Mary AKT Gallagher  
Horace and Wordsworth on Poetry and Its Aims

As an obvious result of living and writing more than an entire millennium apart from one another, Quintus Horatius Flaccus (commonly known as the poet Horace) and William Wordsworth have widely differing literary traditions informing their ideas of what makes a poem – and what makes a good poem. They share only the most general of notions as to what poetry is, and venture to express markedly distinct opinions on its value and purpose in society. Studying their works on the subject in juxtaposition gives a reader an idea of the progression of the art over the centuries between them; in both the concepts and standards that changed, but also in the traditions that did not. The latter, the principles which Horace and Wordsworth – both widely respected and successful figures in their field – each found mutually vital to their art are important and remain so in a contemporary discussion of poetry because they are proven to be more than mere trends of either period.  
The guidelines that both Horace and Wordsworth deemed necessary to write down include the idea that poetry should have an emotional effect on its audience, what relationship one’s poetry should have to reality, even the kind of person a poet is and should be. They are significant because these two legendary literary figures who deigned to discuss the workings of their practice – though separated by more than more than 1500 years, as well as by the influence of hundreds of other critics and philosophers to come between them – both said that they were. The simple fact that they hold these ideals in
common begs the question of whether these shared principles should be considered universal standards of poetry.

A major tenet which permeates the text of Horace’s *Ars Poetica* is the importance of maintaining a definite structure within one’s poetry. He dictates that a poem must be written with some set of rules in mind, and an end in sight. He states in the first line of the text: “*Humano capiti cervicem pictor equinam*” – Latin for “suppose a painter joined a human head with the neck of a horse,” and continues a perverted blazon-like description of an abstract hodge-podge of animal parts depicted in a painting, “so that what began as a lovely woman at the top/ Tapered off into a slimy, discolored fish.” He then asks facetiously, “Could you keep from laughing, my friends?” The absurd suggestion and the confusion a viewer would inevitably feel at such a spectacle carries across the point that deviating too far from what is real and natural without a purpose has very little effect beyond being laughable. While recognizing and supporting the unique freedom that a poet or an artist has in being a creator encumbered solely by the limitations of his (or her) own imagination and not by those of the physical world, he warns against the use of that freedom to too great a degree. He anticipates and dismisses a pupil’s argument: “‘But painters and poets/ Have always been equally free to try anything.’/ We writers know that, and insist that such license be ours…but not to the extent/ Of mating the mild with the wild, so that snakes are paired/ With birds, and tigers with lambs.” (68) The capabilities of invention possessed by a poetic mind must not be misused, according to Horace; otherwise a poet runs the risk of producing a piece that is unrealistic to the point of being ridiculous.

Horace also makes a point of aspiring poets to be consistent in their work; in both the rules they set for themselves within the context of their specific work and in the
work’s adherence to reality. With the latter advisement, he demonstrates himself to be an early proponent of literary realism, long before the movement itself even started. While not being so specific as to prescribe what one’s ultimate purpose should be, he does insist that a poet employ a teleological method in their work: composing a piece with its beginning and end complete and as a singular whole, so that it does not start off as one thing and veer off track into something entirely different by the end. He commands, “Make what you want/ So long as it’s one and the same, complete and entire.” (68) He applies the same directive to all the elements within the work, such as characters, instructing an aspiring poet to: “keep to the end the same sort of person you started out with/ And make your portrayal consistent.” (70) Horace elevates a poet’s consistency throughout his work to a high value, seeming to equate the close adherence to the pre-established set of rules for characters and plot with literary honesty – if a poet is consistent in his poetry, he is portraying people and life as they are; he is being truthful in his work, and verisimilitude is a prized quality in poetry. He rules that the Deus ex Machina (a literary device by which a sudden divinity or otherwise powerful character enters the play and is responsible for the entire resolution of the play) must not be employed “unless the action tangles itself in such knots/ That only a divine deliverer can work the denouement.” (71-72) However, the implication is that making use of such a device is lazy writing and a betrayal of a poet’s audience as well as his own characters. It should not be necessary for such an uncommon event that could not be realistically anticipated to occur to conclude a work that is supposed to portray human life as it is as closely as possible. Horace would regard such a departure from the truth as unnecessary, and a poor example of his ideal of poetry.
Horace goes on to say that the ideal poet is a learned and experienced man. With the aspiration to both teach and please his audience at heart, a poet’s education and familiarity with his world are essential skill to his field. He claims,

The principal source of all good writing is wisdom./ The Socratic pages will offer you ample material,/ And with the matter in hand, the words will be quick to follow./ A man who has learned what is owing to country and friends,/ The love that is due a parent, a brother, a guest,/ What the role of a judge or senator chiefly requires/ What part is played by the general sent off to war/ Will surely know how to write the appropriate lines/ For each of his players. (74)

Horace posits here that the knowledge and wisdom attained throughout an (educated) person’s life provide a writer with material about which to write and lessons with which to instruct his audience. Experience in the world equips him with good judgment of the way real people feel and behave, and therefore enables him to portray the people who are mere figments of his imagination as honestly as possible.

