

**English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832**  
**Prof. Pramod K Nayar**  
**Department of English**  
**University of Hyderabad, Indian Institute of Madras**  
**Backgrounds to the English Romantics, 1798-1832**

**Publishing, Literacy and Reading - II**

**Literacy, Reading and the Audience**

This is Lesson 2 in Backgrounds to the English Romantics, 1798 to 1832. We continue to explore publishing, literacy and reading in this lesson, and specifically focus on literacy, reading and the audience.

(Refer Slide Time: 0:28)

Let me begin with the famous Byron quote: “I will publish right or wrong. Fools are my theme, let satire be my song”. This is Byron making a case of the author’s right to publish, no matter that he receives unfavourable reviews, no matter that he is panned by common readers or the elite critics. It must be noted that the explosion of radical publications is intimately linked to the political dissent, rebellions and protests in the period 1790 to 1830.

Richard Altick’s classic work on the social history of the English reading public, *The English Common Reader* (1963) puts it beautifully:

In the turbulence of the 1790s, the emergence of a reading public among the humble brought England face to face with a major social problem, a problem destined to be shadowed for several decades by the threat, real or imaginary, of a revived Jacobinism. Tom Paine and Hannah More between them had opened the book to the English common reader. But was it merely a book or a Pandora’s Box of infinite trouble?

(Refer Slide Time: 1:30)

If we were to think about the Romantic authors in terms of their reading public, we can follow Jerome McGann’s 1993 work fruitfully. McGann detects two major strands within the Romantic tradition. One strand belongs to Blake, Byron and Shelley whose work explicitly sought to convince and persuade an existing audience about certain ideas, for example, the tyranny of the

present government. The second strand belongs to Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley where they had to create their own audiences by showing a different world.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:57)

In short, what we are looking at is the making of public taste. Authors like Wordsworth were worried about how they would be read. We need therefore to look at attempts such as his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* in this light.

This is an extract from the Preface:

I ask what is meant by the word Poet? What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet (especially in those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful) do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than any thing which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves; whence, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:16)

This is Wordsworth explaining in a rather extended description what is meant by the word “Poet”. What is a poet? And his key question: To whom does the poet address himself? What is the

language to be expected from him? Then comes Wordsworth's famous definition: A poet is "a man speaking to men". But Wordsworth qualifies that further: "A man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind".

Please note, he has said the poet is a man speaking to men but he is not an ordinary man. The poet, as you can see, has more sensibility, more enthusiasm, more tenderness and greater knowledge. These are qualities manifest only among the poets. Wordsworth goes on for some time about the structure of the poet's mind and so on and so forth.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:16)

But after that, he pays attention to the nature of the audience. Here is another extract from the Preface:

Low 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, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist 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 is 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...

(Refer Slide Time: 3:21)

As a defense of the kinds of poetry appearing in the *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798, he says, "Low 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 maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and

more emphatic language because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.”

Wordsworth is saying that it is in the rustic human beings that true passions are to be found. But can we take that language as it is? Can we use the language of the rustic farmer, the yeoman, the dairymaid, as it is? No. Wordsworth qualifies this very carefully. The language of these men is adopted and then he puts in a very important parenthesis: “purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust”.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:28)

It is something you have to pay some attention to. He is not saying you can take the language as it is. He is saying that this language has to be suitably modified, it has to be adopted but it is also to be adapted. Wordsworth is not simply saying that the poet appropriates the language of the common man and puts it into the poetry. The common man, the farmer, the rustic labourer are important, but their language may not be completely adequate to the task of poetic creation. So, it has to be modified and that can be done by the poet alone.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:02)

Moving on now to the question of how Wordsworth defines poetry itself. We are familiar with his oft-quoted description of poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions”. But that is not all that Wordsworth says. This is what he says:

I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:22)

This is a crucial clause: “The emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and itself does exist in the mind.”

(Refer Slide Time: 5:51)

What is Wordsworth doing here? Wordsworth first begins by talking about emotions and then uses the word “contemplation” to suggest that you cannot really separate the two in the act of poetic creation.

Also, note this extract:

I have wished to keep my Reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by so doing I shall interest him. I am, however, well aware that others who pursue a different track may interest him likewise; I do not interfere with their claim, I only wish to prefer a different claim of my own. There will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction; I have taken as much pains to avoid it as others ordinarily take to produce it; this I have done for the reason already alleged, to bring my language near to the language of men, and further, because the pleasure which I have proposed to myself to impart is of a kind very different from that which is supposed by many persons to be the proper object of poetry. I do not know how without being culpably particular I can give my Reader a more exact notion of the style in which I wished these poems to be written than by informing him that I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject, consequently, I hope that there is in these Poems little falsehood of description, and that my ideas are expressed in language fitted to their respective importance. Something I must have gained by this practice, as it is friendly to one property of all good poetry, namely, good sense; but it has necessarily cut me off from a large portion of phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of Poets. I have also thought it expedient to restrict myself still further, having abstained from the use of many expressions, in themselves proper and beautiful, but which have been foolishly repeated by bad Poets, till such feelings of disgust are connected with them as it is scarcely possible by any art of association to overpower.

Here, he defends the kind of poetry he is producing. He says that he has a different claim to make from that of much contemporary and conventional poetry. He says that he avoids using “what is usually called poetic diction” in the *Lyrical Ballads* in order to “bring [his] language nearer to the language of men”.

Why is Wordsworth going on about these three things: the poet, the reader and the language of poetry? Wordsworth is doing this because he is hoping to craft a new poetic diction and he is worried that this poetic diction may not be acceptable to his readers. What he is saying to his readers is, “You are so used to a certain kind of poetry, a certain poetic diction and a certain style, that you might reject what we are trying to do.”

