

THE “REAL LANGUAGE OF MEN” AND THE “DIALECT OF COMMON SENSE” IN THE  
PREFACES OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH AND WALT WHITMAN

BY

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Abstract

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This work deals exclusively with the works of William Wordsworth and Walt Whitman. Specifically, the prefaces of their most important poetic collections are used to address how each poet initiated a shift in the reading and composing of poetry between the late eighteenth to mid nineteenth centuries. Wordsworth engages a new class of readers by the utilization of the “language of real men.” This new language centered on a kind of realism not wholly supported by his Romantic movement, and yet Wordsworth is still celebrated as among the greatest of Romantics. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth argues that this is the kind of language necessary to create honest poetry, poetry that is not tainted by the will or ego of the poet.

Whitman propels Wordsworth’s goals in his Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, advocating a “dialect of common sense” in the poetry of his generation. Whitman’s goals align with Wordsworth’s, and Whitman builds off of the work that Wordsworth had laid forth in his own Preface. Whitman’s Preface, however, differs from Wordsworth’s in that it is essentially a free verse poem, written in language not unlike his poetry. Such a seemingly small observation speaks to the differences in Wordsworth and Whitman’s approaches to the same goal – a goal that sought to pull poetry from its perch atop a literary hierarchy, down to the common people.

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## **Dedication**

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## Introduction: A Tale of Two Prefaces

What do William Wordsworth and Walt Whitman have in common besides their initials? Though the original publication dates of their most familiar works, *Lyrical Ballads* and *Leaves of Grass* are an ocean and a half-century apart, both poets attach prefaces to their famous collections. It is in this common project – to mold and train their readers that I will focus.

The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* would see itself revised nearly as many times as the collection itself, but the 1800 edition of the collection sees the majority of Wordsworth's poetic philosophies intact and contained within that Preface. Just a few lines into the first paragraph, Wordsworth calls to the "real language of men," a language he wishes to evoke in his own poetry. Wordsworth's focus on incorporating of this kind of language into his poetry, a language he argued called to the "low and rustic life," stems from his disillusionment with the poetic world as he saw it. He saw poetry that mirrored the upper class only, excluding those Wordsworth felt had a clearer, more honest understanding of their surroundings. For the poet, depiction of the "low and rustic life" was not a novelty or a popularity ploy. It was a poetic, aesthetic revolution that aimed to strip away the hierarchal system on which poetry had become so comfortable. Wordsworth wanted to change the way poetry was read, but more importantly, he wanted to change who was reading poetry.

*Leaves of Grass* is as much a continuation of poetry's transformation as it is a national anthem – perhaps more so. Whitman's collection is a natural continuation of Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. In the Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman calls the United States "the greatest poem," implying that the general population – and the multitudes of people contained within – represent great poetry. Those people must become the touchstone, or the base, of poetry. The focus is not, as some might need to believe, the United States. The focus is

always on the people. Still, that never leaves Whitman as poet without any agency. He is recorder of the people, yes, but he is also interpreter. In his Preface he calls the poet the universe's "one complete lover." Whitman, then, is a poet who understands not only what his lover wants but also what it needs.

Both Wordsworth and Whitman single out a possible readership, a readership that had previously been slighted by poetry. For both men, this simple engagement of a different, common audience meant more for the reception and composition of poetry than perhaps either knew would be possible. Wordsworth wished to be the voice of the vast variety of individuals who comprised his nation, rather than a generic everyman. Whitman saw himself as "the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves," never believing the two to be mutually exclusive. The result, from the rather idealistic hopes of both men to the prefaces and poetry created from those ideals, transformed poetry – its definition and the art that claimed its name – but more importantly, the two prefaces directly influenced the way readers responded to and with the author. Such a task calls into question the abilities of a preface, as a singular text and as an appendage to a larger body of work. To understand exactly *how* Wordsworth and Whitman's prefaces were able to achieve the tasks with which their authors assigned them, we might turn to a theorist whose work with "paratextual" elements will help us understand the use of Prefaces in historical context.

Describing the subject which doubles as the namesake of his book, Genette defines paratexts as "a *threshold*...that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside [the text] or turning back" (2). The paratextual elements are not instruments haphazardly attached to a preliminary text. Instead, the paratexts offer a unique look at how author or publisher wishes the reader to engage the preliminary text. Genette's *Paratexts* isolates the



“thresholds” into sections, such as the author’s name, epigraphs, and notes. Such paratextual elements seem to be of unequal importance to the actual text – but Genette challenges his readers to approach the devices differently. He asks, “[l]imited to the text alone and without a guiding set of directions, how would we read Joyce’s *Ulysses* if it were not entitled *Ulysses*?” (Genette 2). The question is rhetorical, and he does not explicitly address the answer; the answer, however, deserves some attention, or, if not the answer, the journey to the answer deserves attention.

How would the novel change if the title changed? More importantly, what does it imply about the power of paratextual elements that the answer to such a question is not obvious? The title influences different readers in a multitude of ways – enriches and influences the preliminary text based on the individual’s relationship with Homer. But a title, with all its allusions, is not the only element that can have such a profound interpretive impact on a text. In some ways, a title or the author’s name might appear to impact the text more, since those are two of the first elements the reader will encounter. The preface, however, is in a position to influence more because it is the first intentional interaction between author and reader. A table of contents and other similar conventions – which Genette also includes as a paratextual element – would not have the same impact on the preliminary text because of a publisher’s influence on such conventions. The divisions can be arbitrary, forced upon an author, while the preface most likely comes directly from the author, is not commissioned by the publisher. Genette reminds his reader that the paratext can always come from another party – the author of a paratext is not necessarily the author of the primary text. This is true enough, and important to recognize if and when a particular paratext, the preface specifically, is written by another party outside the text’s

author. Any other author of a preface would also be in the position to greatly influence the text, but for other reasons entirely.

But, if the author of the preliminary text writes the preface, the influence is not only undeniable but, according to the author, important to the consumption of the text. And again, the influence of a preface will vary as well given the type of text it precedes. For example, the preface (titled “introduction”) to Genette’s *Paratexts* reads very much like an introduction to an unfamiliar subject. The preface is necessary, for the reader to first understand terminology in the most simplistic of manners, since the following text is built upon that initial understanding. The preface to literature or poetry, however, acts differently than the preface to a work of literary criticism. Both prefaces to inform and instruct the reader, but as Genette points out in his chapter devoted to only prefaces, this device has several separate and individual functions, although those functions are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Take, for instance, William Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Composed in 1800, two years after the original publication of the Wordsworth-Coleridge collection, and added to the 1802 second-edition publication, the preface stands to function as at least two different types, in accordance with how Genette breaks down the genre. Genette starts the category with “the *original authorial preface* (*authorial* is to be understood, henceforth, as meaning authentic and assumptive),” and includes also “the *later authorial preface* (or postface: at this stage, the distinction between preface and postface is hardly relevant)...” (196, author’s emphasis). At first glance, it might seem that Wordsworth’s preface could not be included in the first category, but Genette goes on to say that “simply from the need to compensate, a later preface may take on a function that had been ignored by the original preface or, *a fortiori*, by the absence of an original preface” (197). This is exactly what happens in the case of the 1802 preface. Prior to

the second edition, the collection included no such paratextual element that might add to the reading of the poetry.<sup>1</sup> So, alongside the considerations that must be taken under due to its nature as a “later authorial preface,” considerations must also include that which would come from the original preface, since the 1802 preface works as both.

In an original preface, Genette says the “chief function [is] *to ensure that the text is read properly*” (197, author’s emphasis). The task seems simple enough – even obvious. Of course the author would want his text to be read correctly, and if a preface could ensure that happened, then why would he not write such a preface? Unfortunately, a preface, even one published with the original text, cannot guarantee such a thing occurs. Genette reminds his reader that the function “can be analyzed into two actions, the first of which enables – but does not in any way guarantee – the second (in other words, the first action is a necessary but not sufficient condition of the second)” (197). Those functions, “to get the book read” and to “get the book read properly,” although not mutually exclusive, do not guarantee each other. Getting the book read can never promise it read to the author’s specific wishes, although a preface does at least attempt to guide the reader in that direction. Although, Genette again points out the most basic of problems – including a preface in the text does not mean that the reader will engage the preface, before the primary text or at all.

Another preface worth looking at, because of its similarity to the Wordsworth preface, is Walt Whitman’s preface to *Leaves of Grass*. The similarities come in terms of authorial intention and composition style, but the differences too are worth discussing, particularly in light of Genette’s book. *Paratexts*, after all, heightens the reader’s awareness of even the subtlest of

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<sup>1</sup> The collection did not include a paratextual element of this kind in 1798, but Wordsworth did compose and publish an “advertisement” – Genette certainly would have considered this paratextual, and it is – but this will be discussed later.

ways such devices can alter the reading of a text. Whitman's preface, for instance, first saw light with the original *Leaves of Grass* publishing. Whitman's preface does not have attached to it any of the complications by being published after the preliminary text's printing.

Given the vocabulary provided by Genette, as well as the various consideration points he highlights in *Paratexts*, both the prefaces to *Lyrical Ballads* and *Leaves of Grass* should be discussed in regard to how they change the readings of their collections. The prefaces highlight the intentions of the poets, yes, but they also speak to each collection's contemporary reading climate. The ways in which each author evokes readers in their prefaces addresses the audience issues each poet anticipates, given their time period. In short, the prefaces can provide current readers with the ability to understand poetic intentions that might otherwise be ignored or misunderstood. Current readers and critics are also allowed, with studies like Genette's, to connect seemingly distant poets like Wordsworth and Whitman – through the critical ways each poet utilized their preface. Reading the two poetic giants' collections through their prefaces will yield a more connected understanding – an understanding that brings two like-minded poets together, rather than keeping them separated, as they have been, by ocean and genre.

## Chapter One: The Real Language of Men

Of all the phrases, all the sentences, all the ideas espoused in Wordsworth's 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, none are as well-known or controversy-ridden as the phrase "real language of men." Even his counterpart, Samuel Coleridge, disliked the phrase and what it meant for the poetry in the collection. In chapter fourteen of *Biographia Literaria*, published in 1817, Coleridge lashes out at Wordsworth and his Preface. He writes that in the Preface, "he was understood to contend for the extension of this style to poetry of all kinds, and to reject as vicious and indefensible all phrases and forms of speech that were not included in what he – unfortunately, I think, adopting an equivocal expression – called the language of *real* life" (Coleridge 693, author's emphasis). Coleridge's is only one example, but most likely the best and clearest example, of the criticism Wordsworth received for his Preface – the height of which was reserved for that simple phrase. Coleridge's is the clearest critique because he goes on to show how *Lyrical Ballads* is not the "real language of men" but instead the poetry of the "young men of strong sensibility and meditative minds"<sup>2</sup> (693). Coleridge's is the best critique because he had the greatest stake in the argument; no person had more to lose with the failure of the "real language of men" than Coleridge.

After Coleridge discusses the reading audiences of Wordsworth, he argues that the phrase "real language of men" is in direct opposition to many of the ideals Wordsworth painted in the Preface and utilized in his poetry. Coleridge writes that he "never concurred – but on the contrary objected to them as erroneous in principle, and as contradictory both to other parts of

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<sup>2</sup> Coleridge and Wordsworth had a falling out, causing a rift in their friendship. It is likely that Coleridge's critiques of Wordsworth came because of this fight, but for the purposes of this thesis, we will ignore Coleridge's intentions. Either way, Coleridge publically argued against Wordsworth's Preface.

the same Preface, and to the author's own practice in the greater part of the poems themselves" (693). However, in many places throughout the Preface, it seems that Wordsworth understands its multiplicity. He acknowledges, from almost the very beginning, that many readers may not agree with his poetic philosophy or even like the poetry contained in the collection. Wordsworth feigns uncertainty, playing innocent or naïve in order to relate to his reading audience. He often refers to the poetry as "experiments," and states, ever so humbly, that, "I flattered myself that they who should be pleased with them would read them with more than common pleasure... I was well aware that by those who should dislike them they would be read with more than common dislike" (496). But public opinion is less important and the real question is this: with what is Wordsworth experimenting?

The most obvious of Wordsworth's experimentation comes in the form of the poetic form. Wordsworth and Coleridge place their experimentation front and center by titling their collection *Lyrical Ballads*. These poems are, first and foremost, deriving from a ballad tradition. This tradition dates back to as early as the fifteenth century. These ballads were popular, just as ballad is a part of the pop music genre today. Ballads were not necessarily love songs, but they were executed in precise, lyrical manners that lead the ballads to be repeated and memorized by a ravenous public. Specifically, this public included the lower gentry, rather than being limited to the upper class elite. The lower classes were able to consume such ballads from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries by way of the broadside ballad, also known as a "vulgar" ballad. On broadsides, ballads were not subject to being scrutinized by a well-educated readership. In fact, the broadsides were popular because they strayed so far from traditional ballad topic. Broadside ballads focused on drinking-songs, and a manipulation of the common love and religious themes seen in traditional ballads.

