

William Wordsworth set forth his radical views on **poetic diction** in the famous Preface to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (expanded in 1802). His manifesto was a direct revolt against the rigid, artificial, and overly stylized poetic conventions of the 18th-century Neoclassical era (represented by poets like Alexander Pope and John Dryden).

Key Tenets of Wordsworth's Poetic Diction

1. "The Real Language of Men"

Wordsworth argued that poetry should be written in a language actually used by ordinary human beings, rather than a specialized, artificial register reserved exclusively for verse.

- He favored the language of **incidents and situations from common life**, particularly humble and rustic life.
- He believed rustic men speak a more permanent, philosophical, and uncorrupted language because they interact daily with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature, free from vanity and social pretense.

2. Rejection of "Gaudy and Inane Phraseology"

Wordsworth strongly condemned the standard Neoclassical devices of his time, which he viewed as decorative tricks that detached poetry from genuine human feeling:

- **Personification**: Avoiding abstract ideas turned into persons (e.g., calling peace "Gentle Peace") unless prompted by true emotion.
- **Poetic Clichés & Archaisms**: Rejecting roundabout phrases (e.g., using "the feathered choir" instead of "birds," or "finny tribe" instead of "fish").
- **Hyper-Inverted Syntax**: Avoiding unnatural word order designed merely to fit a metric scheme.

3. No Essential Difference Between Prose and Metrical Composition

One of Wordsworth's most controversial assertions was that **"there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition."**

- Both prose and poetry spring from the same human passions and express the same truths.
- The only difference is that poetry employs **meter** (and sometimes rhyme), which serves as a harmonious, regulating framework to temper emotional intensity and provide pleasure.

4. Emotion as the True Origin of Diction

For Wordsworth, poetic language must arise naturally from emotional necessity, not conscious ornamentation.

- He defined poetry as **"the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,"** which takes its origin from **"emotion recollected in tranquility."**
- When a poet feels genuine, intense emotion, the words that express that emotion will naturally be vivid, sincere, and direct—requiring no artificial polish.

Wordsworth vs. Neoclassical Diction

Aspect	Neoclassical Diction (18th Century)	Wordsworth's Romantic Diction
Source Material	Urban elites, courtly life, classical mythology.	Rustic, humble, everyday human life and nature.
Vocabulary	Elevated, stylized, ornate, filled with Latinate terms.	Simple, direct, rooted in common speech.
Purpose of Style	To show polish, wit, decorum, and sophistication.	To convey genuine, unadorned human feeling.
Relation to Prose	Sharply distinguished from prose.	Essentially the same as prose, with meter added.

Criticism and Limitations

Wordsworth's theory met immediate pushback, most famously from his close friend and collaborator **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** in *Biographia Literaria* (1817):

- **Rustic Speech is Limited:** Coleridge pointed out that the speech of uneducated rustics is often narrow and grammatically impoverished; when rustics speak poetically, it is because they are educated or thinking deeply, not because they are rustics.
- **Prose vs. Poetry Difference:** Coleridge argued that the presence of meter inherently alters word order and style, making a true identity between prose and poetic diction impossible.
- **Inconsistency in Practice:** Even Wordsworth's finest poems (like "*Tintern Abbey*" or "*Ode: Intimations of Immortality*") use an elevated, deeply philosophical diction that goes far beyond the "language of common men."