

## **‘WILLINGNESS FOR THE EVERYDAY’**

### **Ordinariness and Agency in Three Romantic Prefaces**

Taking its cue from Stanley Cavell’s framing of Romanticism as a ‘quest of the ordinary’, this essay revisits the amplification of the category of the ordinary in the English literature of the Romantic era. Focusing on a specific genre, the preface to poetry, it examines the construction of poetry as a special case of that category in three Romantic prefaces: Wordsworth’s ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) Hazlitt’s prefatory lecture ‘On Poetry in General’ in his *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818) and Shelley’s ‘Preface’ to *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). By tracing and comparing the conceptual bases of these prefaces, it attempts to nuance and discriminate their differing versions of ordinariness. Variations notwithstanding, the reciprocal characterization of poetry and ordinariness, at the heart of the poetics of three major Romantic writers, is shown to be fundamental also to their arguments for agency and their resistance to what Cavell calls ‘the drive to the inhuman’.

Keywords: Romanticism, preface, poetry, ordinariness, humanism, agency

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## **‘WILLINGNESS FOR THE EVERYDAY’**

### **Ordinariness and Agency in Three Romantic Prefaces**

This study revisits the amplification of the category of the ordinary in the English literature of the Romantic era. In so doing, it implicitly re-engages Stanley Cavell’s question, ‘What is romantic about the recovery of, the quest for, the ordinary or everyday?’, and his understanding of such recovery as a recovery ‘from skepticism’ or ‘from a drive to the inhuman.’<sup>1</sup> Cavell’s sights are set especially on Emerson and Thoreau, and his larger view is of the ‘everyday intellectual life’ of America, although what he ‘mean[s] by romantic is meant to find its evidence – beyond the writing of Emerson and Thoreau – in the texts of Wordsworth and Coleridge’ (Cavell, 13, 6). My own attention, in this very much more limited study, is to the English Romanticism with which Cavell is not primarily concerned, and my evidence includes other of the Romantic writers, whose versions of the ordinary, along with Wordsworth’s, bear out Cavell’s insights by turning out to be versions of humanism. My focus, moreover, is on a particular genre – the Preface to poetry – which, in the instances that I discuss, both confirms a key Romantic tenet and illuminates Cavell’s advocacy, of the fruitful ‘participation of philosophy and literature in one another’ (Cavell, 12), a participation which thickens around the category of the ordinary. In the ensuing discussion, I examine the construction of poetry as a special case of that category in three key Romantic prefaces, not usually grouped together: Wordsworth’s ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) Hazlitt’s prefatory lecture ‘On Poetry in General’ in his *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818) and Shelley’s ‘Preface’ to *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). Unpacking the philosophical content of the ordinary, variously presented in these three texts, shows us the makings of a larger generalization, that the quest for the ordinary in Romantic-era literature may be read as a quest for agency.

#### **The necessity of the ordinary**

The recognition that since ordinariness is the human condition, it must be the means by which we recuperate the human from the forces of mechanisation and dehumanization that tend against it is made explicit in Wordsworth's explosive manifesto for poetry, the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* of 1800. Famously, the Preface shows or seeks to show that the ordinary is not only a fitting, but the only fitting subject for poetry, that it is nowhere so completely exemplified as it can be in poetry, and that only the poetry that so exemplifies the ordinary can lay claim to the expression of the human condition. The quest for such a poetry is made urgent by just that 'condition of boredom, [...] a sign of intellectual suicide' that Cavell describes, producing the 'false or fantastic excitements that boredom craves' (Cavell, 7) or as Wordsworth puts it, 'a craving for extraordinary incident':

[...] a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves. [...] When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation, I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble effort with which I have endeavoured to contract it; [...] had I not a deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it [...]²