**The TRAGICAL BALLAD:  
Or, The LADY who fell in Love with her  
SERVING-MAN.**



**PART I.**  
**GOOD** people pray attend  
Unto this line I've penn'd,  
Which to the world I send,  
Therefore draw near,  
And hear what I do say,  
Alas! and woe-a-day,  
Unto love's sad decay,  
Pro'd most severe.  
There was a fervant-man,  
Who lived near the Strand,  
As I do understand,  
He was so fair,  
So this young lady bright  
Could not rest day or night,  
He was her soul's delight,  
She lov'd him dear.  
Now this young lady cry'd,  
I wish I was his bride,  
To cure my smart.  
Young Cupid bend the bow,  
And wound my lover so,  
That in short time he'll know  
A love-sick heart.  
Why should I thus complain?  
He knoweth not my pain,  
He being my serving-man,  
And I so great.  
Could I unfold my mind,  
Great comfort should I find,  
But fortune proves unkind,  
Oh! cruel fate.  
Why was I born so high,  
To live in misery?  
Oh! Cupid's dart to fly  
Unto my breast!

I wish I was so poor,  
Thy love would me adore;  
Then should I care more  
Enjoy my dear.  
Then the young lady said,  
Why should I be afraid?  
I'll prove my fervant maid  
To tell my mind.  
Betty, Betty, said she,  
Pray come you hither to me!  
You must my counsel be,  
Then I'll prove kind.  
I love our fervant-man,  
You know our honest John,  
Let me do what I can,  
I can't be free.  
Love has enjoin'd my heart,  
As I do feel the smart,  
Cupid with his keen dart  
Has wounded me.  
Then said the damsel fair,  
Madam, face your declare  
Your mind, I can't forbear,  
But let you know  
I am in the same case,  
I love his charming face,  
My heart within his breast  
Is plac'd a fe.  
In sorrow, discontent,  
Away this damsel went,  
Her heart with mischief bent,  
As you shall find.  
Thou' she's my lady fair,  
Her secrets I'll declare,  
Oh! I shall live my dear,  
In a short time.

**PART II.**  
**GOOD** people lend an ear,  
I'm sure you'll shed a tear,  
When you this story hear,  
The second part.  
How Cupid bent his bow,  
Wounding three lovers so,  
Great troubles they did know,  
By his keen dart.  
The damsel first began,  
And said, I am undone;  
I shall distracted run,  
I am afraid.  
Could I draw back my mind,  
From love to be inclin'd,  
Great comfort should I find,  
In grief the maid.  
We leave the damsel here,  
As I do feel the smart,  
Entangled in love's snare,  
To treat of the young fair  
Lady so bright.  
As the fat fighting then,  
Came in the fervant-man,  
As we do understand,  
That very night.  
She did unfold her mind,  
Within short time we find,  
Saying to him most kind,  
You have my heart.  
The young man stood amaz'd,  
And on his lady gaz'd,  
Sure these are happy days,  
The young man said,  
Young madam, do forbear,  
Draw me not in a snare,  
If my matter should bear,  
We are nupts!

Rather than that should be,  
I'd go along with thee,  
Either by land or sea,  
Or where you please.  
You are my heart's delight,  
I can travel with you night,  
So they confest their fruit  
To cross the sea.  
Then said the lady bright,  
To-morrow, when 'tis light,  
I'll marry my delight,  
Then straightway I will go,  
Along with thee, my dear,  
And man's apparel wear;  
No one can us ensnare,  
Nor can us know.  
**PART III.**  
**OBSERVE** this part the third,  
The fervant-maid she staid,  
And heard them every word,  
Then straight she ran.  
Mither, mither, said she,  
Alas! you'll ruin'd be:  
Ye... daughter death agree  
To marry John.  
To-morrow is the day,  
As I did hear them say,  
That they would go away,  
And marry'd be:  
She doth him so adore,  
She quits her native shore,  
To cross the sea.  
When the did thus declare,  
He call'd his daughter fair,  
Madam, what are you there?  
Her father cry'd,  
Pray call John here also,  
The truth I mean to know,  
And if I find it so,  
I will provide  
A place you need not fear,  
Both for you and your dear,  
And I will prove severe  
Unto you both.  
Father, your will be done,  
He's like to be your son,  
Or else I will have none,  
Upon my truth.  
Daughter, since you say so,  
He shall to prison go,  
And I'll confine also  
You to your room.  
Father, father, forbear!  
Do not punish my dear;  
Let me the barren bear;  
Or I'm undone.

She to her chamber's first,  
And he to prison went,  
In grief and discontent,  
I here to remain.  
He sent him over to sea,  
A soldier there to be,  
To fight in Spain.  
Now, said the fervant-maid,  
Alas! it was I betray'd  
Your love and mine, the maid,  
Whom have I done?  
With that she tore her hair,  
And fell into despair,  
And as I do declare,  
To heaven's gate:  
That very full-fare night  
This youthful lady bright  
In dark and doleful night  
Got clear away.  
Out of a window high  
She got her liberty;  
Travelling she did come nigh  
Unto the sea.  
And in short time we hear  
She cross'd the ocean fair,  
In man's apparel there  
She met her dear:  
A soldier was he also,  
Yet his love did not know,  
She being his contrade too,  
As we do hear.  
In Spain they were not long,  
Before they both were drawn  
Into a party strong,  
To fight their foe.  
The first that wounded were,  
Was this young lady fair,  
Dying she did declare  
Her grief and woe.  
As she was on the ground,  
He suck'd her blood wound,  
Crying, My dear is gone,  
With her sweet charms:  
Shall I live longer too?  
No, no, that never will do;  
Yielding his body thro',  
Dy'd in her arms.  
Now came this news, we hear,  
Unto her father dear;  
He stamp'd and tore his hair,  
Grieving he said,  
Alas! my daughter dear,  
I prov'd to thee forever,  
Now thou art dead I fear,  
So I'll end my days.

Printed and Sold at the Printing-Office in Bow-Church-Yard, London.

*Traditional broadside ballad, ca. 18<sup>th</sup> century*

More importantly, the broadside ballads were the culture of the lower classes. By incorporating that tradition into poetry, Wordsworth very much breaks generic rules that have so far guided poetry in to a stunted, unbreakable image. Without Wordsworth's radical approach to meld the ballad tradition with the poetic form, there would be no way that he could have committed to a "real language of men." The real language of men, after all, would have been thoroughly and honestly expressed in broadside ballads. By taking on that tradition, Wordsworth is forcing himself away from the more classic poetic tradition. He forces himself out of the uncomfortable, instead of the reader.

According to Jon P. Klancher, who writes *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832*, the experiments deal with the poet's revolutionary approach to the literary world – specifically, his understanding of the author-reader relationship. Klancher writes, "out of his

prefaces, supplements, and letters emerged a whole vocabulary with which literary history and the sociology of culture came to distinguish the transmission of cultural works..." (135). This here, the "whole vocabulary," seems to be the legacy Wordsworth leaves the literary world – perhaps not more important than his poetry, but at the very least, it equals the significance of the poetry. His signature phrase, the "real language of men," can be broken down into the three key words, and, without the work of the preface to fill in the blanks, would beg to be defined more fully, at least in terms of the work Wordsworth wants those words to do.

"Real," for Wordsworth, is defined by the variety of people it represents. Reality can only be found in variety. It is not that, as others from Wordsworth's time might argue, a certain type of person is more real than the other. Instead, the sum is greater and of more significance than any of its parts. But then, it would seem, Wordsworth makes a fatal flaw when he writes in the voice of, say, an ex-captain in "The Thorn." If it is true that by "real," Wordsworth means no specific type of man, then it seems contradictory to highlight one man's voice – one man's point-of-view. Contradiction it is not, however, and Wordsworth illustrates the importance of variety by highlighting the voice of this man. But Wordsworth seems incapable of escaping inconsistencies in his Preface. Again, contradiction appears in the Preface when Wordsworth writes that "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)..." (497). Given that he admits the language to be "purified," then he seems to contradict his assertion that this language is real. How can it be real if he has modified with its contents, even if only taking what he calls "defects" away from the original product? However, "purified" should only be seen as a poetic method, a way by which he can incorporate or transform such language into art. "Real," then,



should not be defined so simply as wholly and completely accurate but as a sincere and genuine representation of “low and rustic life.”

“Language” comes to embrace what Wordsworth calls the “emphatic,” mimicking and respecting a lifestyle above the laws of literature, as the poet believes many in his profession tend to do. He believes these poets “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” (Wordsworth 498). By this he seems to suggest, as Coleridge argued in *Biographia Literaria*, that those who do not follow his suit are condemned to write poor poetry – that their poetry is the product of self-indulgence, not the careful consideration of a variety of readers. Yet that seems a rather bald way of looking at Wordsworth’s argument. It is not simply “I am right, and you are wrong.” Instead, he places the spotlight, at least in this passage, not on his own ideas but on the linguistic choices of his past and present. In that moment, Wordsworth questions the validity of the old ways – begging the question, how useful are these old “habits of expression”?

“Men” represents a wider variety of classes, those Wordsworth believed had not been accounted for in the poetry of his contemporaries, or even his predecessors. His greatest example of these men come from the “low and rustic life,” which he believes to contain some of the best poetic material. He writes that this lifestyle represents men well because “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” (497).

In “Elementary Feelings and Distorted Language: The Pragmatics of Culture in Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” Thomas Pfau discusses the poetic and cultural implications of the Preface. Ignoring the repetitious critiques of the theory, those that highlight

the contradictions in the Preface, Pfau instead focuses on how much of a landmark the Preface truly was, for the time period and for poetry to come in its wake. He writes that the Preface is where “an intrinsically political theory of culture is advanced as a theory of discourse, itself bounded by the yet tighter formal constraints of the *discipline* of poetics and formal stylistic...thereby shaping an argument about the fundamental continuity between discursive, poetic, and cultural transactions” (127, author’s emphasis). That argument Pfau references *is* Wordsworth’s purpose, his intent, the drive behind the production of the Preface – to first identify how that continuity might work, why it might work, and how such a revelation should change the poet’s approach to composition. Wordsworth’s formal engagement reads less like a contract and more like a promise. The promise is simple. Wordsworth’s goal is to produce classless poetry – poetry that cannot be bound by language but is instead set free by the linguistic choices of the author. Wordsworth keeps this promise and the result is evidentiary support for the theories explored in the Preface.

The “language of real men” claim is the most difficult to prove. Tweaking and adding to the type of language typically used in poetry stems from what Wordsworth believed to be a hierarchal system of classifying poetic texts. To a certain extent, many readers still cling to the belief that a poem is worth its weight in extended-syllable words and complicated metaphor. To Wordsworth, a more complicated writing style only limits the poem’s readership. He states, “Because our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity,” by changing the linguistic style, the subject “may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated.” By that, he means it is pointless to render uncomplicated feelings complex. He is advocating (and nobly so!) clear, effective language.

Wordsworth also demands the language do more than say. That is, the words must serve function as well as add to the aesthetic quality of a poem. Ashton argues that “the poems would enact rather serve as emblems” if Wordsworth fulfills his goal in melding action and situation (173). “Real language of men” does just that – it acts, participates as much as it paints a picture. The act of painting a picture is too passive. The language Wordsworth evokes in a poem like “The Thorn” illustrates his need to have the words represent more than what they appear to on the page, while at the same time never overwhelming or confusing the reader (or for that matter, the narrator). Still, Wordsworth is not so blinded by his advocacy that he overlooks one glaring problem with such a notion. Not every person talks alike, thinks alike, or lives alike. As such, the poet focuses his attention to writing in the dialect and manner of specific personas. Adopting such detailed language, Wordsworth carefully constructs a tailored reading, one that suits his goals as author and as poetic trailblazer. In the Preface, Wordsworth argues that this language in particular, a language stripped of all its pretention, “is a more permanent and a far more philosophical language” (497). By this, Wu notes, he means, “fit for philosophical discourse.” This language is ripe for this kind of work because there is no agenda outside communication – no attempt to dominate, no attempt to pretend. If there is an agenda, it is that – to clear poetry of unnecessary ornamental language. Each word is chosen because of its clarity instead of its beauty. Beauty is never the objective; it is a delightful and welcome outcome.

But still, why call it the “real language of men”? Klancher tells us that, “Wordsworth, never comfortable with abstruse speculations, groped toward a systematic conception of his cultural aims...” (135). In order to avoid “abstruse speculations,” Wordsworth tries to ground himself in this “real language of men.” By focusing on a specific group’s linguistic style, Wordsworth would be compelled to produce a specific kind of poetry – that which spoke to the

kind of people whose voice he adapted. This approach is basic enough. Wordsworth will simply mimic the voice of specific characters. He will engage their voice as it were a literary tool. This literary tool, however, does have implicit cultural aims. That is, Wordsworth wishes to deconstruct the literary hierarchy in place. By tearing down cultural walls within the literary world, within poetry specifically, he might reach a broader, classless audience.

