

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH'S PROSODY: A STUDY.

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Studies of Wordsworth are wide and varied; a great deal has been written on nearly every aspect of his genius. However, this is not the place for a study of the extensive literature written on Wordsworth.¹ Instead, I propose to examine an aspect of him which has not yet received much attention by critics or historians, namely his prosody. It is hoped that such a study will not only clarify the poet's attitude concerning the art of writing in general, but it will also afford a better understanding of the poet's own work and poetic techniques.

Wordsworth's famous utterances on the Imagination, his eloquent celebration of genius and natural power and his glorification of spontaneous feelings are common knowledge. What perhaps is sometimes less emphasized is the fact that Wordsworth was a conscious artist who recognized the importance of craftsmanship—of conscious art—in the creation of great

1. It may perhaps be relevant here to mention that there is an excellent survey of the huge Wordsworth literature by E. Bernbaum in The English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research, ed. Thomas M. Raysor (New York: Harper & Bros., 1950).

poetry. He was a vital and an interesting thinker; for he contributed towards our understanding of the laws and processes of poetic creation; and he himself was a careful artist who was interested in words, images, phrases and every nuance of versification. Hence a study of Wordsworth's prosody may afford essential clues to his vision of Man and Nature. This vision is often present in a structure of "literalness" of expression¹; this "literalness" ambiguously assisted the poet to reveal the secret complexities of the inner workings of the human mind or what he himself called "unknown modes of Being".² Hence my intention in this study is to show Wordsworth's genius and the originality of his art by analyzing certain qualities of his style.

The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads is important not so much because it states a theory or tries to put into words the poet's first principles; its importance lies primarily in that it is a theoretical defence of Wordsworth's own poetry.

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1. See Coleridge's criticism of "Wordsworth's Theory of Diction", in Biographia Literaria (1817), ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907), Chap. XVII.
 2. William Wordsworth, The Prelude (1850), ed. by Ernest de Selincourt (2nd ed.), rev. by Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), Book 1, l. 393.

Hence an understanding of his debate on poetic creation as stated in his Preface will evidently help to throw light on his own techniques and way of writing. For instance, in his discussion of metre in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth undertakes to explain an apparent anomaly: the fact that the "language of passion", in lyric poetry, should be subject to artificial rules of stress-patterning, stanzaic structure, and rhyme. His arguments in extenuation of metrical artifice are by no means contemptible, but there is some reason to suppose that he himself was not entirely convinced by them. If he had been, he could hardly have written the last sentence of the Appendix to the Preface:

Metre is but adventitious to composition, and the phraseology for which that passport is necessary, even where it may be graceful at all, will be little valued by the judicious.¹

"Adventitious" and "passport" unquestionably reflect Wordsworth's exasperation with the idea that metre authorizes the poet to employ a "phraseology" differing "essentially" from "the language of prose". His remarks in the Appendix, as well as the more favourable reflections on metre in the Preface, should therefore be understood in the context of his polemic against poetic diction. They are not all that Wordsworth had to say on the subject, but rather all that he could say in an argument

1. William Wordsworth, Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, vol. II, ed. by E. De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (5 vols.; Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940-1949), p. 409. Henceforth referred to as P.W.

centering on questions of diction. And they certainly should not be taken to imply that Wordsworth, as a poet, was indifferent to the technique of verse.

Henry Crabb Robinson noted in his diary that Wordsworth pointed out to him

...some of the artifices of versification by which Milton produced so great an effect in passages like this.

...pining atrophy,
Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence,
Dropsies and asthmas, and joint-racking rheums.

in which the power of the final 'rheums' is heightened by the 'atrophy' and 'pestilence'. 'But', said he, 'I would not print this and similar observations, for it would enable ordinary verse-makers to imitate the practice, and what genius discovered mere mechanics would copy.'

A small point, no doubt, but clearly the observation of a man aware of metrical nuance. "Atrophy", "pestilence", and "rheums" occur at the end of their respective lines. Wordsworth's point is that the "power" of "rheums" depends in part upon its position, which heightens the contrast between the colloquial monosyllable and the learned polysyllables. With respect to the construction of the sonnet, he once told Robinson that he did not

...approve of uniformly closing the sense with a full stop and of giving a turn to the thought in the sestet.... Wordsworth does not approve of closing the sonnet with a couplet, and he holds it to be absolutely a vice to have a sharp turning at the end with an epigrammatic point.²

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1. Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers, ed. Edith J. Morley (3 Vols.; London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1938), II, p. 479.
 2. Ibid., II, pp. 484-485.

Elsewhere, in letters or obiter dicta recorded by friends, he treats many of the traditional prosodic issues, including monosyllabic lines, run-on couplets, double rhymes, and feminine endings in blank verse. His remarks on all of these topics reveal a highly developed interest in metrical technique. That this interest was not fully represented in his formal literary criticism may have been due as much to his expressed reluctance to betray trade secrets—a common attitude among poets—as to his preoccupation with poetic diction.