Wordsworth's watchful awareness of the social conditions of his time – political upheaval and urban overcrowding, together with the ceaseless proliferation of new information – is manifest. So too is his grasp of their epistemological implications. To counterbalance the demand for the perpetually new and sensational, generated by daily political upheaval and the monotony of urban life, the Preface constructs poetry, or at least the kind of poetry that it prefaces, as a permanent embodiment of securely grounded knowledge. The language of the poems aspires to epistemological correspondence, that is, to an absolute or permanent, rather than an arbitrary, connection with that which it represents. Its epistemological ground is an ordinary world, indicated in Wordsworth's 'ordinary things', from 'common life' (Wordsworth, 597, 596). To Wordsworth, that world is nature, from which poetic language gains, in the correspondent relation, nature's permanence, otherwise absent in the rapid shifts and transitions of the human condition:

Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language [...] and [...] because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. [...] Accordingly, such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it [...] (Wordsworth, 597).

Ordinary language – the language of repeated everyday use – holds the possibility of connecting humanity and nature permanently and authentically. Behind Wordsworth's yearning for a permanent language of epistemological correspondence, we might hear the biblical description of the prelapsarian language ('whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that *was* the name thereof'),<sup>3</sup> and closer to Wordsworth's time, George Berkeley's notion of nature itself as the

expressive language of God ('in perusing the volume of Nature [...] We should propose to our selves [...] by proper inferences, to enlarge our notions of the grandeur, wisdom, and beneficence of the CREATOR'),<sup>4</sup> a notion that re-emerges in Coleridge's 1795 lectures 'On Revealed Religion', written in the same period of fruitful collaboration with Wordsworth that produced *Lyrical Ballads*: 'The Omnipotent has unfolded to us the Volume of the World, that there we may read the Transcript of himself' (Lecture 1); 'Nature is thus beautiful because its every Feature is the Symbol and all its Parts the written Language of infinite Goodness and all powerful Intelligence' (Lecture 3).<sup>5</sup> But whatever the traces in its linguistic model for poetry, of the bible or the religious thought of Wordsworth's compatriots, in making nature its epistemological ground, rather than a deity beyond it, and in the moral claim consequent upon that ground, the Preface overlaps more substantially with another, distinctly secular, work of the later 1790s: Friedrich Schiller's *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795-6).

### **Wordsworth's pleasure**

The influence of Schiller on Coleridge is well established, notably, for instance, in Michael John Kooy's *Coleridge, Schiller and Aesthetic Education* (2002).<sup>6</sup> Little, however, has been made of his pertinence to Wordsworth, barring the odd reference to Coleridge's comparison of Wordsworth's early play, *The Borderers*, to Schiller's *The Robbers*, widely known in Britain at the time. There is no factual evidence to suggest that Wordsworth had any direct knowledge of the essay *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*. Nonetheless, the parallels between this essay and the Preface, whether or not they indicate the influence on Wordsworth of Coleridge's reception of Schiller's thought, at the very least suggest a shared intellectual affinity.

Wordsworth's 'permanent' or 'philosophical' language is anticipated in Schiller's description of the 'naïve expression' that 'necessarily follows' from the 'naïve mode of thought', the attribute of 'genius': 'genius delineates its own thoughts [...] with an eternally determined,

firm, and yet absolutely free outline. [...] the [...] language springs as by some inner necessity out of thought, and is so one with it that even beneath the corporeal frame the spirit appears as if laid bare. [...] the sign completely disappears in the thing signified'.<sup>7</sup> Such a language, of authentic and absolute correspondence, unifies the opposite qualities of unchanging nature and mutable humanity, combining necessity, the property of nature, and the freedom (will or agency) of the human being. In Schiller's text we find, too, the mutual characterization of poetry and humanity, and the notion of poetry as the language in which humanity finds its fullest expression: "The poetic spirit is immortal and inalienable in mankind, and it cannot be lost except together with humanity"; 'the notion of poetry [...] is nothing *but giving mankind its most complete possible expression*' (*Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, 110,111). Most importantly, the 'poetic faculty' shows our impulsion back to nature, from which we became separated by agency ('freedom'); thus it belongs to our moral propensity and so attests to the ascendancy of the very agency that separated us from nature in the first place: 'For even if man should separate himself by the freedom of his fantasy and his intellect from the simplicity, truth and necessity of nature, yet not only does the way back to her remain open always, but also a powerful and ineradicable impulse, the moral, drives him ceaselessly back to her, and it is precisely with this impulse that the poetic faculty stands in the most intimate relationship.'*(Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, 110).