The 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* finds William Wordsworth uncertain of such a text's boundaries. In a work that is otherwise purposeful and controlled in its goals, the moments where Wordsworth hesitates to describe fully the abilities of a preface catch the reader off guard. Such moments are fleeting, distanced from each other, but they are true moments of doubt nonetheless. Such a statement does more rhetorically, to set the reader's mind at ease, than it reveals about Wordsworth's opinion of the collection. Still, a few sentences see indecision accompanied by statements regarding the purpose of prefaces, and Wordsworth's doubt is clear and genuine. Such hesitation on the part of Wordsworth merely points to the importance of the preface. He considers what he needs the preface to do, for the collection, for his poetic philosophy, and for the readers on a personal level but is not sure that prefaces can do everything necessary. This concern, in many ways, softens the weight put upon the preface's shoulders – and in effect Wordsworth is letting his preface off the hook. If not everything can be done in the few pages, the preface as a device and the readers shall not be held accountable.

What is interesting about the production of the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is that it did not come from Wordsworth. Instead, Coleridge believed such a text necessary for the publication of the collection's second edition.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is where Wordsworth's concern for pushing preface boundaries stems from. Early in the text, Wordsworth writes "...I was unwilling to

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<sup>3</sup> Wu, Duncan.

undertake the task because I knew that on this occasion the Reader would look coldly upon my arguments, since I might be suspected of having been principally influenced by the selfish and foolish hope of *reasoning* him into an approbation of these particular Poems” (496, author’s emphasis). Such a statement delves away from Genette’s assertion that an original preface’s function is to get the work read and read correctly. Here, Wordsworth believes his readers might see the preface as a way to receive the reader’s approval of the collection as a whole. While that might be a stretch, since Wordsworth could not possibly gain approbation via text, his sentiment is not entirely inappropriate. His is more a fear of an overwhelming sense of authorial presence, rather than “selfish and foolish hope,” which complicates the power of prefaces, as Genette indicates in *Paratexts*. The simple act of placing a preface before the original text argues that the original text cannot be consumed without the reader first engaging the preface. It is as if the author is asserting his power over the reader, although once the text is finished, there would be no tangible control left in the hands of the author. After all, Wordsworth cannot control the order in which the audience reads his poetry. He cannot force his audience to read “The Thorn” outside in a landscape similar to his Martha Ray. However, including a preface into a collection like *Lyrical Ballads* seems, as Wordsworth clearly thought, like an attempt to reassert that control over the reader. By basking in his uncertainty of prefaces, he undermines that control, placing himself on the same level with the reader – or, even, elevating the reader. As it stands, it will be for the reader to decide (either consciously or subconsciously) what limits the preface has.

Wordsworth makes sure to mention which issues he believes a preface, or at least, this preface, cannot cover. This too seems to provide more power to Wordsworth’s audience, as the reader knows what the author could not include and can decide on his own whether or not

omitting such material affects the reading of the preface and poetry. Wordsworth writes, “it would be necessary to give a full account of the present state of the public taste in this country...” but goes on to say that he has “declined to enter regularly upon this defence,” arguably because he feels it is not in the “nature of a [general] preface” to accomplish such goals (496). By announcing that he has declined to do what he believes he ought to, he alerts his reader to the unorthodox nature of his Preface. While at the same time Wordsworth empowers the reader, by acknowledging possible flaws in his own Preface, he highlights what is unique about the construction of his argument. Wordsworth is not only radical in his poetic theory; he is radical in his approach to writing a simple Preface.

An anonymous review, printed in the *American Review and Literary Journal*, met Wordsworth’s preface with delight. The author describes the preface as “ingenious and well written,” and goes so far to argue that the work “should be read by all who wish to enter into the spirit of these ballads” (Gamer 407). Such a suggestion anticipates what Genette argues most preface authors desire: a clear, undeniable relationship between the information in the preface and the literary work it precedes. In this review of *Lyrical Ballads*, the author articulates that very idea, which indicates that not only did Wordsworth understand the nature of a preface, but also he succeeded in its production. He has indeed, as he notes is necessary in his preface, “protected [himself] from the most dishonourable accusation which can be brought against an Author – namely, that of an indolence which prevents him from endeavouring to ascertain what is his duty, or, when his duty is ascertained, prevents him from performing it” (497). But this protection is thanks to his weariness of his preface’s power just as it is thanks to its completion at all. By limiting his preface, acknowledging that he has not the space to discuss in detail his

society's taste in literature, he is able to instead spend a significant amount of time on the literary theory that propels him and Coleridge to create the works included in *Lyrical Ballads*.

That literary theory, the anonymous reviewer writes, asserts "that between poetry and prose there neither is nor can be any essential difference; that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well-written" (Gamer 407-8). Although certainly condensed, the reviewer is true to the heart of Wordsworth's goal. Such a summary does not indicate that the reviewer in question did not understand the whole of Wordsworth's poetic theory, but instead that the most important aspects – the importance of changing the language of poetry – remained with the reader after the consumption of the preface.

After all, the connection between poetry and prose is very much related to the "real language of men." In the Preface, Wordsworth writes, "it is supposed, that by the act of writing in verse an Author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association, that he not only thus apprizes the Reader that at certain classes of ideas and expressions will be found in his book, but that others will carefully be excluded" (496). Here, Wordsworth specifically addresses the major problem that comes with the kind of poetic revolution he attempts. It seems obvious to call the relationship between author and reader an "engagement" in the sense that there is an interaction happening between the two. This engagement is tangible in that there is a product passing between the two – in this case, it is the Preface. This engagement develops a type of contract, one similar to the implied contract between a buyer and seller. However, in the case of the author-reader relationship, the reader cannot take the text back when the author has not satisfied him. This is why the contract between author and reader is that of a "formal" nature. The contract is not implied. It is written,

between the lines of the prose and/or poetry of the author. Simply by engaging in verse, Wordsworth has made specific promises to the reader. He goes on to express his belief that readers might feel he had not fulfilled his part of the bargain. That assessment, more than a trite act of self-effacement, illustrates to the reader Wordsworth's dedication to his craft and his desire to reconstruct poetic composition and theory.

After his discussion of an original preface's functions in *Paratexts*, Genette moves on to the functions of later prefaces – that is, prefaces produced after the preliminary text's publication. Genette classifies Wordsworth's 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* a later preface for logical reasons. The preface appears to be, as Genette calls it, an “afterthought” to the original collection's publication. More than that, Genette approves of this decision, since, he writes, “the earlier edition contained a much more modest anonymous advertisement; but it is true that the second edition is appreciably enlarged, which justifies a more ambitious paratext” (239). Here, it seems, Genette believes length a partial indicator of a preface's length – and perhaps its functions as well. And how could such an important factor not influence the purpose of both texts? *Lyrical Ballads*' 1798 publication included just twenty-three poems and a Wordsworth-penned advertisement preceding the collection. Just two years later, in 1800, the collection swelled to over sixty poems, including “A slumber did my spirit seal” and “Lucy Gray.” And, of course, Wordsworth omitted the advertisement for his preface.

The advertisement included in the 1798 printing was only five paragraphs in length. In many ways, it seems Wordsworth had to write the advertisement to be able to write the 1800 preface, since the advertisement shows early versions of ideas espoused in the original preface. Wordsworth begins with the characteristics everybody *knows* poetry to have, followed by the acknowledgement that this is a collection that might meet the needs of readers. The term for the



poems contained in the collection is “experiments,” which implies a quite humble approach by Wordsworth and Coleridge in terms of what this collection does differently. Wordsworth, however, eschews the poetry of the past, the poetry that foregrounds beauty as a static position, the poetry that stands in opposition to the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*. He believes that kind of poetry contains a sense of “gaudiness and inane phraseology”<sup>4</sup> that emphasizes representation rather than inquiry, just one of the hurdles he and Coleridge have to overcome in order for their experiments to succeed. “Gaudiness and inane phraseology” become a hurdle, rather than an annoying poetic trait to be ignored, because of the readers’ expectations due to the deep-seeded tradition of poetry. The advertisement states that the reader will possibly encounter poetry that he does not like or understand. But there is something missing in the advertisement – the reasoning behind Wordsworth’s intentions, an explanation of the changes he planned to enact in his own poetry. The missing explanations create friction between authorial intent and reader interpretation in regard to the 1798 collection.

Wordsworth writes, in the advertisement, that “the poem of ‘The Thorn,’ as the reader will soon discover, is not supposed to be spoken in the author’s own person: the character of the loquacious narrator will sufficiently show itself in the course of the story” (331). Those are the only lines written about the poem, and Wordsworth only mentions one other poem, “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere.” Given that there are more than twenty other poems in the collection, Wordsworth seems to be bestowing particular importance to these poems in the collection. Since that is most likely the reason for the special attention in the advertisement, it is peculiar that Wordsworth chose not to say more about each of the poems in the advertisement.

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<sup>4</sup> Wu, Duncan.

Despite Wordsworth's careful efforts to properly position the poem in the Preface, "The Thorn" met with harsh criticism. In *Critical Review*, Robert Southey (published anonymously) vocalized his issues with the poem. He states, "we were altogether displeas'd [with "The Thorn"]," and that "the author should have recollected that he who personates tiresome loquacity, becomes tiresome himself" (Gamer 149). Southey, a friend of both the poets, is clear in his dislike of the poem, but in terms of this particular poem, he does not provide explicit examples. It is not so much that the poem lacks formality. It is not that the "language of real men" is inappropriate; rather, the "language of real men" has not the stamina to sustain poetry. Southey sees the "language of real men" as a boring language. He sees the man, Wordsworth's captain, is boring, and so too Wordsworth becomes boring. Southey articulates the problem Wordsworth and Coleridge anticipated: readers would not understand *why* a poet would choose to write with such seemingly simple linguistic choices. The advertisement calls for readers to ask if the poetry in *Lyrical Ballads* "contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters and human incidents," (331). Or, the authors want readers to recognize *reality* in their poetry. But in the advertisement, Wordsworth never articulates why that is a necessary assignment for the reader. Thus, the advertisement fails as a preface. It cannot wholly explicate why the Captain should not be viewed as boring – why, in fact, his point-of-view is crucial to the understanding of Martha Ray, Wordsworth's female character in "The Thorn."

However, the genius of Wordsworth and Coleridge's experiment is able to develop more fully with this development. *Lyrical Ballads* has seen publication and subsequent criticism. As both poets read, digest, and understand the criticism, they are able to react and respond accordingly, to satisfy the reader. For "The Thorn" in particular, the attempt to satisfy the reader translates into the creation of a note, which would see publication in the 1800 edition of the

collection, printed directly before the poem in question. Wordsworth calls this note “an introductory poem,” and goes on to address some of the issues Southey has in his review.

Calling the note “an introductory poem” is an interesting choice in itself. By identifying the note as such, Wordsworth highlights the tools that are necessary for the reader of poetry. By calling the note a poem, the note becomes an integral piece of the poem, rather than a separable apparatus for the poetry. He answers, without being asked, those critics who would ask why this information was not printed in the original publication, if it was so vital to “The Thorn.” Because it is not just a note. It is a part of “The Thorn,” just as a stanza would be. There is a section in Genette’s *Paratexts* that addresses the importance of titles as paratextual elements, and here is a prime example of how a title can transform the text to which it is attached.

In the “introductory poem,” Wordsworth explains that his narrator’s voice derives from his experience as a captain. This narrator retired to the sleepy village that surrounds the location where the poem takes place. The note can be looked at as a character exercise, where the author writes to understand his character better. Such an exercise typically does not reach the reader’s eyes, but Wordsworth’s exercise serves a less inclusive purpose. This author writes so his readers can understand the character better, although this should not be looked at as the poem’s weakness. Rather, it is Wordsworth’s (rather bold) admission that poetry, with all its abilities, cannot fully inform the reader of the author’s intentions. A poem is not without limitations. Wordsworth accepts this and uses the paratextual note as a way to circumvent this issue. He admits the problem but assures his readers when he writes, “I am sensible that an introductory poem is necessary to give the poem its full effect” (508). This simple statement indicates why Wordsworth felt compelled to produce the note, but it also speaks to the purpose of the Preface and the issues that brought about its composition. Because the note to “The Thorn” is not the

only way Wordsworth answers the calls of his readers (and critics). The advertisement sees itself recycled, in 1800, into the original preface.

The problem as he sees it is the limitations inherent in the construction and language of poetry, but by approaching those choices in a different manner, those limitations might be lessened. The result is twofold: the author successfully expresses the original intent, and the readers can approach the poetry with more than mere enjoyment. This theory, then, focuses on the experience of the reader, not the craft of the poet. That is not to say, however, that Wordsworth believed creativity and effectiveness to be mutually exclusive, which he illustrates well in “The Thorn.”