Once, in a passage originally intended for The Prelude but never published, Wordsworth wrote of

...that considerate and laborious work
That patience which, admitting no neglect
By slow creation, doth impart(s) to speech [sic]
Outline and substance even, till it has given
A function kindred to organic power,
The vital spirit of a perfect form.¹

These lines evidently show Wordsworth's concern with poetic form. Hence we shall consider them more closely, as part of an investigation of his verse technique. There can be no doubt about what they assert: it is art that gives to speech the "vital spirit of a perfect form". Language free of literary accretions is not ipso facto poetry. The poet must labour to impart "outline and substance" to his spontaneous speech. Wordsworth does not define the nature of the "considerate and laborious work" required of the serious poet,

1. The Prelude, E. de Selincourt ed., in P.W., Introduction, p. xliii

but it would be strange indeed if "outline and substance", for example, were not intended to suggest, among other things, the subtleties of a studied metrical technique. Herbert Read, who has written extensively of "organic form" in English romantic poetry, may have had in mind the "outline and substance" of speech when he wrote that his intention in analyzing Wordsworth's poetic rhythms was "to trace the contour of the poem—to mark certain levels of depth or pressure in the poet's experience. Though H. Read's scansion of passages from The Prelude are not, I think, always correct, they are nevertheless serious attempts to exhibit the range and delicacy of Wordsworth's auditory imagination. On this subject more remains to be said. In the pages that follow, I shall attempt to illustrate the kind of prosodic analysis that seems to me most likely to lead to a fuller appreciation of Wordsworth's poetic art.

There is, it should be noted here, a kind of prosodic effect, often discussed to-day, that is not, I think, found in Wordsworth's poetry. In a well-known essay Arnold Stein speculates on the proper way of reading a line from one of Donne's poems: "So, if I dreame I have you I have you." His conclusion is that the difficulty of deciding which of the final syllables should receive metrical stresses is the

1. Herbert Read, The True Voice of Feeling (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), p. 47.

result of Donne's prosodic cunning; the uncertainty, he says, "contributes metaphorically to the meaning of the whole poem."¹ To put it another way, since the poem is about a "hovering ambiguity" in the speaker's mind, the metre is appropriately hovering or ambiguous. Now I do not believe that Wordsworth's verse rhythms are vehicles of semantic ambiguities; they are not, then, in Arnold Stein's sense "metaphorical". Usually, the meaning of an assertion in his poetry (as in, say, a description of a childhood adventure) is perfectly clear. The rhythm does not, by suggesting alternative intonations for a group of words, mediate among discrepant or complex attitudes-entertained by the speaker; its function is to contribute to producing a distinctive aesthetic effect proper to the "poetry of sentiment and imagination". The nature of that effect is well-described by Erich Auerbach in his splendid essay on Montaigne. In reading Montaigne, Auerbach says that we imagine that we can "hear him speak and see his gestures". This is not the same thing as following the progress of his argument: "He skips intermediate steps of reasoning, but replaces what is lacking by a kind of contact which arises spontaneously between steps not connected by strict logic".² The spontaneous "contact"

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1. "Donne's Prosody", in Discussions of Poetry: Rhythm and Sound, ed. George Hemphill (Boston: Houghton Company, 1961), p. 93.
 2. Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (New York: Harper and Bros., 1957) p. 254.

is implicit in Montaigne's style: in the rhythms, diction, and syntax which, in Wordsworth's phrase, give "outline and substance" to his speech. Auerbach's description of the effect of Montaigne's style applies equally well, I think, to much first-rate poetry; and it is very close to what Wordsworth meant in Upon Epitaphs, by "language instinctively ejaculated".

Metre, rhythm, syntax, sound, and diction: these are elements of style with which we shall now be chiefly concerned. In virtue of their interaction, the poem is more than what it asserts; it is, as we sometimes say, unparaphrasable. But this is to imply that prosody is an essential aspect of the expressive power of poetry. When we analyze stress patterns, "substitutions", caesuras, etc., we are not describing purely metrical phenomena; we analyze the metrical phenomena in order to better appreciate the poem as a whole. Now, we ask, do the rhythm and sound of this passage function to define more precisely the nature of the poet's experience? The metrical variation is not, on this view, a brute fact—a trochee, a monosyllabic line, a feminine ending; it is a moment or incident in the development of the poem, related both to the sense of the passage in which it occurs and to its metrical environment, that is, to the metrical structure of the lines that surround it.

So far, I think, most critics would be willing to go; but not much further. There is still no generally accepted terminology for describing prosodic effects. Some critics are convinced that the old two-stress system is good enough for satisfactory analysis. But recently, the structural linguists have registered their objections to the traditional system, offering in its place, in addition to four degrees of stress, four degrees of pitch and three kinds of "terminal juncture". I have retained the generally accepted nomenclature when, so it seemed to me, nothing was to be gained by abandoning it; but I have freely used the new vocabulary in many places, where, I think, it has helped me to say what I mean.

