinary, common aspects of life, something that neoclassic writers would have considered low and degrading.

Generally speaking, the whole Romantic poetical production, mainly from the late 18th century, manifests an evident tendency to appeal to a democratized audience, by either approaching themes favorable to “the lower orders” or “hostile to the powerful,” or “in employing diction, meters and symbols with popular connotations”(Butler, 1993: 8). The aristocratic discourse of the predecessors is clearly replaced with another type of language that exalts provincialism. Primitive and heroic societies became more and more objects of interest and, at the same time, the life of men living outside the pale of urban gentility was coming to be regarded as legitimate, even as the most proper , subject matter for poetry.

In 1712 Addison, the famous English essayist and journalist wrote:

Since it often happens that the most obvious phrases, and those which are used in ordinary conversation, become too familiar to the ear and contract a kind of meanness by passing through the mouths of the vulgar, a poet should take particular care to guard himself against idiomatic ways of speaking (Marks, 1826).

In 1800, Wordsworth was writing:

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen [as the subject of his poem] because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, can be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated (Anderson, 1979: 671).

Dryden and Pope had insisted that the language of poetry should be based on the conversation of gentlemen; Wordsworth argued that it should be based on the conversation of common men.

William Wordsworth, the father of English Romanticism, was the initiator of this new poetic trend. He created a different and original kind of poetry which was innovative not only in subject matter, but also in form and language. His poetry had a lasting effect on all subsequent English poetry. In his *William Wordsworth, a Biography*, Edwin Paxton Hood, a nineteenth century writer and biographer, wrote “Wordsworth stands as a Poet at the center and head of a new Order and Era. He not only created a new school, but he greatly influenced all other schools” (Hood, 1856: 2).

Wordsworth brought a completely new approach to the writing of English poetry and set up an ideal to compose poetry in accordance with his definition of poetry and with his new, uncommon ideas to enrich it, by adding strangeness to beauty, uncommon to common and common to uncommon. His objections to an over stylized poetic diction, his attitude towards nature, his emphasis on the value of childhood experience, together with his choice of simple, common incidents and humble people as subjects for his poetry are but few of the aspects of his revolutionary achievements. For Wordsworth poetry was primarily the record of a certain state of mind, a way of glorifying the spirit of man at harmony with his natural environment, away from the industrialized world. For Wordsworth, the world of nature was an endless source of beauty, comfort, spiritual and moral strength. His belief was that only nature could elevate the human soul and exert a positive influence on human thoughts and feelings. He identified Nature with God and was more pantheistic in his vision than Christian. Nowadays, William Wordsworth is credited to be the “high priest and master spirit of what has come to be called the Romantic movement in England” (Mahoney, 1997: xiii).

Of a particular interest is William Wordsworth’s and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s friendship that was to change the face of the English poetry forever, and the peak of their collaboration – the production of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). The book is a landmark in English literature, marking the beginnings of this new era, the Romantic Movement.

The poems deal with low subjects-rural life, rustic characters, and are written in common, simple, vernacular language, without the use of elaborated expressions. The usage of this simple language also emphasizes the universality of the message and of the human emotions depicted in the poems. However, the first edition of the collection was not well received by the public or the literary critics of the day. Despite its criticized immediate effect, the publication in 1798 of the *Lyrical Ballads* changed the course of English poetry forever. The *New Annual Register* called many of the ballads “unfortunate experiments, on which genius and labor have been misemployed”, while the *Monthly Review*

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complained of the volume's implied politics, found the ballads "delineations of low-life...degrading to poetry"(Gamer, 2000: 118).

Two years later, a second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* appeared. This new edition, from 1800, added new poems to those of the first collection, and answered the savage attacks of the critics by a prose preface.

The long *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* is often considered to be a sort of manifesto for the Romantic Movement. In this famous *Preface* Wordsworth presents his view on the nature of the poetic process, the origin and purpose of poetry, and the language most suited for it:

The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint (Brett; Jones, 2005: 235–236).

In his essay *The Language of Paradoxes*, Cleanth Brooks draws attention to Wordsworth's statement in the *Preface* that "the principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life" but so to treat them as "ordinary things" that should be presented "to the mind in an unusual aspect". Wordsworth's conscious attempt "to show the audience that the common was really uncommon, the prosaic was really poetic" is interpreted by the critic as one of the poet's greatest poetic paradoxes (Kumar Das, 2005: 282). Wordsworth did succeed in capturing in his poetic net common things for the readers, but made them be perceived as new, exciting and interesting. Common features of the world were expressed in the most appropriate and suitable way to the human mind, while the uncommon, intricate features of the human mind are exposed in the way most appropriate to their interaction with the world.