## Chapter Two: Fulfilling the Terms of the Formal Engagement

In order to fulfill the terms of the “formal engagement,” Wordsworth must adhere to certain conventional standards, to provide the reader some sense of comfort, while at the same time furthering his own poetic philosophies regarding language and class. In the Preface, Wordsworth refers to the “formal engagement” as a sort of contract between author and reader. That is, it is the understanding that the author will adhere to certain poetic conventions, will answer certain reader expectations. He seems concerned, however, that he has not succeeded. He writes, “I am certain it will appear to many persons that I have not fulfilled the terms of an engagement thus voluntarily contracted” (Wordsworth 497). Has he fulfilled that contract? The answer is found in no better place than widely read “The Thorn,” which showcases the most difficult and greatest aspects of Wordsworth’s poetic philosophy. That is, “The Thorn” illustrates the successes of captivating the reader via the “real language of men.” The captain is just a captain, but also something more. He symbolizes both the limitations of and the possibilities of language: the importance of such a discovery apparent in the class division of the time period, within the artistic world and in society. For Wordsworth, the philosophy behind the Preface was as much a societal revolution as it was a poetic one. The philosophy influenced the poetry in author interaction with his reader.

“The Thorn,” printed in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, illustrates Wordsworth’s ability to walk the fine line between the two. The life given to the narrator by Wordsworth, prior to the beginning of “The Thorn,” affects the story subtly but in vast and important ways. The level of Wordsworth’s craft is in high form with “The Thorn,” melding the purpose of the poem with his overall poetic methodology. The poem comes from the voice of a retired ship captain, which Wordsworth describes in the note to “The Thorn.” The poem chronicles this man’s

adventures as he plays the part of voyeur to a jilted woman named Martha Ray. He watches from afar as she makes her way to the thorn every day, crying over a child's grave. The captain speculates about Martha's life – the circumstances of her child's death and her wrecked life. He is continuously fascinated by her repeated cries. He pays attention to the town gossip, and relays this information to his listener, about how and why her fiancé left. The captain is a simple man watching and reporting on the life of another.

From the very beginning, the simplicity of the narrator's lifestyle shines through. Wordsworth begins simply when he writes, "There is a thorn, it looks *so* old, / In truth you'd find it hard to say/ How it could ever have been *so* young, / It looks *so* old and grey" (lines 1-4, my emphasis). The repetition of the word "so" in describing the thorn immediately speaks to the narrator's linguistic shortcomings. The confirmation that the captain is a simple man discreetly comes from Wordsworth that this is his intention by also repeating "so" before "old" – in the first line, and again in the fourth. The grouping of the two words speaks to the breadth of the captain's vocabulary, a basic fact that reinforces Wordsworth's call for clear, direct language in the Preface. The captain means "old," so he says "old." The captain would not think to say "decrepit" in place of the second "old," simply because he had already used that word. What would be the purpose in that? If Wordsworth is to remain true to the voice of his character, he must understand that this choice is as much a statement of fact as it is a convenient word. Old is old. There is no second-guessing what the captain means. The character develops further with the seemingly banal choice "in truth," found in the second line. Wordsworth, in making these choices, demands that the poem have a face-value meaning that can be enjoyed by any reader. More importantly, it is accessible to those outside the landed gentry, where the lowly captain sits – where Martha Ray sat, before the death of her child.

Truth would matter a great deal to the man Wordsworth describes in the note to “The Thorn.” Telling the reader that his narrator is a retired captain, the reader automatically understands more about the narrator’s philosophies, which govern his life. In the note, Wordsworth states that the narrator should be categorized among those that “are utterly destitute of fancy – the power by which pleasure and surprise are excited by sudden varieties of situation and accumulated imagery” (508). Here, fancy, and Wordsworth’s subsequent definition, calls for particular attention. To be “utterly destitute” of the ability to allow “situation” and “imagery” to entice and ignite passion in a person’s being implies that the person in question is dull, uninspired. Instead, this should be interpreted instead as an unawareness of all of the spectacular ideas and images that comprise the Romantic genre. It is too simple a generalization to call a man like the captain old and boring. Rather, he and his words are products of the life he has lived. As captain, such a man would command organization, clarity, and simplicity to keep his person and his crew safe. Such an environment is not hospitable for the creation of an active imagination, a cornerstone of Romanticism.

In addition to the captain’s simplified descriptions, the poem emphasizes other particular aspects of the captain’s personality. Wordsworth utilizes repetition throughout the poem, a conventional poetic form, which reinforces his description of the captain in the preceding note. The choice on Wordsworth’s part to have the captain repeat himself both distances the poet from the limits of a “formal engagement” while also maintaining his side of the bargain. Wordsworth is not engaging traditional Romantic language. He does not dress up the captain’s linguistic choices. They are not made more beautiful, not embellished to demonstrate Wordsworth’s talent. At the same time, Wordsworth is very much relying on a time honored poetic tradition. Repetition is a safe choice, a *recognizable* choice - one not to be missed by any reader of poetry.

He manipulates the comforting form while relying on its ability to lull the readers into a sense of familiarity. The manipulation comes through the captain's voice and personality. Like the captain himself, the details he provides are ordinary. He tells "you," his listener that, "to the left, three yards beyond, / You see a little muddy pond/ Of water, never dry. / I've measured it from side to side;/ 'Tis three feet long and two feet wide" (28-32). For the subject, for the narrator, for the mysterious person in the narrator's presence, and to the reader, the size of the pond has absolutely no relevance. Including that information, or allowing the narrator to include that information, illustrates how dedicated Wordsworth was to the original goal set forth in the Preface, that he should be bound by the "real language of men." Such a description as that of the pond aligns itself well with the note when Wordsworth writes that he must "represent a picture which should not be unimpressive, yet consistent with the character that should describe it" (508). The initial image of the thorn's location is just that – unimpressive but never overwhelming to any aspect of the reader's senses. In the hands of a poet, even Wordsworth, such description might be blown into epic proportions. The pond might have been described in the extravagant language. Instead, the poem shies away from the principles of Romanticism; the captain's integrity as narrator is reinforced by the simplistic use of details.

The narrator's inclination toward the empirical details establishes an important precedence as we move forward into the poem. With the appropriate representation objective in mind, the description of Martha Ray reads with much more significance – reads poignant, perhaps in a way even Wordsworth had not initially imagined. Everything the reader knows about Martha Ray is filtered through the narrator. The first detail the reader is given that carries any weight is the color of her cloak, the appropriate scarlet. Wu's notation in the anthology to this description points out what current readers understand immediately – scarlet is red, red is



sinful, Martha Ray is guilty. For Wordsworth's contemporary readers, Wu notes that the whore of Babylon, in Revelation, was also marked by the color. Thus, though readers might provide romantic associations with certain details – such as the color red – the captain cannot be held responsible for those links made by the reader. The captain never proclaims the woman's guilt or innocence throughout the duration of the poem. The color detail is peculiar though, particularly for a man who spent four lines describing a pond, a detail Wordsworth utilizes to illustrate the captain's connection to Martha Ray and speak to her state of mind, without stepping outside the point-of-view of his narrator.

The captain's lack of judgment also serves another purpose for Wordsworth. In the Preface, after he discusses the common life he wishes to depict, he writes that the emotions represented in his poetry can be “more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated” through an adoption of the “real language of men” (497). The nature of this captain is not one that is conducive to judgment. And it is an oversimplification to argue that his conversation with the nameless second character can be described as gossip. Rather, it seems that the narrator's desire is to describe and thereby understand the woman. For Wordsworth, the reader cannot accurately contemplate the plight of Martha Ray when his narrator refuses to commend or condemn her.

Given Wordsworth's desire for the reader to fully understand his subject, it fits that the narrator would focus on the color of her cloak. Although the specificity of the color might seem too detailed, the religious connotation of scarlet might not have been lost on the captain. The color, then, does not assure the narrator of the woman's guilt; instead, it alerts the narrator to the woman's belief in her own guilt. The captain sees Martha with no one. She is alone, and yet, she hangs her head low, adorned by her scarlet cloak, and cries. Given what the captain most

likely knows about the color and its associations with sin, he would be justified in believing in her guilt. After all, that is how the woman portrays herself. The captain calls her a “wretched woman,” wretched implying the woman’s state of being. She is overwhelmed by her grief and misery, and her guilt, the reasons behind which unknown to the narrator and reader, consume her, so much so that she feels it necessary to pay her penance by climbing to the thorn each day, crying aloud repeatedly for the child lost. For the narrator, however, the cloak symbolizes those emotions rather than a conviction of a physical crime. The captain’s connection with Martha Ray changes him. His world, and the way he views it, is changed. Wordsworth begins the narration simply, with repetition, and basic terms, but his exploration of language puts him in the unique position to mold his narrator and, in the same stride, his reader.

The change is first illustrated in the captain in the seventh stanza of “The Thorn,” when he continues his description of Martha Ray to his audience. After describing her as the “wretched woman,” he continues by saying that “she is known to every star/ And every wind that blows; / And there beside the thorn she sits/ When the blue daylight’s in the skies, / And when the whirlwind’s on the hill” (69-73). This description showcases the connection between the narrator and Martha Ray in that she has pushed him to look at her, and the world, differently. A man who had previously not spent much time detailing anything, he now spends several lines comparing Martha Ray’s being to the power of the environment surrounding her. Such a result relates to what Wordsworth discusses in the Preface as a merging of passion and nature, passion here being defined as that which stirs up emotion in a person’s being. Wu notes this as a “search for permanence – of language and symbol – [which] is fundamental to Wordsworth’s aesthetic” (497).

But it is more than an aesthetic. This combination serves a much higher purpose. Reaching that classless audience, the commonality that links all people is that natural environment. Specifically, Wordsworth isolates the lower classes as voices through which poetry is channeled; they become source material for his work. The narrator pushes that connection to the environment countless times throughout the duration of the poem. In the tenth stanza, he urges his listener to visit the spot of which he speaks, so that they might be able to understand what he has missed, implying the varying experiences that nature offers to each individual. He says, “But to the thorn, and to the pond/ Which is a little step beyond,/ I wish that you would go./ Perhaps when you are at the place/ You something of her tale may trace” (106-10). The narrator argues for this because the uniqueness of the location. Martha Ray’s story cannot be fully understood without experiencing the landscape, which mimics and surrounds her pain. Such information may appear, on the surface, insignificant to the reader and to Wordsworth’s overall intention with the poem, but in reality, the connection that the narrator draws out between the natural world and the ability to understand echoes Wordsworth’s entire picture – how the captain and Martha Ray and the landscape all merge to create one image. The response a reader may have to the poem is a result of this technique to have the narrator focus on the details, rather than have the poem written in a forced language riddled with invented symbology.

That image created does not necessarily have to be one of great importance. It does not need to be elevated with middle and upper class language. “The Thorn” ends abruptly. There is no answer. The reader is never provided with Martha’s real story, or a meeting between the two characters. And that is the way it should be; that is real life. Wordsworth writes, “the principle object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems, was to make the incidents of common

life interesting by tracing in them (truly, though not ostentatiously) the primary laws of our nature” (497). While it could be argued that Martha Ray’s story is not an “incident of common life,” that assessment dismisses the commonality of her story in favor of its sensationalistic nature. Wordsworth anticipates this, which is why it is crucial that the captain tells the jilted woman’s story. Wordsworth argues in the note to “The Thorn” that men like the captain are “prone to superstition,” and yet this narrator is careful with Martha Ray, as if she might hear him speak about her. Ashton refers to the narrator’s treatment of Martha Ray as “unsympathetic” and “insensitive,” then makes slight jab at what he believes to be similarities between “The Thorn” and Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner.” The Wordsworth-Coleridge comment is misplaced, but the reading of the narrator as insensitive truly misses an opportunity to look at why the narrator is portrayed in that manner.

Rather than being overwhelmed in the controversy of her story, although he does add as many details as he can manage, the narrator’s repetitiveness carries the description of the thorn and of the moss around the child’s gravesite. Ashton outlines the many times Wordsworth’s poems in *Lyrical Ballads* connect to a sensational event, but here, the detail is carefully explored, with slow yet steady drive. The narrator’s curiosity mirrors that which would be common for a captain, a man accustomed to a “seek and explore” attitude. But never would the captain dream to explore, or brutalize, Martha Ray in such a manner. So the reserve that keeps him at bay is not insensitivity – it is a heightened awareness of his own surroundings. Ashton goes on to argue later that the narrator “cannot feel himself,” similar to Martha Ray’s lover, Stephen. This is the danger of the simplicity of Wordsworth’s prose and is certainly why he argues, in the opening lines of the note to the poem, why he must include the note for “The Thorn” to be complete. The seeming discrepancy between Wordsworth’s description of the narrator and the words which the

narrator uses to detail Martha Ray's story is not discrepancy at all. Rather, the dichotomy illustrates what Wordsworth meant when he wrote that "in that situation our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity" (497). Those words written in the Preface explain the apparent coldness of the captain. His words are given the freedom to be plain, because the feelings need not be complex in order to be meaningful. To exist in a state of "greater" simplicity indicates that Wordsworth believed the more simplistic the style, the clearer and more direct the message.