Wordsworth's theory of the Influence of Metre on diction:

In the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth says:

It is supposed, that by the act of writing in verse, an Author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association; that he not only thus apprises the Reader that certain classes of ideas and expressions will be found in his book, but that others will be carefully excluded.¹

This theory, as we well know, is a consistent one in his criticisms: in the mind of poetasters and a large part of the cultivated reading public, metre is thought to dictate or determine a certain "phraseology", a poetic diction. Wordsworth's own early verse exhibits in a striking manner the effects of what we might call metrical compulsion on diction; in Descriptive

1. P.W., II, pp. 385-386.

Sketches, for example, lines 25-44, he writes:

Moves there a cloud o'er mid-day's flaming eye?
Upward he looks - and calls it luxury;
Kind Nature's charities his steps attend,
In every babbling brook he finds a friend,
While chast'ning thoughts of sweetest use, bestow'd
By Wisdom, moralize his pensive road.
Host of his welcome inn, the noon-tide bow'r,
To his spare meal he calls the passing poor;
He views the Sun uprear his golden fire,
Or sink, with heart alive like Memnon's¹ lyre;
Blesses the Moon that comes with kindest ray
To light him shaken by his viewless way.
With bashful fear no cottage children steal
From him, a brother at the cottage meal,
His humble looks so shy restraint impart,
Around him plays at will the virgin heart.
While unsuspected wheels the village dance,
The maidens eye him with inquiring g'ance,
Much wondering what sad stroke of crazing care
Or desperate Love could lead a wanderer there.²

This is poetic diction, with a vengeance. Can we, with Wordsworth, attribute the "phraseology", to metre? It is difficult, I believe, to answer this question with an unambiguous affirmative or negative. Reading the lines, one is positively aware of a recurrent metrical formula common to much eighteenth-century verse. Wordsworth's pentametres frequently end with a monosyllabic noun preceded by a dissyllabic trochaic epithet, the three syllables forming a highly stylized terminal rhythm or cadence. (Of these twenty lines, twelve display the formula I have described. Two others—the thirteenth and twentieth—

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1. The lyre of Memnon is reported to have emitted melancholy or cheerful tones, as it was touched by the sun's evening or morning rays.
 2. Descriptive Sketches, lines 25-44, in P.W., Vol. I, p. 44.

have grammatically distinct but rhythmically identical endings.) Supposing this accentual pattern to have become habitual with Wordsworth through much reading in eighteenth-century poetry, one might guess that it is responsible for the glossiest language in the passage I have quoted, in which we find the formula exemplified by "flaming eye", "golden fire", "Memnon's lyre", "kindest ray", and "crazing care". Yet upon reflection it is clear that metre alone cannot account for these expressions. T.S. Eliot, speculating on the same question, puts it this way:

There is perhaps no more stubborn cause of extreme differences of opinion, between respectable critics of poetry, than a difference of ear: and by 'ear' for poetry I mean an immediate apprehension of two things which can be considered in abstraction from each other, but which produce their effect in unity: rhythm and diction. They imply each other: for the diction—the vocabulary and construction—will determine the rhythm, and the rhythms which a poet finds congenial will determine his diction.¹

This allows for the truth in Wordsworth's theory of the influence of metre on diction, while suggesting that the relation between the two is somewhat more complex than he supposed.

In his valuable study of eighteenth-century poetry, John Arthos compares the development of poetic diction in the English heroic couplet with a similar development in classical poetry:

1. "Johnson as Critic and Poet", in On Poetry and Poets (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 167.

The influence of the Hexameter upon the use of the Greek and Latin compound has an interesting parallel in English neo-classic verse. The heroic couplet demanded phrases of a certain accentual pattern, and in the lack of compounds like squamigeri writers made use of phrases like scaly kind, feathered troops, and finny race. I do not know whether these poets discovered that this kind of periphrasis in a naturally iambic rhythm corresponded to the dactylic compound in a hexameter line. If this parallel was not consciously exploited, it may nevertheless be claimed that prosodically the two-word periphrasis was the native form proper to the English imitation of the classic style.¹

As we have seen in Descriptive Sketches, the two-word terminal formula,² is not necessarily a periphrastic epithet; it was the rhythm of the phrase, in many contexts, as much as its grammatical form that made it congenial to the eighteenth-century ear. And that rhythm remained an important element in the distinctive movement of much eighteenth-century poetry long after the aesthetic ideals of neo-classicism had been repudiated by most poets.

John Arthos' interesting summary contains one possibly misleading statement. If he means that the heroic couplet uniquely "demanded phrases of a certain accentual pattern", he is clearly mistaken. Pope in his pastorals, for example, consistently uses the conventional epithetic tags, but he

1. John Arthos, The Language of Natural Description in Eighteenth-Century Poetry (Ann Arbor: Mich., 1949), p. 63.

2. Such as "flaming-eye", and "golden fire".

employs them very sparingly in his satires.¹ More significantly, writers of unrhymed iambic verse adopted the formula no doubt unconsciously, in lyric meters as well as in all-purpose non-dramatic pentameters. Collins' "Ode To Evening" begins:

 If ought of Oaten Stop, or Pastoral Song,
 May hope, O pensive Eve, to soothe thine Ear,
 Like thy own brawling Springs,
 Thy Springs and driving Gales,
 O Nymph reserv'd, while now the bright fair'd Sun
 Sits in yon western Tent, these cloudy skirts,
 With Brede ethereal wove,
 O'erhang his wavy Beards . . .

In seven of these eight lines, the last three syllables exemplify the pattern we have been discussing. The proportion is almost as high in the rest of "Ode to Evening". As for blank verse, here is a characteristic passage from Thomson's

The Seasons:

 The cattle droop; and o'er the furrowed land,
 Fresh from the plough, the dunn discoloured flocks,
 Untended spreading, crop the wholesome root.
 Along the woods, along the moorish fens,
 Sighs the sad genius of the coming storm;
 And up among the loose disjointed cliffs
 And fractured mountains wild, the brawling brook
 And cave, presageful, send a hollow moan,³
 Resounding long in listening fancy's ear.