Wordsworth is positing the poet as a trendsetter but worrying that this new poetry may never become a trend. And therefore, he writes this protracted, extended defense of what it means to write this new kind of poetry. Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* actually is a poetic manifesto, as we all know. But it is also the expression of a cultural anxiety about trying out something new in the *Lyrical Ballads* and the possibility that it might not be a successful attempt.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:21)

We can summarize briefly. Wordsworth is speculating in the Preface about:

- The appropriate subject and language of poetry
- The “true” nature of the poet
- The language of rustic England from which the language of poetry has to be sourced
- The modifications to be made to that language
- The audience for the new poetry

(Refer Slide Time: 7:44)

The purpose, Wordsworth clearly indicates, is the fashioning of public taste, the making of an audience, the starting of new trends in poetry, but also in reading. Wordsworth is anxious that the volume being marketed is likely to not have an audience at all, and hence, the elaborate defense. We normally think of Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* as a statement about a poetic manifesto. I am

suggesting you also see it as an attempt not only to defend what they are doing but to prepare the audience for something new.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ezra Pound would say, “Make it new”. Wordsworth is anticipating that. But you see, the problem is, when you try to make something new, people may not accept it because they are used to something else. Now, whether the working classes read at all and what they read is still under investigation. The reading habits of the Romantics are also being investigated. Duncan Wu's project on Wordsworth's reading itself is a huge one. What did Wordsworth himself read?

Research since the 1990s has documented working-class memoirs and autobiographies from the 1790s. These memoirs reveal the nature of working-class reading. In any case, statesmen, publishers, magistrates, the aristocracy, and the intellectuals were all confirmed in their belief that public opinion or indeed the public itself was something to be carefully watched. Their fear was that the public would be influenced by radical ideas.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:04)

William St Clair, in his path-breaking work, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004) asked several questions that haunted England and its new readership.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:16)

Three key questions:

- Can the newly formed readership be encouraged, with reading as liberation from ignorance or treated as something dangerous?
- Would a wider readership mean that there could develop a consensus within the nation, binding it together culturally? The role of reading as part of the building of nationhood is significant. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Benedict Anderson would write about the nation as “an imagined community” brought together by print. William St Clair uses that to talk about how the Romantic periodical and print publication may have created a sense of English identity.
- Would reading destabilize established beliefs leading them to anarchy or revolution?

(Refer Slide Time: 9:57)

The elite, St Clair notes, were less worried about the newspapers than by books and other materials coming from the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, especially the pamphlets. The consolidation of print capitalism collaborated with post-Napoleonic consolidation of British imperial identity. Karen Fang in her lovely book, *Romantic Writing and the Empire of Signs: Periodical Culture and Post-Napoleonic Authorship* (2010) makes this case. Karen Fang notes that Charles Lamb's famous "Elia" essays were first published in *The London Magazine* and can be linked to the history of porcelain trade.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:26)

Lucy Newlyn's *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (2003) has argued that there was an "anxiety of reception" in the English Romantics. We have already anticipated Newlyn's argument when we spoke about Wordsworth. Newlyn sees a certain authoritarian view of the audience in these texts and proposes that Coleridge's anxiety can be seen in the form of a tension between a certain contempt for the reading public, on the one hand, and a very high expectation of readerly competence, on the other.

By figuring the ideal reader in the rather passive role of a mesmerized wedding guest, the opening of the famous "Ancient Mariner", Coleridge was opening up the possibilities for a non-passive interpretation and the active reader. Wordsworth was troubled by the fact that the poet was becoming increasingly a public figure. In order to deal with this development which produced quite a bit of anxiety, Wordsworth appealed to an audience of the future. Others such as William Hazlitt, Newlyn argues, sought to develop an "aesthetic grounded in orality".

(Refer Slide Time: 11:26)

So, what exactly are we seeing here? What we are looking at here is a two point system. One, the widening of literacy and the making of public taste. Two, the anxiety that the authors had about who was reading and how they were reading. So, whether it is the "Ancient Mariner" or the Preface



to the *Lyrical Ballads*, people like Wordsworth and Coleridge were wondering whether the audience would read them correctly.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people like Stanley Fish write about the authority of interpretive communities. Its antecedents lie in something like the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* where Wordsworth is saying to the readers, “You are used to a certain style of poetry. We are not doing that. We are doing something else. Please bear with us and maybe, you will acquire a taste for this.”

The second component of this age was the worry that radical pamphlets would influence the readers. There was the anxiety that Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah More’s tracts and William Cobbett’s *Political Register* could disseminate radical opinions. People did not always read just poetry, they would have also read pamphlets, tracts and political treatises. In many of these, the questions asked would be questions of the status of the government, the role of the people, the question of monarchy and the question of rights.

We will be looking at the question of rights and the problems of dissent and revolution in a later session. But for now what you need to understand is that we have traditionally paid attention to how the English Romantic writers were focused on the author. I am recommending that you shift this perspective a little bit. The English Romantic writers were indeed obsessed with the role of the author but they were equally obsessed with the questions of the audience and the questions of reading and reading practices.

**Further/ recommended reading:**

Altick, Richard. *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900*. 1957. Phoenix, 1963.

Fang, Karen. *Romantic Writing and the Empire of Signs: Periodical Culture and Post-Napoleonic Authorship*. U of Virginia P, 2010.

Newlyn, Lucy. *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception*. Oxford UP, 2003.

Barnard, John. “Print Culture and the Book Trade”. *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*, edited by Nicholas Roe. Oxford UP, 2008. 77-89.

St Clair, William. *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*. Cambridge UP, 2004.

Keen, Paul. “‘With an Industry Incredible’: Politics, Writing and the Public Sphere”. *A Concise Companion to Romanticism* edited by Jon Kanchler, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 99-118.