Focusing on the natural world puts the narrator under less "restraint," a happy consequence, Wordsworth believes, in dwelling in the "low and rustic life" that is common. Many critics of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* point to contradiction and an unawareness on the part of Wordsworth. The inconsistencies, many believe, are best illustrated in Wordsworth's execution of his own poetic philosophy. In his article about Wordsworth's preface, Thomas Pfau summarizes these complaints, pointing generally to a dislike of the idea of the Preface as poetic theory. Pfau continually refers to the Preface as "pedagogical," which might account for some of the critical hostility that the Preface endured. There is a mystery behind the construction of poetry, and readers as well as critics like to think of the process as organic somehow, a result of genius. By contradicting what geniuses prior to the publication of the Preface had done, the interpretation is that Wordsworth criticizes the artists of the past. Instead, Wordsworth meant to put forth another writing option, illustrating both in the Preface and in practice that a poem can succeed without being heavily weighted by language.

Although the Preface should not be thought as Wordsworth's way to criticize other poets, he certainly sees that poets can be more effective in their goals by heeding his advice. Poets or readers did not solicit this advice, and no poet was in a mood to change his style. Changing

poetic style might, after all, seem akin to asking a painter to switch from watercolors to oil. It is important to express, however, that Wordsworth did not condemn style. Instead, he wished to illustrate, to readers and poets alike, that “the powers of language are not so limited as [one] might suppose.” He wishes to stretch the boundaries of words beyond what they had previously been. He wishes to redefine the term “poetry,” and, through this redefinition, hopes to change the ways readers can interact with poetry. Wordsworth does not presume to be able to explain to the world the power of words, as much as critics might wish to label him as such. Instead, Wordsworth’s true revolution lies in the way poets utilize each word to affect and influence the reader. That author-reader relationship is being explored in the Preface, in the note, and in his poetry in a way that had not truly been touched. The negative reaction of the critics to this idea certainly points to the hierarchy within poetry. The contention between Wordsworth and his critics speaks to the unwillingness by many to budge. Poetry, after all, was art, and art just might not reach some levels of society, should not comment on some aspects of life, and certainly would not lower itself to utilize the language of the “rustic” everyman.

Wordsworth knew that, above all, a poem must be enjoyable, must entice a “state of excitement.” Wordsworth was not the only poet to know that. He was, however, one of the first poets to understand that that goal did not need to exclude any class, any language. Romance implies fantasy and suggests a whimsical state of being. To be romantic also implies a sense of emotional openness, particularly those emotions that relate to love. But Wordsworth works hard to clear such expectations from his readers’ minds. This complete understanding of not only what readers want but what readers are used to getting allows Wordsworth to write, in absolute clarity, his own goals for his poetry and for the changing of the poetic scene. There is a balance between writing simply, of simplistic things, without writing simple poems. Near the end of his Preface,

Wordsworth provides two examples of poetry which employs simplistic language. The first, from a Dr. Johnson, reads “I put my hat upon my head,/ And walked into the Strand,/ And there I met another man/ Whose hat was in his hand” (Wordsworth 505). The second poem reads “These pretty babes with hand in hand/ Went wandering up and down;/ But never more they saw the man/ Approaching from the town” (Wordsworth 506). At first glance, Wordsworth acknowledges that the two poems seem strikingly similar. They both utilize some of the same vocabulary. Both are short. They employ the same meter, same rhyme scheme. What is the difference? For Wordsworth, the first poem, by Johnson, is “contemptible” because of the “matter expressed” in it. That is, he writes of nothing. He never goes so far as to call it bad poetry, although calling it contemptible seems to do the job. Instead, he argues that “it is neither interesting in itself, nor can [it] *lead* to anything interesting” (Wordsworth 506, author’s emphasis). From common life comes the greatest poetry, but that poetry must also *say* or *do* something worthy of poetry. It cannot just be, as it is, without any movement, any purpose.

He wants to illustrate moments “from common life,” which signals immediately a shift Wordsworth wants to see happen from the whimsical to reality. He feels it necessary to contain his language to the “language [which is] really used by men,” a move that illustrates probably the most important point of Wordsworth’s Preface: reader participation and reception. The easiest method by which Wordsworth can ensure reader participation is to fully explain his narrator and then to write that narrator with a sense of clarity that allows the captain to breathe. The captain has to be as real to the reader as Wordsworth is. Although the narrator does not mean to stand-in for an “everyman,” Wordsworth does write the man in such a way that the reader can connect with him. He asks the questions about Martha Ray that the reader wishes to ask. This is why the

second character, the off-stage character to which the captain speaks, does so well to be unnamed. The unnamed character is a placeholder, in which the reader is allowed to step.

This conversational tone also reinforces the “real language of men” in that there is a tangible entity behind the poem’s purpose. The narrator is not speaking out to the open wind and is not speaking to his own person. That is not real. Real people converse, interact, and this captain is no exception. Because the reader is more accepting of the medium, the reader will more openly listen to the story of Martha Ray. The reader is most likely to believe in and understand the captain before he understands Wordsworth or “poetry”. If guided by the conventions of the genre, rather than the vision of his narrator, the description of Martha Ray’s story might have drawn attention to unimportant aspects of her life – the question of her guilt, the jilting by her lover, or the death of the infant. In the hands of the captain, the detail given never complicates or masks juxtaposition of Martha Ray’s loneliness and the inability to be wholly alone in nature. Those dueling ideas shine through, without a doubt, with the aid of the voyeuristic captain. He says, after describing the jilting of Martha Ray, “...On that woeful day/ A cruel, cruel fire, they say,/ Into her bones was sent:/ It dried her body like a cinder/ And almost turned her brain to tinder” (128-32). This description highlights the superstitious nature to which Wordsworth refers in the note to “The Thorn,” but the control of language that he advocates in the Preface always keeps the overwhelming power of this imagery at bay, so that the reader is privy to her transformation without ever seeing Martha Ray as fantastical. Surely the imagery evokes a sense of the gothic, but speaking specifically of the gothic risks limiting readership. By passing off the gothic as superstitious, Wordsworth widens his appeal, providing a window for several different readers, many of whom might not be as well versed in the aspects of Romantic techniques. The readers would have recognized the technique, but recognizing does not equate



understanding. Here, author-reader relationship weighs more on Wordsworth's mind than poetic fancy.

Wordsworth's poetic theory succeeds because he immediately puts it into practice, inaugurating a cast of characters whose experience, lowly as it may be, does not close them off from poetics. The two, both Preface and collection, had to be coupled, as Wordsworth is well aware in the Preface that even that medium will reach its limits. He talks of "the nature of a preface," and goes on to say that he will perform "as far as the limits of a preface will permit" (496-7). This poetic revolution, this challenging of poetic conventions, would not have worked had Wordsworth simply changed his approach, or had only written the Preface. The Preface and his contribution to *Lyrical Ballads* had to coexist as a single unit, much like he envisioned the note to "The Thorn" and the poem itself interacting. They were not separate, unrelated entities but rather acted as a cohesive unit, one that told different but similar stories, stories that ran parallel to each other with frequent intersections. Wordsworth's critics often categorize the poet as one who, fundamentally, did not understand his own poetic philosophy. But how can that possibly be, when Wordsworth so carefully executed poetry he believed to echo that philosophy so well? It is not possible, and the connection between the Preface and "The Thorn" is merely one example of the many included in the collection that not only justify the need for the Preface, but those poems emerge as written testimonials in favor of a new poetic style.

### Chapter Three: The Dialect of Common Sense

Near the end of his Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman refers to the English language as “the dialect of common sense” (26). But this seems an unlikely place to conclude. The previous pages saw discussion of a “kosmos,” a mingling of past, present, and future, and the ultimate brains of poets – and those are the least lofty of Whitman’s ideas. How then has he provided proof through the execution of his Preface that English is “the dialect of common sense”? Looking very basically at the Preface to the 1855 publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman works hard to steer his composition style away from the conventional norm. Looking closely at only the first paragraph will yield a better understanding as to how and why, although unconventional, Whitman was not wrong when he called the English language (and, thus, his own writing) the “dialect of common sense.”

Whitman’s “dialect of common sense” is a driving force behind the execution of his poetic theory. By utilizing the “dialect of common sense” in his poetry and Preface, he illustrates what can be gained by diverting from the Romantic, exaggerated language of the past. Still, that does not mean Whitman’s prose is not without its own quirks. In the first paragraph, there are no traditionally complete sentences. The reader will not encounter a “subject – verb – proper punctuation” combo anywhere in that introductory paragraph. The first sentence, for example, reads “America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions” (Whitman 7). He means to say, “America does not reject its (or Europe’s) past mistakes,” and then he produces examples as to how those mistakes come to be, with politics or religion. And while the subject matter appears uncomplicated, Whitman constructs a sentence in such a manner that it has to be read twice, perhaps three times, in order for the message to be fully understood. This is not because of his

subject. It is not because the message is hidden. It is because he catches his reader off-guard by employing disorienting grammatical choices. There are no less than four instances where “or” appears, stringing together the sentence where grammar might suggest Whitman stop. Despite its glaring grammatical issues, the sentence has a certain rhythm to it, as if sentences were supposed to be written this way.

But the reader cannot hold onto that notion for long. Abruptly, Whitman drops “or” in favor of ellipses, perhaps one of the most iconic images from his prose and poetry. The ellipsis should represent a word or phrase that can be implied, that does not necessarily need to be repeated for a thorough understanding of a sentence, and in that first paragraph of the Preface, Whitman abides by this rule. The second sentence reads, “. . . accepts the lesson with calmness” (Whitman 7). Given the first sentence, which essentially stated that “America does not reject its past,” the second sentence is an appropriate follow-up. In this instance, the ellipsis takes the place of America; the alternative sentence would read “America accepts the lesson with calmness,” where the lesson is the that of the past. He does this throughout the first paragraph. Each ellipsis is used correctly, omitting something unnecessary. Here, in the first paragraph of his Preface, Whitman illustrates his knowledge of the rules he is about to break. Whitman teaches his audience to read his poetry, by first guiding the reader through the standard grammatical practices he intends to disregard later.

Because for this poet, the ellipses do more than stand-in for unnecessary words. They symbolize an attitude and represent emotion in a tangible way. Words can do that too, and Whitman’s words are no exception, but by employing such a standard, basic grammatical tool as a method by which voice comes through, he illustrates how he wants writing to change at even the most basic level. In the second paragraph, Whitman continues his discussion of Americans.

He calls the United States “essentially the greatest poem” (7). That line is famous, often quoted to illustrate Whitman’s patriotism, but it is what he does after that explains the sentence away. The sentences that follow the bold statement build upon each other, each more daring than the next. He writes, “Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations” (Whitman 7). Here he explains why the United States are the greatest poem – and the answer never deals with America as an idea. The reason is man and woman and child; the people who comprise his country make it a poem. Each “here” sentence illustrates that, each sentence carrying with it an equally important image which contributes to America as poetry. But nearing the end of his series of sentences, Whitman includes another ellipsis. This time, however, the ellipsis represents something different. He continues, “Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes. . . . Here are the rougns and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves” (Whitman 7). This ellipsis stands in for nothing. Instead, it represents a breathlessness; it signifies a never-ending quality. In the first paragraph, Whitman proved to his readers he knew how to use an ellipsis properly. In this second paragraph, he turns the reader’s expectation on its head – a vital move if he is to convince readers to go along with his prose (and later, his poetry).

The danger in not providing examples of his understanding and control of grammatical conventions is serious. Either Whitman looks as if he does not understand the rules of the language he proclaims to know so much about, or he looks as if he has ignored them with no purpose other than to stand out. In fact, this opinion surfaced after the publication of the collection, despite Whitman’s very explicit efforts to circumvent such criticisms. In an

anonymous review written for *The Dublin Review*<sup>5</sup>, the author rails against Whitman's stylistic choices. The review is brief but is loaded with words like "drunkard," "half crazy," and "rubbish." The reviewer calls the poetry "bald, confused, disjointed, caricatures of blank verse" and concludes that "we should not have bestowed one line of notice upon such an insult to common sense and common propriety" (267). Setting aside the obvious religious issues a Catholic reader might have with Whitman, the reviewer illustrates precisely how a reader unaccustomed to such style might perceive the poetry and prose of *Leaves of Grass*. There is an unmistakable hostility directed at Whitman for calling his work what others believe it clearly is not: poetry. Furthermore, this reviewer believes Whitman's writing to be as far from common sense as possible. The poet insults common sense by calling it such. But that sense of hostility says as much about what Whitman is doing right as it does about what he does wrong.

What does it mean, for example, to call Whitman's writing "bald"? The word suggests that his writing does not conceal, is too overt in what it wants to accomplish. But it seems like the "dialect of common sense" would require just that kind of writing – writing where the reader does not have to search too much in order to understand the point of the author. That does not mean, however, that the author has not the ability to challenge the reader. To say that a text is written of common sense does not also mean that it is not difficult. It simply means that the ideas espoused throughout are not, or should not, be considered radical – that in fact, the ideas are unremarkable. Whitman would be of this mind frame. He would argue that his stylistic choices are unremarkable or bald, because they simply represent the subject. When Whitman works to define the Poet in the Preface, he writes that the poet "bestows on every object or

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Joseph Quin, an Irish author, and other authors of the time, first founded this quarterly journal in 1836. The journal was a Catholic review, the leading Catholic journal of the time, and was published in London until 1969.

quality its fit proportions neither more nor less” (10). If a poet does not follow this creed and instead lets the language inflate the subject, then it is not quality poetry. The poet is doing his subject an injustice by writing poetry that does not represent the subject but instead represents the poet’s ego. “Bald,” then, is precisely the right word, a word Whitman would have encouraged be used to describe his poetry. In fact, if Whitman had read that review, he might have agreed with that part, seeing it as a success.