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1. Pope, of course, satirized the ritualistic epithet in Essay On Criticism.
 2. William Collins, "Ode to Evening", in An Anthology of Augustan Poetry: 1700-1731, compiled and edited by Frederick T. Wood (London: Macmillan & Company Ltd., 1931), pp. 207-209. The text used by the editor is that of the 1747 ed. of the Ode.
 3. James Thomson, The Seasons: "Winter", ll. 63-71, in The Complete Poetical Works of James Thomson, edited by J. Logie Robertson (London: Oxford University Press, 1908).

'And Pope, had he completed his projected epic, Brutus, would no doubt have produced thousands of lines of blank verse on this model:

The Patient Chief, who lab'ring long, arriv'd
On Britain's shore and brought with fav'ring Gods
Arts, Arms and Honour to her Ancient Sons:
Daughter of Memory! from elder Time
Recall; and me with Britain's Glory fir'd,
Me, far from meaner care or meaner song,
Snatch to thy Holy Hill of Spotless Bay,
My Country's Poet, to record her Fame.¹

In order to understand better some of the reasons for the survival of this "couplet rhythm" in later unrhymed poetry, and particularly in blank verse, we shall have to consider briefly a few eighteenth century assumptions about the nature of unrhymed verse.

As late as 1804, John Aikin, in his Letters on English Poetry, observed that

The writers of blank verse have been so sensible of their near approach to prose in their versification, that they have been solicitous to give their language a character as different as possible from that of common speech. This purpose, while it has favoured loftiness and splendour of diction, has also too much promoted a turgid and artificial style, stiffened by quaint phrases, obsolete words, and perversions of the natural order of sentences.²

In spite of the immense prestige of Paradise Lost, unrhymed pentameters were probably anomalous to many eighteenth-century

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1. Alexander Pope, Minor Poems, ed. by Norman Ault and John Butt (London: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 404.
 2. Quoted by Raymond Dexter Havens, in The Influence of Milton on English Poetry (Cambridge: U.P., 1922), p. 138.

ears attuned to the metric of Pope and Dryden. (It must be noted that we are speaking here of lyric, descriptive, and didactic verse, not of the blank verse of the theatre. As R D. Havens points out, "The fact is that to the eighteenth-century dramatic blank verse was one thing and poetic blank verse an entirely different thing".)¹ The great neoclassical poets had developed in their readers a sixth sense: a sense of the English poetic line as an iambic decasyllable, introducing or concluding a rhyming couplet. Blank verse, by destroying this sharply defined phonetic silhouette, threatened to collapse altogether the contours of the poetic line. Thus Dr. Johnson could argue that blank verse "seems to be verse only to the eye", and that it "has neither the easiness of prose nor the melody of numbers".² It was often said, too, that unrhymed verse required a special syntax and diction to raise it above the level of prose. "When", Johnson asked in his Life of Akenside, "was blank verse without pedantry?"³ And Cowper, who certainly did not share Johnson's aversion to the metre, nevertheless agreed with him and many other critics that unrhymed heroic demanded a "style in general more elaborate than that which requires, farther removed from the vernacular idiom, to heighten the language itself and in the arrangement of it."⁴

1. Quoted by Raymond Dexter Havens, in The Influence of Milton on English Poetry (Cambridge: U.P., 1922), p. 76.

2. Ibid., p. 44.

3. Ibid., p. 47.

4. Ibid., p. 175.

That Wordsworth had seriously considered Dr. Johnson's strictures on blank verse is shown by the following comment, quoted by de Selincourt from a notebook dated 1798:

Dr. Johnson observed, that in blank verse, the language suffered more distortion to keep it out of prose than any inconvenience to be apprehended from the shackles and circumspection of rhyme. This kind of distortion is the worst fault that poetry can have; for if once the natural order and connection of the words is broken, and the idiom of the language violated, the lines appear manufactured, and lose all that character of enthusiasm and inspiration, without which they become cold and insipid, how sublime soever the ideas and the images may be which they express.¹

To the serious poet, naturalness in verse is an effect of art, an appearance. Thus naturalness has its techniques, though its intention is to transcend technique, to hide its art. When Wordsworth argues that images and ideas, "how sublime soever", are ineffective in poetry if the language in which they are expressed is artificial in point of idiom and syntax, he reveals the essence of his critical theory. We are reminded of the passage in Upon Epitaphs, in which he insists that the poetry of sentiment and imagination is successful only when it "incarnates" in its diction, syntax, and rhythms the "abrupt", interrupted, and "revolutionary" flow of impassioned speech. Poetry, on this view, is less a medium of verbal communication—a vehicle for conveying "meanings"—than a mode of verbal behaviour: words act as

1 William Wordsworth, in Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Vol. 4, p. XX; footnote 2.

the mind moves from moment to moment, and implicit in their action are the vital qualities of a particular experience. This enacting of the implicit vital qualities in experience, rather than an argument supported by illustrative imagery, constitutes, for Wordsworth, the unique interest of the poetry of sentiment and imagination. That is why he says, in Upon Epitaphs, that the poet must utter his feelings "with the freshness and clearness of an original intuition". And that is why he was impressed with Johnson's objections to unrhymed verse. He was about to undertake a long blank-verse poem which could not be technically classified as either narrative or dramatic. The Prelude was to be an autobiographical meditation, concerned with the intimate details of the author's spiritual history. Its success would depend in part upon the mutual adaptation of metre and language, to insure a poetic idiom capable of registering perceptions and feelings not hitherto explored in verse. That Wordsworth did not entirely succeed in his intention—that his versification is sometimes flat, his diction sometimes frigid—most admirers of his poem are willing to grant. In spite of frequent lapses, however, The Prelude offers many examples of the old metre made new by a poet highly skilled in the art of versification.