Both Wordsworth and Coleridge were convinced of the fact that their time needed more than an epic poem. In the *Preface* Wordsworth clearly pointed out to the gap he and his coworker were trying to fill. His confessed intention was to place real, common people back into poetry because they:

... speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because

the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men has been adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. Accordingly, such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation (Brett; Jones, 2005: 235–236).

Wordsworth became the source by which, through poetic means, the common would be made uncommon, while Coleridge would attempt to make the uncommon, supernatural worlds of fantasy and dream credible (see *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*). Their intentions followed a symmetrical pattern and they used opposite ways round. Wordsworth would create an uncommon poetry, for those times, out of the common by the imaginative coloring, and Coleridge would bring uncommon things within the control of the common imagination by emotional truth.

Through simple, meticulous poetic description of common day life and activities, Wordsworth managed to give uncommon aesthetic significance to, as he puts it, *simple and unelaborated expressions*. By means of poetry, Wordsworth succeeded to inspire transcendental consciousness through the poetic examination of immediate life.

Therefore, the issue of common and uncommon becomes a central leitmotiv when it comes to analyzing the whole range of meanings within Wordsworth's poetry. In nuce, his purpose was to deal in his poetry with common people, in common situations, in common language, and to reinterpret them in uncommon ways.

However, for Wordsworth, the Poet has an elevated, uncommon status distant from that of his *common readers*. In his study, "*My Office upon Earth*": *William Wordsworth, Professionalism and Poetic Identity*, Scott Hess shows how William Wordsworth constructed newly coherent models of poetic identity, how he rediscovered his true self as *a Poet* finding *beneath that name/My office upon earth, and nowhere else* (*Prelude* 10.915, 10.919–10.920) and how he adjusted his professional self-definition to fit his function and relationship to audience. By rejecting *poetic diction*, positing a common *real language of men* as the

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proper language for poetry, turning to lower class subjects, and appealing directly to readers in the *Preface*, Wordsworth claimed an independent professional authority in direct relationship with a general public. However, as Scott Hess stresses, Wordsworth establishes the Poet in a position of authority above his solitary readers who become unified across time and space by the common bond of his word. By defining the common language of poetry in relation to the language of rural laborers, the Poet thus simultaneously breaks down existing cultural hierarchies and exalts himself above his public on a professional and interpretative self. Therefore, as Annette Cafarelli has described, there is an uneasy alliance between the common reader and the uncommon poet (Hess, 2005: 170–173).

In his book *Wordsworth and the Worth of Words*, Hugh Sykes Davies aimed to study Wordsworth's view on poetic diction, the words he used and the frequencies of their meanings. He claims that one particular characteristic of Wordsworth's idiolect may be his use of uncommon meanings of relatively common words. Davies establishes a very close connection between this characteristic diction and the modern theory of Information. One of the basic theorems of this theory is that in any code (including the natural languages), the amount of information carried by any element is inversely proportional to its frequency of occurrence. Many writers of literature rely upon this sharply focused and concentrated communication upon relatively rare words. However, he concludes, Wordsworth is a poet that achieved the same end, the same concentration of much information into a small amount of code, by using the uncommon meanings of relatively common words (Davies, 1986: 73).

No matter at what level, Wordsworth did manage to wrap even the most ordinary and common words, figures or subject matters in an uncommon poetic form. Poems such as *The Green Linnet*, *She was a Phantom of Delight*, *The Solitary Reaper*, *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, *The Daffodils* and the *Ode on Imitations of Immortality*; as well as the pieces called *Ode to Duty* and *Character of the Happy Warrior* undoubtedly testify this subtle an uncommon approach that best characterizes the wordsworthian poetics.

The wordsworthian poet reveals himself as a man of unusual emotional vitality, guided by intuition and imagination rather than reason, who has the ability to communicate and transmit powerful feelings and emotions by portraying common aspects of the reality with, as he says in the *Preface*, a *colouring of the imagination*, so that even ordinary things become uncommon and able to carry the truth *alive into the heart by passion*. Moreover, his keen imagination can reveal the inner truth of ordinary things to which the mind is habitually blind. The

Poet is presented as a general benefactor, the one who best perceives the uplifting relationship between the *common* of the real word and the *uncommon* of poetics, all for an ultimate goal: to speak to and for the man.

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