Occasion of the Lyrical Ballads

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, chapter 14 (1817)

*Biographia Literaria* was originally intended by Coleridge as the preface to an edition of his poems. When it was actually published, in 1817, it contained a series of critical considerations on poetry in general and on Wordsworth’s theory of ‘poetic diction’.

During the first year that Mr Wordsworth and I were neighbours,¹ our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal² points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy³ of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination. The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural. […] For the second class, subjects⁴ were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such as will be found in every village and its vicinity where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them when they present themselves.

In this idea originated the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads*; in which it was agreed that my endeavours⁵ should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward⁶ nature a human interest and a semblance⁷ of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing⁸ suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy⁹ of custom¹⁰ and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which,¹¹ in consequence of the film¹² of familiarity and selfish solicitude,¹³ we have eyes yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.

1. *neighbours*: both Coleridge and Wordsworth had settled in the Lake District.
2. *cardinal*: main.
4. *subjects*: i.e. for poetry.
5. *endeavours*: efforts.
9. *lethargy*: sleep, i.e. lack of interest.
11. *but for which*: se non fosse per il quale.
13. *solicitude*: i.e. interest.

Guided analysis

1. Describe the circumstances in which the plan of *Lyrical Ballads* was formulated and its poems composed.
2. What are, according to Coleridge and Wordsworth, the two cardinal points of poetry?
3. Can you remember any poem(s) by the two writers that fall(s) into these two categories of poetry?