WORDSWORTH AND COLERIDGE

Lyrical Ballads

WORDSWORTH AND COLERIDGE

Lyrical Ballads

Critical Perspectives

PATRICK CAMPBELL

palgrave
macmillan

© Patrick Campbell 1991

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1991

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 4LP.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The author has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Published by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN 978-0-333-52259-2 ISBN 978-1-349-21564-5 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-21564-5

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

To My Mother and Father

Contents

<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
1 <i>LYRICAL BALLADS: THE CURRENT OF OPINION</i>	1
Contemporaneous criticism: the magazines	1
Victorian and later criticism: some trends	7
2 <i>CRITICISM IN CONTEXT, 1797–8</i>	15
The social and political background	15
Biographical considerations: collaboration or conflict?	18
The philosophical context	22
Literary influences	28
3 <i>LYRICAL BALLADS: RECENT INTERPRETATIVE STANCES</i>	35
Formalist approaches: ‘The Bridle of Pegasus’	35
The issue of ‘genre’	41
Psychoanalytical perspectives	47
Marxist, historicist and problematic readings	56
4 <i>LYRICAL BALLADS: CRITICISM OF THE MAJOR POEMS</i>	66
‘The Ancient Mariner’	66
‘Tintern Abbey’	76
‘The Thorn’	83
‘The Idiot Boy’	88
5 <i>THE POET AS CRITIC: THE PREFACE (1800)</i>	95

6	PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES: THE 'OTHER' LYRICAL BALLADS	102
	Three ballads	104
	'The Female Vagrant'	104
	'The Last of the Flock'	108
	'Old Man Travelling'	112
	Two laments	115
	'The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman'	115
	'The Mad Mother'	117
	'Goody Blake and Harry Gill'	120
	'Simon Lee'	124
	Two expostulatory pieces	128
	'Expostulation and Reply'	128
	'The Tables Turned'	130
	Two credal lyrics	132
	'It is the First Mild Day of March'	132
	'Lines Written in Early Spring'	134
	Two anecdotes	136
	'We Are Seven'	136
	'Anecdote for Fathers'	138
	'The Nightingale'	140
7	FROM ADVERTISEMENT TO ALBATROSS: UNITY OR DIVERSITY?	147
	<i>Bibliography</i>	163
	<i>Index</i>	171

List of Abbreviations

- B&J *Wordsworth and Coleridge, 'Lyrical Ballads'*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963, reissued as a University Paperback 1968). This edition uses the text of the 1798 edition and includes the 1800 poems and Preface. Line references to the 1798 poems and page references to the 1800 Preface relate to this edition.
- BL S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907).
- CC Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman (eds), *Coleridge: 'The Ancient Mariner' and Other Poems, a Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1973).
- CCH J. R. de J. Jackson (ed.), *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).
- CL *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966–71).
- EL *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. The Early Years, 1787–1805*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 2nd edn, rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).
- FN Notes dictated to Isabella Fenwick by William Wordsworth in 1843 and published in *PW*.
- LL *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. The Later Years, 1821–1853*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939).
- PrW *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).
- PW *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952–9).
- WC Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman (eds), *Wordsworth: 'Lyrical Ballads', a Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

Introduction

Northrop Frye, arguably the most distinguished of contemporary critics, recently announced his sense of exhilaration at the number of approaches now used in the study of literary documents and undreamt of a century ago. While these critical initiatives have sometimes bypassed the genre of poetry, *Lyrical Ballads* has hardly suffered from neglect. Indeed, the chorus of critics is still far from unanimous about the volume's merit and meaning – continuing testimony to its perennially elusive appeal.

There is nothing novel about such responses. *Lyrical Ballads* was widely discussed upon its publication in 1798, and the appearance of the Preface two years later merely fanned the flames of controversy. That these initial reactions *were* mixed should surprise no one. For a start, the reviewers were unaware that there were two authors with different objectives. And Wordsworth was at pains to stress that he was reconnoitring new terrain: the Advertisement talks of 'experiments' and the reader's inevitable 'strangeness and awkwardness' when confronting the unfamiliar. For his part Coleridge would later recall their wish to 'give the charm of novelty to things of every day' (*BL*, ch. 14). Yet the degree of real innovation, indeed the very meaning of that word 'experiments', has been debated ever since. Though there are few dissenters to the view that *Lyrical Ballads* occupies a pivotal place in English literary history, many critics now set it apart from other verse outpourings of the day more on grounds of formal excellence or intensity than on the basis of its innovative content – or even its language.

Such a sober assessment is countered by commentators who see in the volume and its prose glosses a reflection of cultural and

political crisis, an energised reaction to moribund and hackneyed traditions. For these analysts, novelty resides everywhere in the enterprise: in the poets' stated aims, in the versification, diction, genres and themes of the poems themselves, even in the attention-seeking title. Twentieth-century parallels would have to be sought in Yeats's revolutionary desire to embrace the 'enterprise' of 'walking naked' in *Responsibilities*, or Eliot's conscious rejection of Georgian diction and values in *Prufrock* – 1917.

At all events the volume's roller-coaster ride through literary history is testimony to the caprice of critical fashion. Oddly, while the growing chorus of approval for *Lyrical Ballads* provided ammunition for the argument that both poets had shot their creative bolts by 1810, the individual ballads often failed to register with the poetry-reading public. In Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, a cultural barometer of Victorian taste, only two of forty-one poems by Wordsworth were from the 1798 edition. Nor have authorial judgements always stood the test of time. 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' was a Wordsworth pet poem; he would have been insulted by its appearance in a modern anthology of 'Sick Verse' (1963). On the other hand, 'The Ancient Mariner' almost failed to make the second edition because of Wordsworthian doubts.