In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth presents his mission as the enlargement of exactly this 'faculty', so as to fulfil the moral purpose – the full development of freedom or agency – towards which such enlargement tends.

For the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, [...] It has therefore appeared to me, that to endeavour to produce or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a Writer can be engaged; but this service, excellent at all times, is especially so at the present day. For

a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. (Wordsworth, 599)

Where one of kind of language, the arbitrary and sensational kind, produces torpor, deadening agency and conducing to the mechanical functioning of the human being, another stimulates mental activity, or 'voluntary exertion'. The pleasure taken in poetry, that poetry enacting or embodying a correspondent relation with nature, attests to this second kind of excitation, the stimulation of agency. As Schiller does before him, Wordsworth identifies agency with the urge towards nature. Endorsing Schiller's contention that our pleasure in nature is not aesthetic, but moral, Wordsworth's attempt in his own poems, by embodying in them a permanent relation to nature, is to elicit the same pleasure: 'The end of Poetry is to produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure' (Wordsworth, 609). Pleasure is produced by the exercise of agency.

The association of pleasure with mental activity, or the 'excitement' of agency, contradicts another view, of pleasure as the driver of an automatic or mechanical reaction, the antithesis of agency, that defines human behaviour. In Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarian model, 'Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. [...] They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it.'<sup>8</sup> Countering Bentham's emphasis on subjection, Wordsworth's notion of pleasure as promoting moral agency, or the free choice of nature over the artificial conditions of modern life, informs his repeated references from the very outset of the Preface to pleasure as the effect of poetry and the goal of his own poetic endeavour:

Nor let this necessity of producing immediate pleasure be considered as a degradation of the Poet's art. It is far otherwise. It is an acknowledgment of the beauty of the universe, an acknowledgment the more sincere because it is not formal, but indirect; it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love: further, it is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves. (Wordsworth, 605)

Wordsworth's 'pleasure', like Bentham's, is an 'elementary principle', but unlike Bentham's, a 'grand' principle, belonging to human dignity, and acting to enable rather than disable or constrain the free workings of the human mind. In its production of pleasure, poetry confirms and strengthens that freedom.

Thus the view of poetry in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is underlaid throughout by Wordsworth's alertness to 'in what manner language and the human mind act and re-act on each other' (Wordsworth, 596). The language of epistemological correspondence is instrumental in the recovery of agency: that is, Wordsworth's claim of moral instrumentality for poetic language, its capacity to excite agency, is founded on that language's embodiment of a permanent relation of mind and nature. As we have seen, the prerequisite of such embodiment is its ordinariness, its basis 'in repeated experience and regular feelings.'

### **Hazlitt's power**

Nearly two decades later, another preface to poetry also draws from the ordinariness of poetry, its resistance to Utilitarian and other mechanistic models of the mind. The prefatory lecture, 'On Poetry in General', to Hazlitt's *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818), is, like Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, at once manifesto and defence, although its conceptual principles depart significantly from Wordsworth's. Where 'pleasure' is the operating principle of Wordsworth's



Preface, that of Hazlitt's is 'power'. The theoretical underpinnings of his essays and criticism are in his own early, explicitly philosophical writings – his first published work, the treatise *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805), and his first course of public lectures, the *Lectures on English Philosophy* (1818) – which set out his argument for agency and an anti-mechanistic, anti-Utilitarian model of the human mind. By this argument, the exercise of agency is identical with the exercise of the imagination, which, discernible in all voluntary action, is innately impelled and independent of external stimuli.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently finding its practical application in Hazlitt's critical and conversational prose, his philosophy is there encapsulated in his use of the word 'power', signifying the agency or innate creative ability, also called 'imagination', of the human being. In the lecture 'On Poetry in General', poetry is characterized by such power: "The poetical impression of any object is that uneasy, exquisite sense of beauty or power that cannot be contained within itself."<sup>10</sup>

