The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*


*Lyrical Ballads* was written together by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, though it first appeared anonymously in 1798. The two poets had agreed to divide the task of composing the volume, according to each other’s poetical inspiration: Wordsworth wrote poems based on ordinary language, Coleridge those of an exotic or fantastic nature. *Lyrical Ballads* contains Wordsworth’s (and Coleridge’s) idea of poetry as spontaneous feelings expressed in common language, and describing common events. Nature is both the setting of Wordsworth’s poems – which are mainly about country people and country scenes – and the source of the poet’s inspiration.

“The principal object,¹ then, which I proposed myself in these poems [Lyrical Ballads] was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate² or describe them […] in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby³ ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way”;

“Low⁴ and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil⁵ in which they can attain⁶ their maturity”;

“[…] poetry is the spontaneous overflow⁷ of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till […] the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred⁸ to that which was before⁹ the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, […] In this mood¹⁰ successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on."¹¹"

1. object: end.
2. relate: narrate.
3. whereby: by which.
4. Low: simple.
5. soil: ground.
6. attain: reach.
7. overflow: traboccare.
8. kindred: similar.
9. before: initially.
10. mood: spirit.
11. carried on: continued.

Guided analysis

1. Consider the phrases in italics.
   a. Which ones refer to the subject(s) of poetical composition?
   b. Which ones refer to the mode (way) of poetical composition?