

William
Wordsworth
in Context

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The most prominent proponent of the Gothic ballad was undoubtedly Gottfried August Bürger. His modern updates of 'The Child of Elle', 'The Friar of Orders Gray', 'Sweet William's Ghost', a Scottish favourite, and other tales taken from Percy's *Reliques* mesmerised scores of readers when they appeared in translation in the 1790s. Half-a-dozen English versions of 'Lenore' came in 1796 alone, including a notable one by the Poet Laureate Henry James Pye, and others by Walter Scott, W. R. Spencer and J. T. Stanley. In 1796 a new journal, the *Monthly Magazine*, published the most popular take on the tale, a lively and sentimental piece by William Taylor of Norwich. Even Wordsworth preferred it, so he claimed, to the original German.¹⁴ Indeed, much debate concerns whether Wordsworth considered Bürger an important influence on his balladry or whether he actively rejected him. Perhaps it is most helpful to think of Wordsworth's engagement with German Gothicism as a process mediated through the English sentimentalism then in vogue. Certainly, in late 1798 Wordsworth expressed strong dissatisfaction with Bürger's style: 'I do not perceive the presence of character in his personages. I see everywhere the character of Bürger himself'. He continues: 'It seems to me, that in poems descriptive of human nature, however short they may be, character is absolutely necessary, &c.: incidents are among the lowest allurements of poetry' (*EY* 234). Wordsworth nevertheless admired Bürger's 'manner of relating' and found it 'almost always spirited and lively, and stamped and peculiarized with genius' (234). But he tellingly summed up Bürger as merely 'the poet of the animal spirits'. 'I love his "*Tra ra la*" dearly', he concedes, 'but less of the horn and more of the lute – and far, far more of the pencil' (*EY* 235). Spencer, as a translator of 'Lenore', made similar criticisms of Bürger's use of words merely for sound, most garishly the 'trap, trap, trap' of

the horses' hooves.¹⁵ By 1815, when he wrote 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', Wordsworth had all but given up on Bürger, favouring instead the songs of Percy, Burns and Cowper.

But what of the earlier influence of Bürger on the *Lyrical Ballads* at the turn of the century? Three Bürger poems in particular have been routinely grouped with Wordsworth's works. 'Des Pfarrers Tochter von Taubenhain', a breathless tale of seduction followed by infanticide and retribution, was translated loosely into English as 'The Lass of Fair Wone' by Taylor in 1796 and Charlotte Dacre in 1805; it has been frequently compared with Wordsworth's ballad spoof 'The Idiot Boy'. Bürger's 'Lenore', in which a ghostly lover returns from the dead to carry his betrothed back to the tomb, is most often discussed alongside 'The Thorn', along with 'Ellen Irwin', 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', 'Hart-Leap Well' and countless others. A final Bürger piece, 'Der wilde Jäger', tells the story of a callous huntsman who faces eternal punishment. Walter Scott's famous 1796 retelling, 'The Chase', together with Bürger's original, has been read with 'Hart-Leap Well' most readily. Arguably the clearest reminiscences of 'Lenore' occur in 'The Idiot Boy' and of 'The Lass of Fair Wone' in 'The Thorn', even if, as Albert B. Friedman says, Wordsworth's pieces can scarcely be called 'horror ballads'.¹⁶ 'The Lass of Fair Wone' is far more explicit in its treatment of infanticide than Wordsworth could ever be:

Forth from her hair a silver pin
With hasty hand she drew,
And prest against its tender heart,
And the sweet babe she slew.¹⁷

Wordsworth's blustering narrator in 'The Thorn' instead speaks over the mother's silence in terms that, inadvertently or otherwise, only further emphasize her possible guilt: 'kill a new-born infant thus! / I do not think she could' (*LB* 84; lines 223–4). Whereas Wordsworth largely shied away from the gorier aspect of Anglo-German balladry, in 'The Idiot Boy' he toyed with the comic potential of sentimental Gothicism. As Stephen Parrish puts it, the poem burlesques 'the macabre, terrifying, midnight ride of Bürger's ghostly lovers' in the blundering ride of Wordsworth's idiot who clings 'happily to his pony, pursued by his anxious mother'.¹⁸ One might wonder, in passing, if Bürger's demonic horseman is not itself a parody of the unfeasibly chivalrous heroes of the ballad tradition. Certainly the opening stanza of 'The Idiot Boy', as Mary Jacobus observes, 'teasingly echoes the exclamatory refrains of Taylor's *Monthly Magazine* translation' – 'The moon is bryghte, and blue the nyghte' – in its economical use of

description common to ballads: 'Tis eight o'clock, – a clear March night, / The moon is up – the sky is blue'.¹⁹ In some other works in which Wordsworth mimics Bürger's characteristically abrupt beginnings and endings we see different, non-comic effects: the simple repetition in the first line of 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' creates from the start a bold tone of despair ('Oh! what's the matter? what's the matter?' (*LB* 59; line 1)), while the stark opening of 'The Thorn' puts strong visual emphasis on the poem's subject in the manner of Blake ('There is a thorn; it looks so old' (line 1)). Incidentally, the metre of 'The Thorn' follows Bürger's rapid speed, perhaps as part of an elaborate parody, or merely in keeping with generic expectations. In either case, Wordsworth's superior artistry becomes apparent when he creates out of the Bürger measure a more flexible line, as in 'Hart-Leap Well', which uses the standard English five-beat pentameter. Walter Scott's translation ('The Chase') from 'Der wilde Jäger' provides a ready contrast: 'Earl Walter winds his bugle horn; / To horse, to horse, halloo, halloo!' Wordsworth's slower metre, along with the varying clause lengths, opens up sufficient space for thoughtfulness amid the unfolding story:

'Another Horse'. – That shout the Vassal heard,
And saddled his best steed, a comely Grey:
Sir Walter mounted him; he was the third
Which he had mounted on that glorious day. (*LB*, 133; lines 5–8)

To be sure, even if they had their roots in oral poetry, Wordsworth's works live on the page in flagrant disregard of the communal objectivity of ballad-makers. 'Simon Lee, The Old Huntsman' begins innocently enough as a popular yarn, as Maureen N. McLane has neatly observed, before the author alerts us to the dubiousness of verbal transmission: 'He says he is three score and ten, / But others say he's eighty' (*LB* 65; lines 7–8).²⁰ The narrator, too, freely breaks out to address 'My gentle reader', a member of the literate classes, and coerces him into finishing the plot at his own leisure – 'Perhaps a tale you'll make it' (lines 69, 80). In 'Hart-Leap Well' the storyteller declines to tell a story even as he does so: 'I will not stop to tell how far he fled, / Nor will I mention by what death he died' (lines 30–1). The narrative voice throughout the collection is at once sophisticated and naïve, informed and unaware. Wordsworth certainly distanced himself from the speaker of 'The Thorn', perhaps to signal that we ought to read the poem as a comment on the ineptitude of modern storytellers or, more charitably, the difficulties endemic to storytelling. The main speaker in the poem, he makes clear in the 'Advertisement' to the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, is

'not . . . the author's own person: the character of the loquacious narrator will sufficiently shew itself in the course of the story' (*LB* 739). The notional, if not the nominal, subject is Martha Ray, a troubled, inarticulate young woman who may or may not have killed her infant born out of wedlock. We hear snippets of her life story from the perspective of an outsider, an old mariner passing through the village. The chatty old mariner, one might say, gets in the way of the tale he wants to tell. He even invites the reader to help him out: 'Perhaps when you are at the place / You something of her tale may trace' (lines 109–10). Specificity clashes with vagueness here: even when visiting the spot itself the reader will, at best, only trace a part, something, of Martha's story. Ballads keep local and national traditions alive but, when transferred to the page, the tale is also being lost.

Along with his peers, chiefly Coleridge and Southey, Wordsworth was a keen student of the ballad revival. So pervasive became the rage for balladry in the periodical press, along with scores of collections of old songs, that critics continue to debate whether Wordsworth augured a new style of poetry or merely popularized it. Jacobus, on the one side, hails the *Lyrical Ballads* as a highly original collection in its innovative approach to different genres. Robert Mayo, on the other, painstakingly traces themes and motifs common to both Wordsworth and contemporary magazines.²¹ Either way, it is clear that Wordsworth was thoroughly grounded in the songs and popular poetry that resounded across the British Isles, particularly the modern versions penned or polished by Percy, Scott and other literary antiquarians. The ballad tradition thrives on imitation, and, above all else, experimentation. With such pieces as 'The Seven Sisters', 'The Horn of Egremont Castle', and 'The Force of Prayer', Wordsworth demonstrated that he could write neo-medieval verse brimming with stock ballad devices, and he did flirt with the prevailing taste for Gothic tales, but it is his thoughtful songs on plebeian themes, on childhood and old age, for which he is justly celebrated.

Notes

1. Robert Mayo, 'The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*', *PMLA* 69 (1954), 507.
2. 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' (1815) (*Prose* III: 78).
3. Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 3 vols. (London: J. Dodsley, 1765), I: x.
4. *The Spectator*, no. 74 (25 May 1711), 62.
5. *The Plain-Dealer*, no. 36 (24 July 1724).
6. *The Spectator*, no. 85 (7 June 1711), 200. See also John Dennis, 'Of Simplicity in Poetical Compositions' (1721).

7. Samuel Johnson, *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets*, 10 vols. (London: J. Nichols, 1779), v: 154.
8. *Monthly Review* 29 (June 1799), 202–10.
9. Charles Wharton Stork, 'The Influence of the Popular Ballad on Wordsworth and Coleridge', *PMLA* 29 (3) (1914), 304.
10. G. Malcolm Laws Jr, *The British Literary Ballad: A Study in Poetic Imitation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 4.
11. *The Complete Works of Thomas Chatterton*, ed. Donald S. Taylor in association with Benjamin B. Hoover, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 1: 210.
12. See Albert B. Friedman, *The Ballad Revival: Studies in the Influence of Popular on Sophisticated Poetry* (University of Chicago Press, 1961), 154.
13. See Helen Darbishire, *The Poet Wordsworth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 37–8.
14. See Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads (1798)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 222.
15. Preface to *Leonora* (London: T. Bensley, 1796).
16. Friedman, *Ballad Revival*, 288.
17. *Monthly Magazine* 1 (April 1796), 224.
18. Stephen Maxfield Parrish, *The Art of the Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 88.
19. Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment*, 250–61 (250).
20. Maureen N. McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 226.
21. For an overview of the originality debate, see John E. Jordan, *Why the Lyrical Ballads? The Background, Writing, and Character of Wordsworth's 1798 Lyrical Ballads* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 128–54.