Of Wordsworth's earliest attempts at blank verse, two translations from Virgil and Moschus have survived, as well as several fragments of narrative and dramatic verse, written

"verdant herb" is echoed in "barren boughs", "curling waves", "mossy sod", "aged tree", and "circling shade". What F.R. Leavis calls Wordsworth's "withdrawn, contemplative collectedness"¹ is evident in the syntax: note the slightly formal effect produced by the two successive clauses beginning "What if", and the emphasis thrown on "I well remember", separated from its object by three intervening lines. Leavis' description, however, though it fits 'Lines', is not, I believe, accurate for some of Wordsworth's best poetry. In the most memorable passages of The Prelude, a more intense, varied, and complex experience is reflected in the versification - in rhythms, sounds, and phrasings closer to the immediate "flux and reflux" of the poet's mind.

H.W. Garrod said of Bk. I of The Prelude that it "contains effects of poetry hardly surpassed in our literature".² Let us begin our study of these effects with the famous lines from Bk. I describing the young boy hunting woodcocks among the Cumberland hills:

Through half the night,
Scudding away from snare to snare, I plied
That anxious visitation; - moon and stars
Were shining o'er my head. I was alone,
And seemed to be a trouble to the peace
That dwelt among them. Sometimes it befell

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1. F.R. Leavis, Revaluation (London: Chatto and Windus, 1956), p. 169.
 2. H.W. Garrod, Wordsworth: Lectures and Essays (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 31.

In these night wanderings, that a strong desire
O'erpowered my better reason, and the bird
Which was the captive of another's toil
Became my prey; and when the deed was done
I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.¹

When we remember this episode, it is not because our imagination has been stimulated by sharply delineated visual detail. Wordsworth is more concerned with evoking the peace that dwells in the mountains and the boy's violation of it than with describing the distinctive physical features of a particular place. His setting is the animistic landscape of mountain places at night: "wood" "stars" "hills" "certain sounds, all mysterious" "stars in the sky" "extremities of the earth". Attention is directed to the feelings of the human intruder: "I was alone / And seemed to be a trouble to the peace / That dwelt among them" - who breaks in upon this natural quiet, to be pursued by the tutelary spirits or "presences" of the "solitary hills".

The verse in which the experience is rendered can hardly be called sensuous. It has little of what we usually mean by sensuous, for really there is no richly orchestrated Kantian sensuousness or "vibrations" or "ultrasonic resonances". Yet a careful reading of the poem will convince us that these lines are written for

1. The Prelude (1850), I, lines 312-325.

the ear. In their movement, one hears a man speaking, remembering and reliving the excitement of that autumn evening. The rhythms are those of a skilful story-teller, who intensifies the immediacy of his tale by various nuances of vocalization - pauses, changes of pace, and expressive groupings of significant sounds.

As for the metre of the passage, it is, of course, unrhymed iambic pentameter, or blank verse. The traditional analysis would note three trochaic substitutions: "scudding" in the second line, "I was" in the fourth, and "almost" in the last. (It is difficult to determine whether Wordsworth intended his readers to pronounce "wanderings" with three syllables, or to "swallow" the medial e. The Prelude - particularly the 1850 version - seems to admit trisyllabic feet, but also exhibits contractions that are apparently there to preserve the iambic metre.) Eleven of the fourteen lines are enjambed; the only punctuation in the final eight and a half lines is internal, with the exception of the full stop at the end of the sentence.

I have been describing what George B. Pace calls "the domain of meter".¹ The other domain of verse, that of rhythm, is more problematical; its boundaries are still relatively uncertain. One enters it as soon as one attempts to account

1. George B. Pace, "The Two Domains: Meter and Rhythm", PMLA, LXXVI, September, 1961, 413-419.

for the distinctive quality of the final lines of our passage:

... and when the deed was done
I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.

Analysis will reveal, I think, that rhythmical effects best be illustrated in terms of what the structural linguists call "intonation patterns":

At the end of each sequence of pitches, we have learned to make our voice 'behave' in certain regular ways. For instance, the voice might "trail off" into silence, quite rapidly, but still perceptibly. Or the voice might rise slightly in pitch and intensity. Finally, in contrast to both of these junctures, we might hear the pitches 'squeezed', so to speak, on either side of what we might describe as a 'slight break or pause'. These three contrasting ways of ending sequences of pitches constitute the terminal juncture phonemes, and a sequence of pitches bounded by one of these is called an intonation pattern. The terminal juncture that trails off is referred to as double-cross juncture ($\overline{\overline{/}}$), the one that rises, double-bar juncture ($//$), and the one where the pitch neither fades off nor rises, but is 'squeezed', single-bar juncture ($/$).¹

These breaks or division points in the flow of speech are obviously important elements in the expressive power of spoken language.