William Wordsworth, whose Preface to Lyrical Ballads was published (in its primary edition) in 1800, was an important figure in the Romantic Movement of literature. This movement, in response to the culture of the Enlightenment of Western Europe, tended to prioritize the expression of emotion in literature over the Enlightenment tradition of prizing humanity’s
ability to reason above all else. There was also a notable shift in focus from the awe-inspiring capabilities of human beings themselves to the awe-inspiring beauty and power of nature, and the devotion to nature was only exacerbated by the Industrial Revolution, which served to urbanize Great Britain at an alarming rate, inciting a literary tradition of nostalgia, where Romantic poets would lament the days gone by when England was all countryside and still dominated by an agrarian society. Wordsworth, in particular, saw “the rustics” (the mostly impoverished occupants of the countryside; remnants of the pre-urbanized generation) as the ideal people – they maintained the strongest connection to nature because they cultivated the land themselves; they were not spoiled by cynicism and access to worldly materials. The rustics were common subjects of Wordsworth’s poetry for their simplistic lifestyle, their unsophisticated language, and their communion with the natural world.

In his Preface, in accordance with the Romantic tradition, Wordsworth offers his definition of poetry: “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” (304) He says that this overflow must be written in the words of the common man, defending this departure from the tradition of flowery, verbose language (often meant to demonstrate the extent of the poet’s education) with the claim that the primitive human emotions are more easily accessed and understood in the environment and language of the rustic:

…in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly
communicated…and…are most easily comprehended. (303)

He goes on to posit the assertion that the English language is in its purest form when spoken by the rustic people, because of their frequent interaction with the natural world (or, as Wordsworth describes it, “the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived,”) and because they are so unsophisticated and simplistic that they communicate their opinions in “simple and unelaborated expressions.” (304) Simply stated, Wordsworth implies that rustic people do not have the extensive vocabulary that their more civilized counterparts do; they say only what they truly feel, without mincing words. Similar to Horace in this instance, Wordsworth places a high value on the expression of truth in one’s poetry; it goes so far as to inform the language he employs.

Where Horace claims a poet is an educated and worldly person, Wordsworth ventures to claim that a poet’s skill is ingrained by nature rather than nurtured into development. He answers to the self-imposed question “what is a poet?” that he is a man…endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind…[he is] affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present… (308)

These distinct ideas of who a poet must be can be derived also from the slight differences in the opinions of the two of what a
poet’s purpose is. Horace states that he endeavors to “either delight or enlighten the reader, / Or say what is both amusing and really worth using.” (75) A poet should educate or entertain, and preferably do both at the same time. Wordsworth agrees with the goal of delighting the audience, but then deviates to replace the goal of enlightening, stating that “the end of poetry is to produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure.” (311) A poet’s purpose, according to Wordsworth, is to incite feeling, and to delight. Both are of the opinion that pleasing one’s audience is an absolute necessity, and they both believe that this can be done by relating truths of the human spirit, whether it be by taking one’s experience in society and applying that to their characters, or by interacting with nature to encounter one’s simplest and most natural passions. In an ideal situation, their intended audience would recognize either of these endeavors, finding them relatable, and, hopefully, pleasing. Even the purposes they claim that are different from one another still have the same ultimate goal of helping an audience to come closer to encountering the truth. Horace attempts to impart it directly through dramatized poetry, and Wordsworth, by communicating the spontaneous overflow of feelings to an audience who has not felt them, enables them to do so vicariously, and to come into closer contact with their deeper, more natural emotions, and to experience them simply and honestly.

Writing in different time periods, reacting to different events and influences, and practicing different traditions in literature would lead a reader to expect that Horace and Wordsworth would have entirely different ideas of what a poet is supposed to do. While they do differ in several respects, such as by what means a poet is supposed to go about fulfilling their purpose in writing poetry, their general purpose is the same.
Each endeavors to bring their audience closer to discovering the truth; wherever and however they find it.
Works Cited