Calling the poetry “confused” and “disjointed” can again be traced back to Whitman’s Preface, where he illustrates the purpose of a constantly evolving subject. If America is only great because of the men and women who occupy it, and nature that creates it, then it stands to imply that a poem written about America can only truly represent the land well if attempting to cover all that makes it great. Whitman writes that a poet’s “spirit responds to his country’s spirit” (9). Because the poet absorbs his country, the poetry cannot help but reflect that which it has absorbed: the country’s spirit. For Whitman, that spirit is represented in all things nature and human. He continues in a fervor, listing place after place: “Mississippi with annual freshets and changing chutes, Missouri and Columbia and Ohio and Saint Lawrence with the falls and beautiful masculine Hudson...” and continues to the West, “over the Texan and Mexican and Floridian and Cuban seas and over the seas off California and Oregon, is not tallied by the blue breadth of the waters below more than the breadth above and below is tallied by him” (Whitman 9). He could easily spend a significant amount of time on each location, spending paragraphs on Mississippi or a pages on the West, but Whitman understands that each location is inextricably linked, both literally and figuratively. They are connected; they occupy the same physical space. They follow a logical flow – this stream of consciousness is dictated by the common sense that

tells a reader the exact locations of each place. In this sense, then, Whitman is not “disjointed” but obeying entirely the chorological order of his beloved America.

Still, after obeying the rules by consciously adhering to a logical stream by which he presents certain locations, Whitman articulates perhaps the greatest reason why a poet cannot always be bound by rules. He writes, in the middle of his continuously flowing paragraph about American landscape, that the poet “spans between them also from east to west and reflects what is between them” (Whitman 9). The sentence is not an apology. It can barely be called an explanation, but the sentence does provide insight regarding Whitman’s stylistic choices. Because the poet must be knowledgeable of both east and west, everything in between, while continuously reflecting upon that landscape, the chronology should be of little importance. And such a sentence also illustrates Whitman’s command over his purpose. The reviewer from *The Dublin Review* calls the *Leaves of Grass* confused, but how can it be confused if Whitman so “baldly” states his purpose as a poet? If Whitman is clear about nothing else, he is abundantly clear about his understanding of the term “Poet.” He went as far as to broadcast his understanding of the word outside of his Preface, during the time that the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was produced

In the October 1855 edition of the *American Phrenological Journal*, Walt Whitman wrote a review in which he discussed the differences between an English and American poet. Phrenology was the belief that personality traits could be studied and understood based upon the shape of the head. Founded by Franz Joseph Gall, the pseudoscience led to the publication of the *American Phrenological Journal*, in which scholarship regarding the study could be published. Although currently phrenology is known as a pseudoscience, something silly to do, by way of palm reading, some of the greatest minds of Gall’s time believed in its effectiveness. However,

the article, published just as *Leaves of Grass* saw first light, had nothing to do with phrenology. Even at this early stage in his career, Whitman did not discount the importance of publicity in order to push the popularity of his new, experimental poetry collection. Indeed, linking it to this fledgling science emphasizes its experimental quality. He does not ignore any possible reader, and publishing in this journal, he brings light to his issues with his chosen genre, more importantly, draws necessary attention to *Leaves of Grass*.

The first paragraph begins by outlining, the virtues of the true, best poet. He is a poet, says Whitman, who cannot be bothered to conform to a contemporary society's view of what makes poetry beautiful. He cannot be held down by this notion of beauty, as it is filled with the same ebb and flow of a river stream, those grand river streams Whitman is so fond of recalling in his poetry. And if such laws must hold the poet, he should only care about those "universal ones of great masters," since it is only the universal laws which respect both "the average and superb beauty of the ensemble" (Whitman 90). All of this discussion, of laws and the sense of what is natural, seem nothing more than a way to set the stage for Whitman's purpose – to show the categorical differences between English and American poets. That first paragraph seems not much to do with such a task, but in many ways, he continues the work of his Preface in this review. When he argues that a poet cannot "limit himself by any laws less than those universal ones," (Whitman 90) he means the laws of form, rhyme, meter, and language. The true poet would never let those laws hinder him when a subject calls for the poem to be constructed in a different way. A poet might fear breaking such laws as an egregious crime, but common sense would say that the individual poet himself carries out the law and order of poetry. There are no poetic officers, no law of poetry. So, to allow something so abstract as stylistic laws control the creation of poetry is not only silly, but severely limiting to the art.



It does not seem as if the discussion of poetic law and the definition of beauty would have much to do with the difference between English and American poets, but Whitman has to address those topics in order to illustrate what an American poet is and must always be. Whitman more explicitly engages the differences between poets in the second paragraph, where he spends time describing the English poet. Whitman writes that the English poet is born out of his country's history. He mentions issues political in nature, arguing that the poetry "has grown out of the facts of the English race, the monarchy and aristocracy prominent over the rest, and conforms to the spirit of them" (Whitman 90). Here, the people's institutions, both past and present, define and shape the poetry of a nation just as much if not more than the poet working as individual. This is political, and still, it has not much to do specifically with politics. Instead, Whitman speaks to the ways in which the people engage one another, and this context just happens to be political.

Whitman sees differences in the style and intent of English and American poets, but his concern lies specifically with the ways in which the two countries do not share similar backgrounds, as he sees it. Here, Whitman has common sense on his side. Common sense tells us that of course Americans cannot completely and wholly relate to the poetry of England. Common sense would compel a poet to be a "prodigal user of his own land [and] not a borrower from other lands" (Whitman 91). Whitman never attacks English poets; he never argues that they are incorrect to write about their monarchies. But, he asks, "What play of Shakespeare, represented in America, is not an insult to America, to the marrow in its bones?" (Whitman 90). For those stories to work in his country, Washington would "have been caught and hung" and Jefferson would have been "the most enormous of liars" (90). Again, creating the dichotomy between English and American poets has little to do with a battle between the two and more an

exercise in common sense. And in 1855, drawing closer to a century after the American Revolutionary War, there might be no greater task for the country than to stake its own historic claim in all its forms. Rather, he states that his country cannot rely on the poets of other nations to write America's story – America's poetry – and he does believe America deserves, or requires, its own set of poets; we needed an American bard.

The problem with this “common sense,” however true it may be, is that Shakespeare *was* popular during Whitman's time. His readers did not see it illogical to produce and enjoy productions of the various plays. In his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine begins his analysis with the utilization of Shakespeare in America, particularly between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries<sup>6</sup>. Levine argues that the most common member of the reading public would have had an impressive understanding of Shakespeare's plays in order for the parody of the plays popular at the time to make sense. The plays reached audiences on varying economic levels, due much to the medium they utilized. Levine argues that, “[t]he theater in the first half of the nineteenth century played the role that movies played in the first half of the twentieth: it was a kaleidoscopic, democratic institution presenting a widely varying bill of fare to all classes and socioeconomic groups” (21). This comparison is vital to understanding the cultural consumerism of the nineteenth century.

Here is the time period where, as Levine's book goes on to illustrate, economic backgrounds begin to dictate and isolate cultural preferences into distinctive class brackets. This melding of economic backgrounds is key to understanding Whitman's desired audience. The

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<sup>6</sup> Levine recalls when John Quincy Adams acknowledged that he knew Shakespeare alongside Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the Bible. Levine uses Adams to illustrate how the works of Shakespeare sat alongside the most important of literary studies in terms of significance to readers.

poor, lower class that flocked to these productions of Shakespeare, those are the “roughs” with which Whitman wished to associate himself. In a review published in *The Brooklyn Daily Times*, Whitman refers to himself (in the title, no less) that he is “a Brooklyn boy.” Now, just as the image of Whitman as ragged, working class poet is constructed, so to is the “Brooklyn boy” image, and it serves a specific purpose. He calls the Poet the “equalizer” of all things throughout his Preface, and by creating these images out of his person, he is becoming the equalizer. Does this mean, then, that Whitman does not understand the audience to whom he links? After all, the theater transformed quite literally into the common ground on which all classes could tread, and Shakespeare plays acted as a kind of equalizer among the varying groups of people. Levine notes that the popularity of Shakespeare could not be confined to large cities, since “[i]f miners could not always come to San Francisco to see theater, the theater came to them” (19). But Whitman was well read, and he knew his surroundings and people well, as he proves continuously throughout his Preface by mentioning every type of person and place. So, this is not misunderstanding on the part of Whitman. Instead, he is trying to illustrate that an American poet has the ability to be that equalizer as well, and might make a better one for the people of the United States.

Whitman never criticized the craft of Shakespeare. Instead, his problem dealt simply with the adaptability to an American audience. He felt, as he expressed in various reviews and other published forums, that Shakespeare did not address issues to which Americans as a class could relate. Whitman’s issue with the plays’ subjects might have more to do with a desire for autonomy, a need to distance the American poet from an English poet. Individuality is sought for a new and better identity. The connection between the two countries, whatever it might have been, must be cut in order for the fledgling country to find its way. Or at least, that is how this

quest for independence is perceived. From this school of thought, Whitman's article from the *American Phrenological Journal* begins and builds. In 1855, he felt, like Emerson before him, that American must have its own poets, to write his own stories (and, in turn, the stories of America's people). In that article, Whitman states, "if the Americans want a race of bards worthy of 1855, and of the stern reality of this republic, they must cast around for men essentially different from the old poets, and from the modern successions of jinglers and snivellers and fops" (91). There, his argument stands, complete and stripped of all its previous discussion of beauty and nature and laws. Here, he has laid out what is at stake. Only Americans can be the players in this game, and the prize is a pure and complete American literary history, one complete and independent from Shakespeare, from Tennyson, even (who Whitman sets up as his counter in this "review").

Whitman believes he has answered his own call with the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. He spends a bit of time beating around the bush, when his own poetry is brought into the article in the *American Phrenological Journal*, reciting the necessary self-effacement for such a text, but follows it with a peculiar question. He asks, of the readers of his article but also the readers of *Leaves of Grass*, "if this [*Leaves of Grass*] is poetry, where must its foregoers stand?" (Whitman 91). This is a two-part question, because indeed two questions are implied. The first question is implied in the question's first clause, "if this is poetry," which translates into the question, "is this poetry?" The second question, "where must its foregoers stand?" is more obvious. In terms of the second question, Whitman's answer is implied. If Shakespeare is a foregoer, he must stay in England, with its people. The past is just that – the past – and it should not be placed in the same spectrum with present poets. He writes in the Preface that "the American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races" (Whitman 8-9).

Simply because the past should not interfere with the present does not mean that a poet cannot respect the past. Instead, Whitman means that the best Poet understands the past's relationship with the present and does not let it interfere with the future. The same can be said for the poetry's past. The best Poet understands the laws of his craft and respects them, but does not let them inform how he produces the poetry of the future, the poetry that represents the present literary climate.

The first question, "if this is poetry," leads to a more complicated answer. Ask Whitman, regarding *Leaves of Grass*, "is this poetry?" and his answer would be "yes." But ask the readers of his time, and the answer would be decidedly split. On the one hand, reviewers call his poetry "disjointed." On the other hand, Whitman has Emerson calling *Leaves of Grass* a "wonderful gift<sup>7</sup>." We know Whitman believes poetry must be representational of its source in a basic, truthful way. He purposefully sets out to employ the "dialect of common sense," but how can that dialect meld with the practice of poetry? In fact, that is where Whitman's skill shines. He takes the simple subject, like the naïve nature of a child, and utilizes stylistic and linguistic choices that not only adhere to the child but manage to represent his America.

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<sup>7</sup> This was written in a letter composed by Emerson to Whitman in 1855, a letter Whitman would attach to subsequent editions of *Leaves of Grass*.

#### Chapter Four: The “Fruition of Beauty” in Unrhymed Poetry

In the Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman refers to poetry as “the fruition of [a poet’s] love” and “the fruition of beauty,” which is “no chance of hit or miss . . . it is inevitable as life” (14). Identifying poetry as the fruition of something, beyond and outside of the poet as opposed to the singular work of one poet, suggests again what Whitman wishes to make clear – that the poet is a vehicle through which the subjects speak. The poetry comes from beauty, or better yet, the people of America, and the poet merely a medium. But that does not mean the poet is unnecessary to the process. It is the poet who must observe and report to the masses. It is his duty. And it must be this poet, because it is the poet who can navigate around the literary world to produce a product worthy of his subject, America. In the Preface, Whitman writes that a poet, in order to write great poetry, must “compete with the laws that pursue and follow time” (14). This is the poet’s task – to navigate through these conventions and decide which to obey and which to break, in the best interest of the subject and the poem.