In the lines beginning "I heard among the solitary hills..." as I have said, one hears the inflections of vivid oral narrative. The pace of the verse is subtly controlled to suggest the

1. Henry Lee Smith, Jr., "Linguistics: A Modern View of Language", in An Outline of Man's Knowledge of the Modern World, ed. Lyman Bryson, New York, 1960, p. 360.

speaker's lively sense of the approaching "presences". This is another way of saying that Wordsworth attempts to "enact" in language the feelings of suspense, awe, and anxiety which accompanied his experience. He achieves this immediacy largely, I think, through skilful employment of intonation patterns, those segmentations of speech which occur between "primary stresses"--the loudest of the four degrees of stress distinguished by the structural linguists--and are bounded by the juncture phonemes described by H. Lee Smith. In our passage, there is a single-bar or level-pitch juncture at "hills", which, probably because of the somewhat unusual syntax--the prepositional phrase "among the solitary hills" precedes rather than follows the direct object "Low breathings" receives a primary stress. (A rising juncture is perhaps possible here). There is another single-bar juncture at "breathings" and, probably, a rising clause terminal at "me"--the pitch rising with alarm. Perhaps the most expressive of the pauses, or prolongations of pitch, occur at "sounds", "motion", and "steps"; the pitch is sustained in pronouncing the first, falls in the second, and is sustained again in the third. Because "sounds" and "steps" come at the end of their respective lines, we hear the latter as a kind of resolution of the former: the indeterminate motion, as it approaches, becomes the frighteningly definite footsteps. In this poetry,

to quote Leo Spitzer, an experience "has been symbolized by units of breath, it has been made kinesthetically perceptible".¹

The boy we meet in the first two books of The Prelude lives in a universe haunted by "huge and mighty forms".² However empty or silent the place in which he finds himself, he is never alone. Wordsworth attempts to portray the boy's sense of what is there: his awareness of inscrutable power inhabiting and protecting the natural world. The primitive quality of these experiences is evident mostly, I think, when we read the poetry aloud. The episodes come to life in the sounds we utter as we imagine them:

Oh! When I have hung
Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass
And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
But ill sustained, and almost (so it seemed)
Suspended by the blast that blew amain,
Shouldering the naked crag, oh, at that time
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance! the loud dry wind
Blow through my ear! the sky seemed not a sky
Of earth--and with what motion moved the clouds.³

Hanging suspended from Yewdale Crag, the boy is suddenly aware of the wind's voice and of movement in the sky. The "blast that blew amain" becomes a "strange utterance", and the everyday "sky of earth" now appears unfamiliar. To express the

1. Leo Spitzer, "Language of Poetry", in Language: An Enquiry Into Its Meaning and Function, ed. Ruth Manda Anshen, New York, 1957, p. 218.

2. The Prelude (1850), I, 398.

3. The Prelude (1850), I, 330-339.

wonder of this moment, Wordsworth, in the final lines of the passage, abruptly alters the rapid pace of his verse. "Loud dry wind / Blow!..": these monosyllables receive primary stresses, and each one marks a juncture in the flow of speech. Another juncture (rising) at "ear" prepares for a second wave of exclamatory utterance, in which "earth", "motion", "moved", and "clouds" are all heavily emphasized. The pulse of the experience is in the language: as we read, the boy's feelings are ours.

Some passages in The Prelude, as well as in other poems dealing with childhood, exhibit aspects of Wordsworth's style seldom considered by his critics. I have in mind certain patterns of sound which seem woven into the texture of the poet's experience. One hears such patterns in the memorable scene in Book 1 of The Prelude, where the young Wordsworth, rowing his stolen boat across Ullswater Lake in the moonlight, is suddenly terrified by the black shape of St. Sunday Crag looming on the horizon:

It was an act of stealth,
And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice
Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on;
Leaving behind her still, on either side,
Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
Until they melted all into one track
Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,
Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point
With an unswerving line, I fixed my view
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,
The horizon's utmost boundary; for above
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
She was an elfin pinnace; lustily

I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan;
When, from behind that craggy steep till then
The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me.¹

One might say of these lines that they are composed in two strongly contrasting tonalities. The "Small circles glittering idly in the moon" melt "into one track of sparkling light"; liquid consonants—small, circles, idly, melted, sparkling, light—help to convey an impression of moonlit serenity. Four heavy monosyllables—"a huge peak, black and huge"—announce the appearance of the "mighty form". A good deal of the primitive, animistic quality of the scene is due, I think, to the repetition, in struck, struck, still, stature, stars, strove, of the st sound. Wordsworth has embodied the implacable approach of the peak—its apparent motion as seen by the boy in the boat—in a sequence of sounds qued, it would appear, by "instinct". The result is, that we experience something like the sensation of being pursued when we read the lines aloud.

In revising, Wordsworth seems often to have been concerned with establishing a dominant pattern of sound, encompassing as

1. The Prelude (1850), Bk. 1, ll. 361-85.

many words as possible. Consider, for example, the first and the final versions of the following lines from The Excursion:

Oh! then what soul was his when on the tops
Of the high mountains he beheld the sun
Rise up and bathe the world in light. He looked,
The ocean and the earth beneath him lay
In gladness and deep joy. The clouds were touched
And in their silent faces did he read
Unutterable love.¹

The revision reads:

What soul was his, from the naked top
Of some bold headland, he beheld the sun
Rise up, and bathe the world in light! He looked—
Ocean and earth, the solid frame of earth
And ocean's liquid mass, in gladness lay
Beneath him:—Far and wide the clouds were touched,
And in their silent faces could he read
Unutterable love.²

In the later passage, Wordsworth fully exploited a phonetic possibility present in the earlier one. He had no doubt become aware of the interplay of l and d sounds in various positions in the first version: soul, beheld, world, light, looked. His revisions bring this pattern into high relief: soul naked, bold, headland, world, light, looked, solid, liquid, gladness, lay, wide, clouds. This is a kind of unity in variety, produced by the poet's auditory imagination.