To Hazlitt, as to Wordsworth, poetry is so far ordinary in that it is the consummate expression of the human condition: 'Fear is poetry, hope is poetry, love is poetry, hatred is poetry; contempt, jealousy, remorse, admiration, wonder, pity, despair, or madness, are all poetry' (Hazlitt, v. 2). But where Wordsworth identifies agency, manifest in the pleasure taken in poetry, with our willing return to nature, for Hazlitt, agency inheres in the formative ability of the mind. The first posits that poetry stimulates agency, the second, that it confirms it. The power of poetry indicates an empowered mind, irreducible to mechanical models: 'Poetry is that fine particle within us, that expands, rarefies, refines, raises our whole being: without it "man's life is poor as beast's." Man is a poetical animal and those of us who do not study the principles of poetry, act upon them all our lives' (Hazlitt, v. 2). By showing our ability to shape our world rather than be shaped by it, poetry attests to mental activity. 'It is strictly the language of the imagination; and the imagination is that faculty which represents objects, not as they are in themselves, but as they are moulded by other thoughts and feelings, into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power' (Hazlitt, v. 4)

As Hazlitt perceives it, poetry's primary reference is not to nature, but the inner man: 'Poetry then is an imitation of nature, but the imagination and the passions are a part of man's nature. We shape things according to our wishes and fancies, without poetry; but poetry is the most emphatical language that can be found for those creations of the mind' (Hazlitt, v. 3). In his *Round Table* essay 'On *Gusto*' (first published in *The Examiner* in 1816), Hazlitt had named as 'gusto', this powerful shaping by the imagination of the objects of its perception, shown in the great works of art and literature: 'Gusto in art is power or passion defining any object' (Hazlitt, iv. 77). Here, in the lecture 'On Poetry in General', he confirms that the referential relation of poetic language is not with nature or the world outside of it, but with human feeling; more particularly, with the external object as it is moulded by internal feeling. To a far greater degree than Wordsworth's, Hazlitt's preface emphasizes the extent to which the ordinary world is wrought by a self that is innately poetic or imaginative. The epistemological ground is neither world nor self, but the locus of their relation, a relation in which the mind is always primary. With that ground, that is, with a reality shaped by the creative mind, the language of poetry achieves a perfect correspondence. 'It is the perfect coincidence of the image and the words with the feeling we have' (Hazlitt, v. 7). Or 'it is the music of language, answering to the music of the mind' (Hazlitt, v. 12).

By contrast, '[...] there is nothing either musical or natural in the ordinary construction of language. It is a thing altogether and conventional' (Hazlitt, v. 12). Insisting, as Wordsworth does, on the ordinary content of poetry, Hazlitt's tendency is nonetheless to distinguish rather than conflate ordinary language and poetry. Poetry is the ultimate or climactic manifestation of the ordinary, formative power of the mind on which he bases the case for agency in his philosophical writings. Poetic language is a language heightened by its increased charge of agency. Its completeness of epistemological correspondence marks it as authentic ('there is no other nor better reality'; Hazlitt, v. 3); as the expression of the full exercise of innate power or agency, it is forceful. It is an 'emphatical language', its expression is 'in the boldest manner, and

by the most striking examples'; 'it describes the feelings of pleasure or pain, by blending them with the strongest movements of passion, and the most striking forms of nature' (Hazlitt, v. 3,5). And again: 'Poetry is only the highest eloquence of passion, the most vivid form of expression that can be given to our conception of any thing' (Hazlitt, v. 7). Dante, for instance, 'is power, passion, self-will personified. [...] The immediate objects he presents to the mind are not much in themselves, [...] but they become every thing by the force of the character he impresses upon them. His mind lends its own power to the objects which it contemplates, instead of borrowing it from them' (Hazlitt, v. 17).