What characterises the recent critical debate is its scholarly and scrupulous character. The poems and their prose superstructure may be 'problematic' or 'paradoxical', but that is all the more reason for close and attentive analysis. And, if both the volume as a whole and its constituent parts reveal inconsistency and diversity as well as unity, then it is incumbent upon the critic to attend to this textual complexity.

Regrettably, such an *embarras de richesse* has meant some curtailment of scope. It soon became clear to me that, in a study of this length, meaningful comparison with the second edition of 1800 was an impossible pipe-dream, as was exhaustive coverage of the criticism of every single ballad. And how much space could be devoted to Coleridge? After all, his contribution – a mere four poems out of twenty-three – was statistically slight. At the same time it was impossible to ignore the status of 'The Ancient Mariner', a celebrated poem that critics usually cosset in splendid isolation, conveniently forgetting not only its lead-off role in the collection but also any links it may have with the

ballads that follow. Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' occupies a place in the pantheon almost as monolithic. So I felt justified in devoting separate sections to both poems, despite the inevitable dangers of overlap with the sections on critical methodologies. The same 'star treatment' was accorded to 'The Idiot Boy' and 'The Thorn', owing to the recent critical preoccupation with these ballads.

Most of the critical categories discussed chose themselves. The inclusion of opinion from magazines of the day – still frequently misrepresented – reflects a desire both to begin at the beginning, to highlight the shift in critical perspective over two centuries, and to uncover those quasi-Augustan pronouncements about poetry that provoked Wordsworth's rejoinder in the Preface. The survey of Victorian commentary provides a continuing history of taste and a lead-in to recent criticism – the staple of this book. In examining the background to *Lyrical Ballads* – biographical, political, philosophical and literary – I have focused on the key issues rather than attempt a comprehensive survey of context. Other books admirably fulfil this need.

One of the distinctive features of *Lyrical Ballads* is its surrounding penumbra of explanatory and justificatory comment. That these authorial statements have a role in the debate is undeniable, even if critics have tended to approach the Preface (like 'The Ancient Mariner') as an autonomous text. Part of that 'first great step in clarifying the role of criticism that could unify the mental elements in the creative process' (Frye, 1986, p. 32), these *ex cathedra* explanations also merit inclusion because of the discussion they continue to generate.

Equally one could hardly ignore the claims of formalist, psychoanalytical or political analysts. While the very presence of authorial intention has proved a disincentive to 'New Critical' purists seeking to exclude extra-textual matters, much mid-twentieth-century commentary does reflect such formalist concerns as coherence, ironic modes, narrative procedures and genre. And, while psychoanalytic approaches, whether Freudian or Jungian, now seem almost venerable, 'The Ancient Mariner' has consistently fallen victim to psychological-symbol hunters, both because Coleridge the man is a far more rewarding subject than Wordsworth the man and because the poem, uniquely symbolic or revealingly personal, has attracted critics in droves. They have been also drawn – if less lemming-like – to the

victimised women of Wordsworth's ballads – apparent spectres of a conscience unable to repress a sense of personal guilt.

The perennial difficulty of categorising critics – and literature usually resists pigeonholing, though we like to think that such classifications aid understanding – is most apparent in the section on left-wing criticism. While traditional Marxists have foregrounded the socio-political background to the enterprise, a newer school of 'theorists' has addressed the 'problematic' nature of individual poems, their subversion and erasure of meanings which the writer apparently does not want to stress. 'Tintern Abbey' has proved particularly susceptible to such revisionist readings, as do those of other maverick critics who defy easy classification. But, though the tentacles of post-structuralism have fastened onto *Lyrical Ballads*, feminist criticism has barely touched it. There are women writers aplenty on Wordsworth and Coleridge – Mary Jacobus and Heather Glen have recently written major studies of the volume, for example – but there is no full-scale feminist critique of *Lyrical Ballads*. There is little, for example, on the portraiture of female victims of a patriarchal society, on the vampiric woman of 'The Ancient Mariner' or on the crucial role of Dorothy. Jan Montefiore (1987, pp. 10–11) objects to the exclusivity of 'a man speaking to men' but praises the emphasis on personal and transcendent experience, an emphasis which 'theorists' – who regard transcendence as a hegemonic con-trick – find particularly irksome. It is a pity that she has not written on *Lyrical Ballads*.

I should add that, in selecting critics for inclusion, I have not always been seduced by excellence – though I hope that it has usually been a significant criterion. The most distinctive, even the most influential, speakers in this debate are not always the most perceptive or thorough: just as the ballads drew attention to themselves by their very iconoclasm, so too do these maverick critics – witness some of the wilder psychological readings of 'The Ancient Mariner' or the materialist hermeneutics applied to 'Tintern Abbey'. Again, illuminating comments on individual poems are often embedded in larger works or general studies and need, perforce, to be prised out. However, the search for specificity has not prevented me from including provocative observations not geared directly to *Lyrical Ballads* but by their very acuity worth any risk involved in drawing a connection.

In airing my own views, I have tried to plug some of the gaps left by the survey's inevitable partiality. To this end I have adopted the stance of self-styled pluralist critic in my examination of the less-vaunted poems from the 1798 edition. In the process, and taking my cue from 'problematists', I have sought to show that their apparent simplicity and wholeness is often deceptive, that even the less rewarding 'experiments' pose disconcerting questions or reveal unsuspected inner tensions. Yet as part of a grand design they also reveal affinities that go beyond the idea of formal companion pieces or even the statements of Advertisement and Preface. To explore this notion of unity in diversity, I have concluded the study by considering 'The Ancient Mariner' in its context of opening poem and have sought to show how this least compatible of bedfellows in fact prefigures the rest of the volume in significant ways.