We find a more complex example of a similar kind of revision in Book I of The Prelude, where Wordsworth interrupts

1. Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, vol. v, p. 382, ll. 122-128.

2. Poetical Works, vol. V, p. 14, ll. 198-205.

the account of his childhood to reflect upon his subsequent development:

Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
Like harmony in music; there is a dark
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, makes them cling together
In one society. How strange that all
The terrors, pains, and early miseries,
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused
Within my mind, should e'er have borne a part,
And that a needful part, in making up
The calm existence that is mine when I
Am worthy of myself!¹

Two earlier versions of the first line and a half of this passage have been preserved:

The mind of Man is fram'd even like the breath
And harmony of music.²

The mind of man is fashioned and built up
Even as a strain of music.³

The even expository tone of the earlier versions is transformed into the exclamatory "Dust as we are..." as if the lines were indeed a spontaneous interjection. So, too, "How strange..." - Wordsworth had originally written "Ah me!" - is meant to portray the speaker in the act of discovering his thought. At the same time, the language is given another kind of emphasis: there is an intricate stylization of sound, particularly in the first four and a half lines of the revised version. Are is recalled in immortal, spirit, harmony, dark, workmanship, discordant; the k in like is echoed in music.

1. The Prelude (1850), Book 1, lines 340-50.

2. The Prelude (1805), Book 1, lines 351-352.

3. 1813, note to ll. 351-352.

dark, workmanship, reconciles, discordant, makes; m is sounded in immortal, harmony, music, workmanship, elements, makes; and c in dust, dark, discordant. It must be admitted that the rich orchestration of sounds helps to communicate a complex experience: the ineffable spiritual harmony is adumbrated in the material world.

Bert Read has written that "the most personal passages" in Wordsworth's poetry, "come in the longer blank-verse poems,

and it is in his blank verse that Wordsworth achieves his

greatest freedom—his curiosa felicitas".¹

Robert Read has some per-

sonal views on the blank verse of The Prelude. Yet many

critics believe, apply with equal force to

Wordsworth's best lyrics, which are as interesting rhythmically

as the longer blank-verse poems.

As an example, let us consider one of Wordsworth's short

poems that is characterized by its powerful musical effect

through the use of rhythmic language. I speak of Wordsworth's

"Slumber Did My Spirit Seal", which combines what Paul Valéry

describes as the two kinds of poetic lines, les vers donnés and

¹ Bert Read, The True Voice of Feeling (London: Hogarth Press, 1952), p. 46.

It is interesting here to notice that for H. Read "blank verse is virtually free verse", its rhythm is determined only by the "true voice of feeling" - Ibid., p. 47.

les vers calculés.¹ Although written in the traditional ballad metre, its cadence "haunts the ear" of the hearer while its meaning addresses "the eager parts of the mind":²

A SLUMBER did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.³

If we look closely into this lyric, we shall notice that in the first stanza, the speaker recalls the living girl, who, in her more than human vitality, had seemed to him immortal. The illusion was powerful, and in acknowledging her death in the second quatrain, he is vividly aware of the lifeless natural thing she has become, to be "rolled round" for ever by a motion over which he has no control.

The poem dramatizes the moment in which the speaker comes into full possession of the truth. We follow the movement of his thought as we speak the verse. Thus, "No motion has she now, no force" seems to call for a more deliberate, measured

1. See Seamus Heaney, The Makings of a Music: Reflections on the Poetry of Wordsworth and Yeats, The Kenneth Allott Lectures, No. 1, (Published by the University of Liverpool, 9 Feb., 1978), p. 1 and ff.

2. Ibid.

3. Poetical Works, vol. II, p. 216.

reading than the preceding lines. "No motion" receives unusual emphasis not only because the giri's inertness is in question here, but because of the inversion of the normative word order. (We have had the normative order in "She seemed a thing that could not feel...."). There is, in addition, if this reading is accepted, a level juncture at "motion", expressing the speaker's recognition of what has happened to the animated creature of stanza 1. The next natural division or segmentation occurs at "now": a caesura, or perhaps more accurately, a rising juncture, which marks the transition between memory (stanza 1) and the sensations of the present moment. "No force", parallel with "no motion" brings the line to a heavy, reflective pause. The rest of the stanza prepares for the even more deliberate movement of the final line, in which the utterance is broken into three segments, each noun in the series bearing the full weight of the speaker's discovery or realization.

As Seamus Heaney quite rightly suggests, the quality of Wordsworth's poetic music is "hypnotic, swimming with the current of its form rather than against it."¹ One feels that to Wordsworth the act of Composition was a cheering one; because as he himself repeatedly avowed, poetry to him was just a shadow of "the mind's internal echo".²

1. Seamus Heaney, The Makings of a Music, pp. 1-2.

2. The Prelude 1850, Bk. 1, ll. 35-38.

It is not only the shorter lyrics which possess this quality, but also the longer ones. Indeed, Wordsworth's latest poetry bears out Santayana's contention that the "magic of poetry" lies in the "immersion of the message in medium".¹ To prove this we shall consider certain aspects of Wordsworth's most complex lyric, the 'Intimations Ode'.