The forceful impact of poetry generates a chain of associations: 'Poetry represents forms as they suggest other forms; feelings, as they suggest forms or other feelings. [...] The poetical impression [...] strives to link itself to some other image of kindred beauty and grandeur'; 'poetry suggests what exists out of it, in any manner connected with it' (Hazlitt, v. 3,10). In his *Remarks on the Systems of Hartley and Helvetius*, appended to the *Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, Hazlitt had refuted the associationism of the eighteenth-century philosopher, David Hartley, by which the mind's associative process is mechanical and automatic, wholly dependent on the sense impressions that it receives from the external world. Instead, he posits a dynamic process, instigated by a mind whose innate power enables it to form, rather than be formed by the associative chain (Natarajan, 51-64). Poetry's is just such a process, 'Where one idea gives a tone and colour to others, where one feeling melts others into it' (Hazlitt, v. 12). Not produced by, but producing the chain of association, poetry reverses Hartley's mechanistic model.

By the time of his lectures on the English poets, Hazlitt had published his first collection of familiar or occasional essays, *The Round Table* (1817), and so begun to shape the genre of whose development he was to become the *sine qua non*: the familiar essay, the consummate genre of the ordinary in the Romantic era. Proclaiming that genre, his essay 'On Familiar Style' in *Table-Talk* (1822), deliberately echoes Wordsworth's proclamation for poetry in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth's 'language really used by men' becoming Hazlitt's prescription 'to write as

any one would speak in common conversation' (Wordsworth, 597; Hazlitt, viii. 242). But if the ordinariness of Hazlitt's prose matches the ordinariness of Wordsworth's poetry, the ordinariness of the poetry described in the lecture 'On Poetry in General' is of a different order. Poetry, as Hazlitt presents it, as an intensification of the ordinary creativity of everyday speech and action. If his familiar essays may be said to expose, again and again, the poetic content of the ordinary, the lecture 'On Poetry in General' shows rather the ordinary content of the extraordinary discourse that he calls 'poetry'. Together, both forms of the ordinary stand against the mechanistic or empiricist models of the human mind, the resistance to which is Hazlitt's life-long mission.

### **Shelley's habit**

In another Romantic preface, the mutual characterization of ordinariness and poetry emerges in a third variation. Where Wordsworth insists on the ordinary language of poetry, and Hazlitt, on its intensification of the ordinary activity of the mind, Percy Shelley's impassioned preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) maintains the instrumentality of poetry in making the extraordinary ordinary. Viewing poetry, as Hazlitt does, as the fullest embodiment of the mind's shaping power, for Shelley, such embodiment is solely of the highest mental conceptions, that of moral absolutes or ideals. In Hazlitt's lecture 'On Poetry in General', poetry is the expression of the whole range of human emotion ('contempt, jealousy, remorse, admiration, wonder, pity, despair, or madness, are all poetry'), but Shelley's Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, like his great *Defence*, severs it altogether from the narrow and inhibiting impulses of the self. Prometheus is 'a more poetical character' than Milton's Satan, 'because, in addition to courage, and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement'.<sup>11</sup> Poetry relates solely to the moral – unselfish, altruistic – conceptions of the mind. Wordsworth establishes the

referential relation of poetic language to nature in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Hazlitt, in ‘On Poetry in General’, to a reality that is shaped by the mind. By implication in both prefaces, poetry, grounded in what constitutes our common humanity – the impulsion to nature or the innate power of the mind –promotes intersubjectivity, the relations between human beings. To Shelley, poetry more explicitly and utterly embodies intersubjectivity itself. The characteristic of poetry is that it is other-directed. As he puts in later in the *Defence*, ‘Poetry, and the principle of Self, [...] are the God and Mammon of the world’ (Shelley, 696).

