

## WILLIAM HAZLITT

*From Mr. Wordsworth*<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Wordsworth's genius is a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age. Had he lived in any other period of the world, he would never have been heard of. As it is, he has some difficulty to contend with the hebetude<sup>2</sup> of his intellect, and the meanness of his subject. With him "lowliness is young ambition's ladder":<sup>3</sup> but he finds it a toil to climb in this way the steep of Fame. His homely Muse can hardly raise her wing from the ground, nor spread her hidden glories to the sun. He has "no figures nor no fantasies, which busy *passion* draws in the brains of men":<sup>4</sup> neither the gorgeous machinery of mythologic lore, nor the splendid colors of poetic diction. His style is vernacular: he delivers household truths. He sees nothing loftier than human hopes; nothing deeper than the human heart. This he probes, this he tampers with, this he poises, with all its incalculable weight of thought and feeling, in his hands; and at the same time calms the throbbing pulses of his own heart, by keeping his eye ever fixed on the face of nature. If he can make the lifeblood flow from the wounded breast, this is the living coloring with which he paints his verse: if he can assuage the pain or close up the wound with the balm of solitary musing, or the healing power of plants and herbs and "skyeey influences,"<sup>5</sup> this is the sole triumph of his art. He takes the simplest elements of nature and of the human mind, the mere abstract conditions inseparable from our being, and tries to compound a new system of poetry from them; and has perhaps succeeded as

1. This is one of a series of essays on contemporary philosophers, poets, and statesmen that Hazlitt published in 1825 with the title *The Spirit of the Age: or Contemporary Portraits*. In this essay Hazlitt deals with Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* and other early poems. With notable insight Hazlitt, alone among contemporary critics, writes a sociological study of Wordsworth's innovations in poetry and criticism. He recognizes that the traditional hierarchy of poetic genres, subjects, and diction had reflected the class-structure of society, and that by "leveling" this hierarchy Wordsworth had effected a literary equivalent of the political and social revolution in France.

2. Dullness, lethargy.

3. Spoken by Brutus in *Julius Caesar* 2.1.22.

4. *Julius Caesar* 2.1.231–32; Hazlitt substitutes "passion" for Brutus's word "care."

5. *Measure for Measure* 3.1.9.

well as any one could. “*Nihil humani a me alienum puto*”<sup>6</sup>—is the motto of his works. He thinks nothing low or indifferent of which this can be affirmed: every thing that professes to be more than this, that is not an absolute essence of truth and feeling, he holds to be vitiated, false, and spurious. In a word, his poetry is founded on setting up an opposition (and pushing it to the utmost length) between the natural and the artificial; between the spirit of humanity, and the spirit of fashion and of the world!

It is one of the innovations of the time. It partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments. His Muse (it cannot be denied, and without this we cannot explain its character at all) is a leveling one. It proceeds on a principle of equality, and strives to reduce all things to the same standard. It is distinguished by a proud humility. It relies upon its own resources, and disdains external show and relief. It takes the commonest events and objects, as a test to prove that nature is always interesting from its inherent truth and beauty, without any of the ornaments of dress or pomp of circumstances to set it off. Hence the unaccountable mixture of seeming simplicity and real abstruseness in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Fools have laughed at, wise men scarcely understand them. He takes a subject or a story merely as pegs or loops to hang thought and feeling on; the incidents are trifling, in proportion to his contempt for imposing appearances; the reflections are profound, according to the gravity and the aspiring pretensions of his mind.

His popular, inartificial style gets rid (at a blow) of all the trappings of verse, of all the high places of poetry: “the cloud-capped towers, the solemn temples, the gorgeous palaces,” are swept to the ground, and “like the baseless fabric of a vision, leave not a wreck behind.”<sup>7</sup> All the traditions of learning, all the superstitions of age, are obliterated and effaced. We begin *de novo*, on a *tabula rasa*<sup>8</sup> of poetry. The purple pall, the nodding plume of tragedy are exploded as mere pantomime and trick, to return to the simplicity of truth and nature. Kings, queens, priests, nobles, the altar and the throne, the distinctions of rank, birth, wealth, power, “the judge’s robe, the marshal’s truncheon, the ceremony that to great ones ’longs,”<sup>9</sup> are not to be found here. The author tramples on the pride of art with greater pride. The Ode and Epode, the Strophe and the Antistrophe, he laughs to scorn. The harp of Homer, the trump of Pindar and

6. Terence, Roman writer of comedy: “Nothing that is human do I consider alien to me.”

7. Adapted from Prospero’s speech in *The Tempest* 4.1.151–56.

8. We begin anew, on a clean slate.

9. Adapted from *Measure for Measure* 2.2.59–61.

of Alcaeus<sup>1</sup> are still. The decencies of costume, the decorations of vanity are stripped off without mercy as barbarous, idle, and Gothic.<sup>2</sup> The jewels in the crisped hair,<sup>3</sup> the diadem on the polished brow are thought meretricious, theatrical, vulgar; and nothing contents his fastidious taste beyond a simple garland of flowers. Neither does he avail himself of the advantages which nature or accident holds out to him. He chooses to have his subject a foil to his invention, to owe nothing but to himself. He gathers manna in the wilderness, he strikes the barren rock for the gushing moisture. He elevates the mean by the strength of his own aspirations; he clothes the naked with beauty and grandeur from the stores of his own recollections. No cypress grove loads his verse with funeral pomp: but his imagination lends “a sense of joy”

To the bare trees and mountains bare,  
And grass in the green field.<sup>4</sup>

No storm, no shipwreck startles us by its horrors: but the rainbow lifts its head in the cloud, and the breeze sighs through the withered fern. No sad vicissitude of fate, no overwhelming catastrophe in nature deforms his page: but the dew-drop glitters on the bending flower, the tear collects in the glistening eye.