Critics of the 'Ode' have quite naturally tended to focus their attention upon its theme or argument, about which there has been considerable disagreement. This is to say, that they have frequently been less concerned with Wordsworth's art as a poet than with demonstrating that the poem represents a certain stage in his philosophical development, or reflects his preoccupation with childhood and maturity. Such interpretations, however illuminating, cannot account for the distinctive artistic form of the 'Ode', which is a unique organization of mutually related parts, designed to produce in the reader a vivid impression of the poet's experience.

Like the great lyrics of Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley, Wordsworth's poem is notable for its dramatic shifts in thought and modulations of tone. It begins with a man reflecting upon the subtle difference in appearance between the celestial

¹ George Santayana, The Life of Reason or the Phases of Human Progress, revised by the author in collaboration with Daniel Cory (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 329.

world of his childhood and the beautiful but somehow less preternaturally radiant world in which he lives as an adult. His memories of a vanished earthly paradise are then interrupted by the sights and sounds of a particular "sweet May-morning", and we see him next observing and rejoicing in the natural landscape. Near the end of the fourth stanza, however, the disquieting thoughts return: a tree, a field, and a flower all "speak" of the disappearance of the "visionary gleam". Donald Davie's description of Coleridge's 'Dejection' applies equally well to Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode': "This flees in a circle, and being overtaken by the feelings from which the poet flees...".¹

Part of the power of the 'Ode' is due, I think, to Wordsworth's success in presenting a complex train of thought as a series of dramatic incidents, each with its distinctive emotional quality. This is to say, that the speaker's meditation is shaped not merely by the explicit premises set forth at the beginning of the poem, but by what he chances to see or hear, at a particular moment. The transitions from moment to moment, as the flow of impressions is arrested at some significant point, are analogous to the recognitions or reversals of a dramatic action. One can see this very clearly in stanzas III and IV, where the versification plays a particularly important part in rendering the experience. First, let

1. Donald Davie, Articulate Energy (London: The Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 76.

us consider stanza III:

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,
And while the young lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound,
To me alone there came a thought of grief:
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
And I again am strong:
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,
And all the earth a day;
Larkin
Gives thanks as up to gullity,
And with the heart of May
Dith every Beast: sheep holiday;
Thou Child of Joy,
Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou
happy Shepherd boy!

The "timely utterance" having released him from his "thought of grief", the speaker is suddenly aware of the sounds of the spring morning. As he listens, the "irregular" Pindaric quatrain modulates into an iambic pentameter quatrain. In this quatrain, the four lines beginning "The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep" form a distinct unit of metrical organization, bringing into prominence the joy and conviction with which the words are uttered. The last line of the quatrain is particularly impressive: "The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep". For a moment, perhaps, the reader is uncertain whether or not Wordsworth intended a trochaic substitution in the second foot. The immediately preceding lines ought, I think, to resolve the doubt. "Come" is grammatically parallel to "blow" and "hear", and the preposition "to" cannot in this context, interfere with our natural

tendency to stress the verb. This means that "Winds" and "come" receive primary stresses. The metrical variation emphasizes the character of these envoys from the "fields of sleep" Like the "mild creative breeze" of Bk. I of The Prelude, and the "living air" of 'Sintern Abbey', they fulfil nature's intentions with respect to the "mind of man": they come to the speaker because, having ceased to "wrong" the season, he has come to them.

Stanza IV begins with a joyful celebration of the "blessed creatures":

Ye blessèd Creatures, I have heard the call
Ye to each other make; I see
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;
My heart is at your festival,
My head hath its coronal,
The fulness of your bliss, I feel - I feel it all.
Oh evil day! if I were sullen
While Earth herself is adorning,
This sweet May-morning,
And the Children are culling
On every side,
In a thousand valleys far and wide,
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,
And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm:-
I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!
- But there's a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The Pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

The landscape is now part of a vision of Spring: the speaker "sees" a "thousand valleys far and wide". As he rejoices in the universal "jubilee", the verse tends to fall into rhymed

couplets. Thus after "side" and "wide" and "warm" and "arm", we expect another rhyming couplet. Wordsworth, I think, counts upon that expectation. There is only one "blind" line in the stanza: "I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!" The next line - "But there's a Tree, of many, one" - owes some of its dramatic power - its effect of surprise - to Wordsworth's versification. A sound we anticipate rhymes for "hear" - does not occur, and its absence marks the transition between the opening and closing, or rather of the stanza; between the speaker's joy and his sudden perception of "something" . . .

... 'the poetry', Paul Valery wrote, "is the kind of poetry that thinks of the voice in action - the voice as direct issue, provoked by, - things that one sees or that one feels as present."¹ I take Valery to mean that the medium of verse in the work of true poets has the power to deliver the full force of a sensory experience, by virtue of which things may be made to bear directly to our senses and feelings. In this sense, the analysis attempted by analysis of rhythm and sound patterns in the stanza of the range and power of Wordsworth's "voice" in Wordsworth's versification was seen in part as the "power" or "relative" of unusually vivid sensory and emotional experiences.

¹ Paul Valery, Selected Writings (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 149.

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