The poetic, the intersubjective, and the ideal, are all synonymous for Shelley. In his Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, the poet aspires to make the ideal familiar; or as he puts it, ‘to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence’ (Shelley, 232). In an earlier preface, to *Laon and Cythna* (1817), Shelley had already identified the readers he has in mind as ‘the enlightened and refined’ in whom ‘a thirst for a happier condition of moral and political society survives’ in the aftermath of the French Revolution (Shelley, 130). In seeking, in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, ‘to familiarize’ these readers ‘with beautiful idealisms’, his aspiration is to habituate his readers to the ideal in order to bring about the new reality of which the ideal will be the ordinary condition. The verb ‘familiarize’ is critical, laden as it is with Shelley’s alertness to poetry’s impact on the complex relations between the imaginative and the habitual. Exactly this alertness is manifest later in *A Defence of Poetry*, where the ordinary is famously de-familiarized: ‘Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar’ (Shelley, 681). Equally and conversely, in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, poetry works to familiarize the extraordinary, or to render the ideal habitual.

The aim of rendering the ideal familiar or ordinary (so far as it becomes part of ordinary thought or everyday experience) is underwritten by a pressing consciousness, that Shelley shares with Hazlitt, of the undermining of imagination by established habit. In his *Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, Hazlitt had argued that although the imagination is innately capable of altruism,

or other-directed action, habit and the tyranny of sense experience impels it in the direction of self-interest: '[...] a sentiment of general benevolence can only arise from an habitual cultivation of the natural disposition of the mind to sympathise with the feelings of others [...], as the other feeling of abstract self-interest [...] must be caused by a long narrowing of the mind to our own particular feelings and interests' (Hazlitt, i. 14-15). That is, the habit of sympathy must supersede the habit of selfishness. Like benevolence or altruism, self-interest is also willed or voluntary, not automatic, and so generated by imagination, or the innate formative capacity of the mind, but unlike altruism, it is sustained by established habit. Yet this habitual self-interest may be turned to disinterestedness, because contrary to the tenets of the 'mechanical' philosophies, it is willed, not necessary. The distinction between the habitual and the necessary is critical to the case for agency and to the assertion of the real possibility of other-directed action.

Whatever Shelley's knowledge of Hazlitt's *Essay* – and the indications that he had read it are strong<sup>12</sup> – he so far shares Hazlitt's understanding of the stranglehold of habit that he presents poetry's function as the unsettling of established habits of thought in order to render the ideal habitual. The consciousness of the workings of habit is inseparable from the commitment to agency, and to the facilitation of altruism by the surmounting of habit, or the replacement of bad by good habit. Hence Shelley's argument is for a radical revision of what constitutes the ordinary or habitual. The poet's attempt is to transfigure into the ideals that he espouses, the long-established mental attitudes that are inimical to them.

Just as assured, then, as Hazlitt is, of the shaping power of the mind, Shelley describes the shaping achieved by and in poetry as a reformation. In the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, the empirical materials of the world are acted upon – reshaped – by the imagination of the poet. Poetry 'creates, but it creates by combination and representation' (Shelley, 231) Reform begins with language, with the embodiment and expression in poetry of a reformed world. The poet, himself shaped 'by all the objects of nature and art', is in turn able to 'modify the nature of others' (Shelley, 231). In his repeated references to the reformation, reshaping, or modification

achieved by poetry, Shelley claims for it the ability to re-habituate our minds to other-directed rather than self-centred responses, or by making the ideal ordinary, by implication to transform us from automatons to agents.