There are those, however, that balk when a poet does not adhere strictly to certain poetic conventions. In 1865, the novelist Henry James wrote a fairly harsh review<sup>8</sup> of Whitman’s work, mostly *Drum-Taps*. Although James focuses on a different collection of poetry for his examples, the ways in which he categorizes and depicts Whitman’s poetry stand out as some of the principle objections regarding the application of Whitman’s poetic philosophy to actual poetry. James argues that the “novelty” of Whitman’s writing is found in the stylistic choices he makes, not in the profoundness of his writing or the quality of his wordplay. For James, style acts as much as a barometer for literary worthiness as it does a method by which content is delivered to the reader. It becomes clear that, in the case of James v. Whitman, the crime Whitman

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<sup>8</sup> James’ review is on the whole incredibly harsh and critical of Whitman’s style.

committed was the attempt at blurring the lines between prose and verse. Curiously, it does not appear that James is wholly against this idea in general. Instead, he merely stipulates that “prose, in order to be good poetry, must first be good prose,” and it seems that his definition of good prose does not include any of the prose/poetry published by Whitman.

However, one of the original poems included in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, “There Was a Child Went Forth”<sup>9</sup> illustrates that combination, between good prose and good poetry. There is an ease with which a reader could see this poetry as prose. It certainly looks like prose: the long, lingering sentences of the Preface and of the other poems find themselves in tact here. Ellipses are scattered throughout; more complete sentences than complete images can be found. In fact, the majority of the images caught by Whitman’s pen in this poem seem to be merely snapshots – incomplete sketches of the characters in the story. However, it is in the ways in which Whitman constructs those images that sustains his argument and to allow for his linguistic choices to transcend its prose-like qualities to transform into poetry. The poem begins quietly and mimics a story.

“There was a child went forth every day,  
And the first object he looked upon and received with wonder or  
pity or love or dread, that object he became,  
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part  
of the day . . . . or for many years or stretching cycles of years.” (Whitman, lines 1-5).

The first line is reminiscent of the eternal story beginnings, “there once was...” or “once upon a time,” opening in a familiar way to welcome the reader into a story. Except, in this manner, Whitman lulls his readers into believing his poem is a typical story, the reader eased into the

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<sup>9</sup> It would seem that the more fitting choice for Whitman would be “Song of Myself” but length prevents me from using it for the purposes of this project. “Song of Myself” indeed fits and works well with all of the objectives Whitman sets for himself in the Preface, but so does “There Was a Child Went Forth.” It just happens to be less obvious and also of a suitable length.

subject matter by the clear, simple image of a child. In the first stanza, there are no metaphors with which to battle, no hidden meanings to decipher. Instead, there is a child, and the notion of time, an ellipsis acting as subtle indicator to the reader that, in this poem, time is without boundaries.

This child's story is not epic. That is, it is not grandiose. Whitman knows this. What's more – he wants this. There is absolutely no desire in Whitman to make his poetry stand out by creating wine out of water – creating a more interesting story when in fact there is only a child. In the Preface, Whitman writes that, “For such the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic. Its quality goes through these to much more” (10). So the goal, then, of a poem such as this, is twofold. The poem should be “transcendent” but not “epic.” But what does Whitman mean when he uses such a loaded word? Does he wish “transcendent,” in this instance, to simply remind his readers of its traditional meaning – surpassing usual limits? Or, and this seems the more likely the case, does he want the word to evoke American Transcendentalism? In 1842, Emerson read his essay “The Transcendentalist” at a lecture in Boston, in which he thoroughly discusses his own transcendental ideals. He begins simply by stating that, “what is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842” (Emerson). For Emerson, idealism in 1842 did not imply a naïveté or an innocent sense of wonder. The idealist was a man, instead, grounded in a sense of righteousness, if one ever can be so grounded in something so abstract. In the essay, Emerson sets up “the materialist” as a foe for “the idealist,” where the materialist is a man burdened with the desire for fact. An idealist instead relishes in the unknown. Whitman agrees with this and states it explicitly in his Preface. He writes, “great is the faith of the flush of knowledge and of the investigation of the depths of qualities and



things...the depths are fathomless and therefore calm,” (Whitman 17, my ellipses). In that last statement, that the depths of knowledge cannot be understood, Whitman aligns himself with the idealist, as Emerson defines the idealist. Perhaps, if a *poem* qualified as a transcendentalist, it then means that this poem does not hinge itself on objects, is not bound by common material law. The poem is an idealist; the poem understands no laws above those more ethereal, or otherworldly.

Even with this, a superficial understanding of a rather complicated topic, a rather complicated and multi-faceted essay, the glaring problem is the opposition inherent in being “transcendent” and not “epic.” The contradiction is inescapable. To be “transcendent,” if not in its Emersonian definition, implies a sense of infallibility – to surpass that which is seemingly unsurpassable is indeed epic. And worse, if in fact the word was meant to imply all that accompanies the Transcendentalism of the age, epic seems unavoidable, since this word calls forth idealism and the higher laws of nature. If Whitman had a thorough understanding of either definition of “transcendent,” how could he argue for poetry to be that but never epic? Our greatest clue that Whitman did indeed mean to reference Emerson’s Transcendentalism is when, after he has dropped those two rather explosive words, he states, “its quality goes through these to much more” (10). “Epic,” then, would be understood to refer to a literary device, instead of a state of being. Whitman leans on “transcendent” rather than “epic” for that very reason: there is a desire to distance the writing, just as Wordsworth had tried to do earlier, from traditional poetic conventions. Whitman means to create poetry, and argues that these “American poets,” create poetry that cannot be bound by the rules of the past. And if there is any singular sentence that can sum up why Transcendentalism or Idealism might appeal to Whitman so much to be included as part of his own poetic philosophy, it is this: “It is also not consistent with the reality

of the soul to admit that there is anything in the known universe more divine than men and women” (Whitman 17).

It is not surprising, then, that “There Was a Child Went Forth” does not rely on traditional techniques to comfort the reader. The security that the reader is granted in the first stanza, through the simple story-telling beginning, does not last long. The first line of the second stanza sees a drastic change in tone and imagery, when Whitman writes, “The early lilacs became part of this child,” (line 6). Such a statement is nonsensical, the materialist’s nightmare, and but Whitman is not using the child to write a larger, more important story. He is not surrounding the child in these beautiful, overwhelming natural images, to write about nature. This is a poem about a child; above all, as he believes each person, each thing in this world should be of equal importance. The materialist would disagree, relish in the systematic placing of the classes in a hierarchal system. The idealist believes in the importance of all people, of all things, and sees each individual a part of one massive class. Whitman writes, in his Preface, “the messages of great poets to each man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, What we enclose you enclose, What we enjoy you may enjoy. Did you suppose there could be only one Supreme?” (16). In that question, Whitman hopes that those barriers that have been engrained in the minds of his readers might slowly begin to erode away. In “There Was a Child Went Forth,” Whitman does a bit of that work himself, chipping away at old conventions by allowing his poetry to tell the story of a simple child. But it is not simply the content of the poem that works to dissolve poetic conventions.

In a rather bold move, Whitman’s poem, specifically the second stanza, looks and reads exactly like an excerpt from his Preface. With the exception of three, the second stanza’s lines

are blocked, not given the traditional poetic form. In fact, taken on their own, only those three slightly indented lines provide the reader with clues that the object being consumed is poetry and not prose.

“The early lilacs became part of this child,  
And grass, and White and red morningglories, and white and red  
Clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird,  
And the March-born lambs, and the sow’s pink-faint litter, and the  
mare’s foal, and the cow’s calf, and the noisy brood of the  
barnyard or by the mire of the pondside . . . and the fish  
suspending themselves so curiously below there . . . and the  
beautiful curious liquid . . . and the water-plants with their  
graceful flat heads . . . all became part of him.” (Whitman lines 6-14)

Just as he did in the Preface, Whitman builds paragraphs or stanzas together through a series of sentences connecting seemingly disconnected images and ideas. This poem, or any other in the collection, does not appear like a traditional poem, with perfect, four line stanzas that begin and start in precisely the same spot. He showcases here the many forms poetry can take; he does not rely on one form to carry him even throughout one poem, let alone an entire collection. He mentions in the Preface that “most works are most beautiful without ornament,” (20) and it would seem that ornaments to Whitman, at least in this respect, come in the form of poetic convention. By shying away from those rules, by ignoring those poets before him and writing in this particular style, he tries to provide tangible proof for such a statement.

That does not mean, however, that Whitman does not utilize any poetic conventions. Simply, he chooses very carefully the conventions he wishes to use. Some things are left to the ways in which the subject motivates or inspires the poet. Other things – the more nuanced aspects of poetry, are left to the discretion of Whitman. Such instances are clear in the poet’s decision to hyphenate certain words in the second stanza, while he lets morning glories blur into one word. Why is this word different? Why should it meld together where the other words are

separated? The move, more than anything, is aesthetic. The two “g”s together startle the reader – again, he disorients, pushes the reader as far away from convention as possible. Just the same, the word comforts. When read aloud, the singular word rushes together, keeps tempo, the two “g”s that at once look strange sound perfectly fine. The clear indication that this decision was about the look and sound of the poem rather than the creation of the image lies in the subsequent editions of the collection. By the 1892 printing, the “deathbed” edition, Whitman had included a hyphen in the word, changing “morningglories” to “morning-glories.”

Still, many of Whitman’s grammatical choices have as much to do with the understanding and reading of the poem as with the aesthetics of it. Whitman combines commas and ellipses as methods by which he separates his images. At first sight, those distinctions might appear superficial – perhaps Whitman grew tired of the comma so he inserted an ellipsis instead. However, closer inspection of the exact locations of an ellipsis or comma illustrate much more thought behind such a seemingly disjointed method. The last portion of the second stanza, which begins “And the March-born lambs,” deals entirely with the natural environment that surrounds the child. The lilacs become a part of the child as does everything else. From the “March-born lamb” to the “noisy brood of the barnyard or by the mire of the pondside,” Whitman paints a picture of those that occupy the landscape. The commas separate those which are common, linked together in this clause by their group: animals. Then an ellipsis is used, followed by mention of fish, and then another ellipsis followed by the water. Each subject occupies its own space. The water-plants complete the scenery, after which Whitman reminds the reader that the above picture “all became a part of him.” The combination of commas and ellipses here are not simply a clear disregard for the rules of convention. Instead, he uses the combination to create a unique, vivid picture. This picture is not stationary. It is panoramic. The images need to remain

close together, but he must also convey distinction between them. This yields a complete image that moves, changes; at first, the reader is presented with the lamb but fluidly moves to the plants. Such is a case where ignoring the laws have benefitted the reader, rather than harming poetic integrity.

The idea that the poem can be a moving image is aided by Whitman's usage of the word "and" in his poetry. Looking again at the stanza that really delves into the imagery, an abundance of "ands" are littered throughout the stanza.

"The early lilacs became part of this child,  
And grass, and White and red morningglories, and white and red  
Clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird,  
And the March-born lambs, and the sow's pink-faint litter, and the  
mare's foal, and the cow's calf, and the noisy brood of the  
barnyard or by the mire of the pondside . . . and the fish  
suspending themselves so curiously below there . . . and the  
beautiful curious liquid . . . and the water-plants with their  
graceful flat heads . . . all became part of him." (Whitman lines 6-14)

This stanza now illustrates Whitman's commitment as an American poet to the particular nuances of the English language. By the seemingly simplistic choice to string together his images with "and," Whitman has again illustrated a breathlessness to the landscape surrounding the child. The images are separated in that they are individual, they do not rely on each other, yet the "and" ties them together. The "and" works as a connecting force, a way for Whitman to illustrate the never-ending wonder elicited from such landscape.

The separating of images also explains why the majority of the stanza is indented, while a few lone lines are not. The inconsistency disorients the reader but also serves a larger purpose in the cultivation of the images. The first three lines seem related. From the grass grows lilacs, as does clover, which attract the "morningglories" and "phoebe-birds," both white and red. But by refusing to indent the second line, Whitman calls attention to the first – to the image of the lilacs.

The lilacs stand alone, whereas the grass, clovers, and birds mingle as part of one landscape. Of course, the lilacs are too a part of the landscape, but this is the first instance where Whitman links one object with the child. The third line not indented begins the images of the animals and the land they inhabit.

There is a straightforward tone with which Whitman describes the landscape. There are few qualifying adjectives for each animal, each part of nature. In that second stanza, he provides color for the morningglories and clover, both white and red. The sow's litter is pink-faint, the brood noisy, the liquid beautiful curious, and the water-plants' flat heads graceful. The list appears long, but it actually illustrates constraint given the number of subjects in that paragraph. More importantly, those adjectives are basic – short, simple words to describe color or convey physical appearance. “Beautiful” and “graceful” do not tell the reader much about the liquid or water-plants; they reader does not know *why* they are so. This seems a mistake, and yet, this kind of writing aligns itself with the poetic philosophy Whitman developed in his Preface. He writes, “men and women and the earth and all upon it are simply to be taken as they are...” (Whitman 17, my ellipsis). No adornments are necessary in the description of people or places. The fruition of beauty is simply beauty itself, documented by the poet for the reader's consumption. Whitman needs only call the liquid beautiful, as the reader will understand the kind of beauty that is the body of water. More than understand – the reader will recall that beauty. Whitman counts on the reader's mind as well as their understanding of sound and rhythm to conjure the images as the images are mentioned.