Beneath the hills, along the flowery vales,  
The generations are prepared; the pangs,  
The internal pangs are ready; the dread strife  
Of poor humanity's afflicted will,  
Struggling in vain with ruthless destiny.<sup>5</sup>

As the lark ascends from its low bed on fluttering wing, and salutes the morning skies; so Mr. Wordsworth's unpretending Muse, in russet<sup>6</sup> guise, scales the summits of reflection, while it makes the round earth its foot-stool, and its home!

Possibly a good deal of this may be regarded as the effect of disappointed views and an inverted ambition. Prevented by native pride and indolence from climbing the ascent of learning or greatness, taught by political opinions to say

1. Pindar and Alcaeus were Greek writers of odes.

2. I.e., uncouth; belonging to the Dark Ages.

3. From William Collins's ode *The Manners*, line 55: “Whose jewels in his crisped [“curly”] hair.”

4. Wordsworth, *To My Sister*, lines 6–9.

5. Wordsworth, *The Excursion* 6.53ff. The first line is misquoted: “Amid the groves, under the shadowy hills. . . .”

6. A coarse homespun cloth, worn by country people.

to the vain pomp and glory of the world, “I hate ye,”<sup>7</sup> seeing the path of classical and artificial poetry blocked up by the cumbrous ornaments of style and turgid *commonplaces*, so that nothing more could be achieved in that direction but by the most ridiculous bombast or the tamest servility; he has turned back partly from the bias of his mind, partly perhaps from a judicious policy—has struck into the sequestered vale of humble life, sought out the Muse among sheep-cotes and hamlets and the peasant’s mountain-haunts, has discarded all the tinsel pageantry of verse, and endeavored (not in vain) to aggrandize the trivial and add the charm of novelty to the familiar. No one has shown the same imagination in raising trifles into importance: no one has displayed the same pathos in treating of the simplest feelings of the heart. Reserved, yet haughty, having no unruly or violent passions (or those passions having been early suppressed), Mr. Wordsworth has passed his life in solitary musing, or in daily converse with the face of nature. He exemplifies in an eminent degree the power of association; for this poetry has no other source or character. He has dwelt among pastoral scenes, till each object has become connected with a thousand feelings, a link in the chain of thought, a fiber of his own heart. Everyone is by habit and familiarity strongly attached to the place of his birth, or to objects that recall the most pleasing and eventful circumstances of his life. But to the author of the *Lyrical Ballads*, nature is a kind of home; and he may be said to take a personal interest in the universe. There is no image so insignificant that it has not in some mood or other found the way into his heart: no sound that does not awaken the memory of other years. —

To him the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.<sup>8</sup>

The daisy looks up to him with sparkling eye as an old acquaintance: the cuckoo haunts him with sounds of early youth not to be expressed: a linnet’s nest startles him with boyish delight: an old withered thorn is weighed down with a heap of recollections: a grey cloak, seen on some wild moor, torn by the wind, or drenched in the rain, afterwards becomes an object of imagination to him: even the lichens on the rock have a life and being in his thoughts. He has described all these objects in a way and with an intensity of feeling that no one else had done before him, and has given a new view or aspect of nature.

7. Shakespeare and John Fletcher, *King Henry the Eighth* 3.2.365: “Vain pomp and glory of this world, I hate ye!”

8. Adapted from the conclusion of Wordsworth’s *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*.

He is in this sense the most original poet now living, and the one whose writings could the least be spared for they have no substitute elsewhere. The vulgar do not read them, the learned, who see all things through books, do not understand them, the great despise, the fashionable may ridicule them: but the author has created himself an interest in the heart of the retired and lonely student of nature, which can never die. Persons of this class will still continue to feel what he has felt: he has expressed what they might in vain wish to express, except with glistening eye and faltering tongue! There's a lofty philosophic tone, a thoughtful humanity, infused into his pastoral vein. Remote from the passions and events of the great world, he has communicated interest and dignity to the primal movements of the heart of man, and ingrafted his own conscious reflections on the casual thoughts of hinds and shepherds. Nursed amidst the grandeur of mountain scenery, he has stooped to have a nearer view of the daisy under his feet, or plucked a branch of white-thorn from the spray: but in describing it, his mind seems imbued with the majesty and solemnity of the objects around him—the tall rock lifts its head in the erectness of his spirit; the cataract roars in the sound of his verse; and in its dim and mysterious meaning, the mists seem to gather in the hollows of Helvellyn, and the forked Skiddaw<sup>9</sup> hovers in the distance. There is little mention of mountainous scenery in Mr. Wordsworth's poetry; but by internal evidence one might be almost sure that it was written in a mountainous country, from its bareness, its simplicity, its loftiness and its depth!

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9. Mountains in the Lake District.