### **Coda: from preface to essay**

By advocating the ‘selection’ of poetic language from the ‘language really used by men’, Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* opens up the possibilities of the conversational and in so doing, as it announces a new kind of poetry, also prepares the ground for the genre that develops in its wake, the familiar essay of the Romantic era. Leigh Hunt acknowledges the debt in his essay ‘On Washerwomen’ (1816), when he humorously alludes to his own introductory remarks as ‘making a very important preface to what may turn out a very trifling subject’, going on to claim a stricter adherence to the principles of Wordsworth’s Preface than Wordsworth himself: ‘The reader sees that we are Wordsworthians enough not to confine our tastes to the received elegancies of society; and, in one respect, we go further than Mr Wordsworth, for, though as fond, perhaps, of the country as he, we can manage to please ourselves in the very thick of cities’.<sup>13</sup> Hunt’s ‘please’ deliberately replays Wordsworth’s ‘pleasure’ in another milieu. Fixing his setting ‘in the very thick of cities’, he signals the key locational shift that was to define the seminal new genre of his era. In the quintessentially urban mode of the Romantic familiar essay, the ordinary finds both its consummate expression and its fitting milieu.

But the *quest* for the ordinary, that Stanley Cavell has so persuasively identified with Romanticism itself, is most overtly proclaimed as such in the era’s exemplary prefaces to poetry. The juxtapositions of the prefaces treated in this study allows us usefully to discriminate, as I have shown, their characteristic emphases and concerns. But notwithstanding their variations in what comprises the ordinary, all three theorize the category so as to enforce a commitment to our common humanity, or to the human condition. In one way or another rejecting the

distinction between the philosophical and the literary, they make poetry a philosophical language by finding in it the expression of that ordinariness in which humanity consists. Expressly, too, they characterize such humanity as agency. Thus the category of the ordinary is fundamental to the claim of agency. The intersubjective response promoted or embodied by poetry is associated with versions of willing – in our return to nature, in our shaping of the world, in our other-directed impulses – all of which are innately driven. Cavell’s phrase, ‘willingness for the everyday’ (Cavell, 178), exactly describes the moral impulse with which Wordsworth, Hazlitt, and Shelley counter historical and philosophical determinism, in the teeth of political turbulence and the growing dominance of Utilitarianism in their time. Their prefaces complement the familiar essay in their more direct articulation of the necessity of the ordinary, as the locus of our humanity and the goal of our agency.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago and London, 1988), 26.

<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Major Works: Including the Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill (1984; revised ed. Oxford, 2000), 599-600.

<sup>3</sup> King James Bible, Genesis, 2:19.

<sup>4</sup> George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), Part I, section 109. See George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues*, ed. Howard Robinson, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford, 1996), 72.

<sup>5</sup> S.T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, vol I of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Bollingen series no. 75, 2 vols (Princeton, 1971), 94, 158.

<sup>6</sup> Michael John Kooy, *Coleridge, Schiller and Aesthetic Education* (Basingstoke, 2002). See especially 28-31 for Kooy’s argument that the Bristol physician, Thomas Beddoes, was the conduit from Schiller’s aesthetic essays, including the essay *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, to Coleridge.



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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich von Schiller, *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* and *On the Sublime: Two Essays*,<sup>3</sup> introd. and transl. by Julius A. Elias (New York, 1966), 98.

<sup>8</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart (Oxford, 1996), 11.

<sup>9</sup> For an extensive discussion of Hazlitt's 'power principle' as the philosophical basis of his entire oeuvre, see my monograph, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense: Criticism, Morals, and the Metaphysics of Power* (Oxford, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe (21 vols, London, 1930-4), v. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford, 2003), 229-30.

<sup>12</sup> P.M.S Dawson argues the impact of Hazlitt's philosophy on Shelley in *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford, 1980), 230-9, and, without actually claiming influence, Laurence Lockridge suggests a number of parallels in *The Ethics of Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1989), especially 335. My chapter, 'Circle of Sympathy: Shelley's Hazlitt' in *Metaphysical Hazlitt: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. U. Natarajan, T. Paulin, and D. Wu (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 112-22, extends and further substantiates Dawson's case.

<sup>13</sup> Leigh Hunt, *Selected Essays*, with an introduction by J.B. Priestley (London, 1929), 51-2.