Whitman spends more time on description and adjectives when he depicts the people in the poem. In the middle of the first stanza, a person other than the child makes an appearance. Instead of referring to the man simply as a drunkard, Whitman writes “And the old drunkard

staggering home from the outhouse of the tavern whence he had lately risen” (line 21-2). A more vivid picture is being painted for this man than had previously been done for the environment. There might only be one adjective, but every aspect of this image brings with it some kind of descriptive device. The drunkard is old, yes, but he is not merely walking from the outhouse; he is *staggering*. And he is not leaving just any outhouse. He leaves the tavern’s outhouse – more confirmation that this is, in fact, a drunkard. He applies the same description method when he adds more characters to the poem. One section in particular is littered with adjectives.

And the schoolmistress that passed on her way to the school . .  
and the friendly boys that passed . . and the quarrelsome  
boys . . and the tidy and freshcheeked girls . . and the barefoot  
negro boy and girl, (Whitman lines 23-6).

The boys are friendly or quarrelsome, the girls tidy and freshcheeked. He qualifies between races here, in turn, classes. The black children are “barefoot.” In that short passage, he describes the nature of children as well as refers to class issues. These are children that are not friendly or quarrelsome, tidy or freshcheeked but are defined thoroughly by their class: barefoot. Why might Whitman do this – adorn the characters with adjectives but not the scenery? The adjectives are necessary in order to distinguish between people, but this also illustrates the care with which Whitman depicts the people he loves so well. In the Preface, he admires the common people – every aspect of their being fascinates him as a poet. He loves, “their manners speech dress friendships – the freshness and candor of their physiognomy – the picturesque looseness of their carriage . . . their deathless attachment to freedom” (Whitman 8). These, the subtle traits of each individual’s being, is what Whitman strives to represent in his poetry. The adjectives are necessary to succeed in this goal. Still, the adjectives are small, somewhat quaint, as they are rather basic words. The adjectives are not followed by similes and metaphors that call on the

power of heaven and earth to represent their objects. They are short and subdued, and that is enough.

This attitude towards describing people also aligns itself well with the Transcendental attitude. In the essay “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson discusses what is important to the materialist as opposed to what is important to the idealist. While the materialist appreciates “every social action,” valuing all on a basic, fundamental level, the idealist responds more metaphysically. He writes that the idealist understands “the rank which things themselves take in his consciousness” (Emerson). For Whitman, that would not mean that one class is better or more important than the other. Instead, each class must be distinctly described; not only should they be differentiated, in nature they are. Manners of speech or dress will change given the location of a specific group of people, and Whitman understood his term “masses” not simply to mean that all people are the same. And such is the same in the world of the child in “There Was a Child Went Forth.” There is a rank that appears organically in the poem. Whitman begins with the child’s surroundings, which leads into the school children around him, where after he settles for two stanzas to describe the child’s parents. If ever was a rank necessary, here it is. Whitman spends such a significant amount of time with the parents because of what parents are, on a very natural level, to a child.

The fruition of beauty, in terms of this poem, shines through the simple choices Whitman makes regarding style and language. With the initial understanding and obeying of the grammatical conventions and then obvious distortion of those rules, beauty here is to be seen as the ability of the poet to interpret for the sake of the poem – for the subject. Although Whitman is a poet of disruption, he also cares deeply for the poetic process. He utilized that process until his death, time and time again, when he reproduced and revitalized *Leaves of Grass*. He



understood the process, and, more importantly, he understood the form – perhaps better than most. He understood that form, illustrated to his readers what the rules were, and then merrily when on his way to destroying those conventions. At least, he destroyed what they represented – a stasis in poetry, the inability to develop and change because of the comfort and stability such conventions provide. “There Was a Child Went Forth” showcases those conventions and then illustrates the wonder that can be created by simply breaking a few – not all need to be or should be broken in a single poem. And the poet must know *why* the rules are being broken. For that particular poem, the ellipses and the commas create the movement his images need, to mimic the way a child sees the world – constantly moving, fast-paced, constantly changing. Like poetry should be.

#### Conclusion: Wordsworth is a Realist; Whitman is an Idealist

Both Wordsworth and Whitman work hard in their Prefaces to define poetry and, in the process, define themselves as Poets. Wordsworth does not pursue a visual image of the Poet in the way that Whitman does, but an image is produced just the same. Instead, Wordsworth’s image comes strictly through the Preface and in his production of poetry. In the Preface, Wordsworth is the kind of poet who apologizes for his poetic experimentation. In “The Thorn,” Wordsworth so explicitly delivers a sense of moral code and social consciousness that it seems he is much more a Realist than Romantic. He could be swept away in the language, in the environment – and to a certain extent, he sometimes is. But in a poem like “The Thorn,”

Wordsworth illustrates his diligence to the depiction of a particular character. It is in his careful execution of his goals that leads Wordsworth on a path that diverts from his Romantic cohorts.

Wordsworth as a Realist seems problematic, given some of the description in his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*. In “The Ruined Cottage,” for example, the environment takes on a life-like quality; the vines and greenery surrounding the cottage have the ability to very nearly strangle the life out of the house and its inhabitants. The description is not meant to be real; it is an environmental manifestation of the woman’s emotional state. The cottage and the environment mimic her emotions, follow in her stead, and lock her away just as she wishes to be locked away. A poem like “The Ruined Cottage” illustrates the Romantic in Wordsworth. He did not completely abandon the ways of his writing companions, nor did he need to in order to propel his poetic theory. In fact, Wordsworth’s skill and craft is seen in his ability to seamlessly meld together the principles of Romanticism and Realism, a literary tradition not yet truly explored prior to the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. The melding together of two literary ideas is significant because of the contrast between the two traditions. Realists very much saw themselves as the opposition to Romanticism.

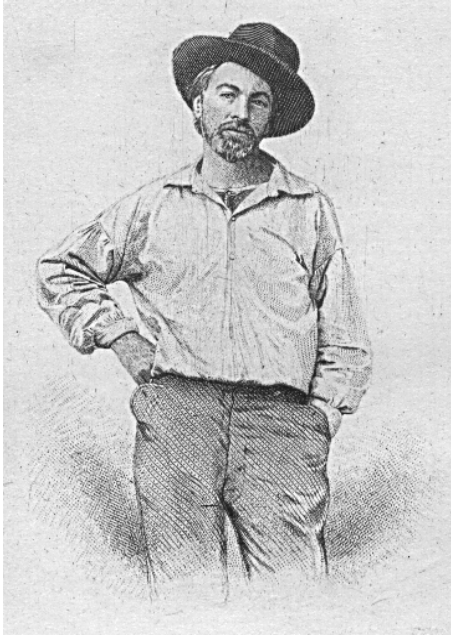
The problem, as Klaner indicates in *The Making of English Reading Audiences*, is that Wordsworth’s linguistic choices could not quite carry out all the work they were supposed to accomplish. In fact, Klaner would say that Wordsworth is too Romantic, because he ignored the fact that indeed cultural language was greatly “constrained” by class systems of the time period. Wordsworth wanted, according to Klaner, to be freed from “a materially intolerable social world,” (136) the way all Romantics do. This too indicates where the problem might have been for Wordsworth – being trapped between the Romantic and realistic. Unable to answer completely to both, Wordsworth instead made excuses for the shortcomings that he

believed would inevitably be found in his poetic theory, in his advocating of the “real language of men.” Near the end of his Preface, Wordsworth writes that he hopes to have shown readers “that the powers of language are not so limited as he may suppose” (507) which indeed is one of the great objectives of Wordsworth’s poetic philosophy – the very one that Whitman advances so well in his manipulation of poetic conventions. Whereas Wordsworth could never fully abandon those rules he railed against, Whitman does so without question, without worry for the consequences. Wordsworth’s “The Thorn,” although radical in its choice of storyteller, is still quite traditional in many ways. He keeps time, keeps rhyme, and never disorients the reader in terms of stylistic choices. His only radical change in the composition of his poetry comes in the form of the linguistic choices.

Klancher highlights exactly where Wordsworth goes wrong when he writes that the poetry in *Lyrical Ballads* contains “a ‘real language’ all but inaccessible to the middle-class mind. The language of Wordsworth’s own poems therefore becomes a metalanguage, a framework of highly qualified ‘poetic’ language that carefully... ‘imitates’ a ‘real language of men’ as its object” (139). Because Wordsworth’s language is not fully adapted, he imitates and does not completely represent the lower class, at least not in the way Whitman does. Whitman captures his subject in every poetic choice – through the grammar and meter and rhyme scheme to the words and construction of those words. For Wordsworth, it is only the latter. In fact, much of “The Thorn,” although the narrator is a sea captain, reads like a poet. Whitman cannot be found in “There Was a Child Went Forth,” but Wordsworth is attached to “The Thorn,” almost inextricably. Sure, the captain is repetitious, and uses the word “old” to describe the thorn, but still he uses words like “o’ergrown” and Wordsworth never strays from the ballad. Klancher suggests that perhaps Wordsworth’s “struggle to transform middle class culture” could

never be achieved. He was not alone. Robert Southey concludes his remarks, from his 1798 review of *Lyrical Ballads*, by arguing that “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” (Gamer 150). Perhaps, though, Wordsworth did not fail because of his choice of subjects. Instead, he failed because he allowed his project to be termed an “experiment” at all.

For Whitman, the Poet as an idea begins with a simple image. Nobody knew how to challenge and manipulate the tired poetic image more than Whitman. An anonymous criticism published in July 1855 in *Life Illustrated* commented in the most detail on the unique nature of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. This particular reader focuses most of its energy on the appearance of the collection and Whitman himself. The author calls Whitman “the picture of a perfect loafer; yet a thoughtful loafer, an amiable loafer, an able loafer” (“A curious title”). This description comes, of course, because the first publication of *Leaves of Grass* printed anonymously, but even so, the appearance of the “unknown author” on the first page of the collection speaks volumes as to how Whitman wanted his readers to see him. He already was crafting his image, as both author and as man.



The image, a man with a “careless attitude, without a coat or vest, with a rough felt hat on his head, one hand thrust lazily into his pocket and the other resting on his hip” (“A curious title) is an image that is specifically constructed in all its haphazardness. He is to appear, at the same time, as the icon for the general American public while still maintaining his poetic image. This criticism is one of many to comment on Whitman’s appearance in the collection. Another review, published anonymously in the *New York Daily Times*, barely manages to last an entire paragraph before mentioning the picture. The reviewer notes that, “on opening the book we first beheld, as a frontispiece, the picture of a man in his shirt sleeves, wearing an expression of settled arrogance upon his countenance” (“Leaves of Grass”). After this lightly antagonistic comment, the reviewer continues with a strangely detailed account of turning the pages, encountering the title pages; he even mentions finding the space where the printing location (Boston) and the date (1855) are located. In this manner, with the reader depicting each and every moment in the reading of *Leaves of Grass*, the collection becomes a journey, not simply a text, and Whitman becomes the guide. Forcing the reader to mind the details, Whitman’s

strategy succeeds. His careful consideration of every image, both written and visual, perfectly depict his subject material, and his reader is taken on a journey experiencing all America has to offer.

With this detailed a reading as the reviewer in the *New York Daily Times* illustrates, not only is the Poet (as an idea) being transformed via Whitman's imagery, but that seemingly simplistic picture is also furthering the notions of poetic experience. The reading becomes a process, and much like walking through a forest, all the senses must be called upon for that journey to make sense, to matter. *Leaves of Grass* begins in just that manner, with a sense of the unknown (no attribution to Whitman the author, at least in the beginning) and only an image to hold on to as that journey begins. The result of which is twofold. He adheres to his assertion that the poet is merely a vehicle and should not be seen as the creator of the subjects; he is the deliverer. Also, Whitman introduces himself to the world, subtly, the way he believes poets should be *perceived*. This notion of perception is the key difference in the successes and failures of Wordsworth and Whitman. This picture of the "perfect loafer" is just that – a picture. A man who is truly that loafer would not take care to revise the same collection of poetry throughout his entire life.

At the end of the Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman argues that "the proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it" (xii). Both men were met with criticism – Whitman by a countless variety of people, and Wordsworth by his own writing partner, Coleridge. Still, each men, in the same breath, were met with reverence for their attempts to transform the poetic atmosphere present in their respective literary worlds. Wordsworth had to push his contemporaries out of the shadows of poetic giants like Shakespeare and Donne, while Whitman had to contend with disillusioned readers, who were about to enter a

war, not with a foreign country, but among their brothers. Both men saw successes at this as well as failures, but those successes were so great that the overall messages of both the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and the Preface to *Leaves of Grass* reach their intended audience. The messages are complicated only in their execution, which can be found within the poetry contained in each collection. The poetic philosophy, however, is not so complicated. Wordsworth and Whitman are calling, above all, for a relationship between reader and author that is inclusive, intimate, where the author treats the reader like an equal.

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