WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770-1850)

“The Solitary Reaper”

1. Behold her, single in the field,
2. Yon solitary Highland Lass!
3. Reaping and singing by herself;
4. Stop here, or gently pass!
5. Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
6. And sings a melancholy strain;
7. O listen! for the Vale profound
8. Is overflowing with the sound.

9. No Nightingale did ever chant
10. More welcome notes to weary bands
11. Of travellers in some shady haunt,
12. Among Arabian sands:
13. A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
14. In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
15. Breaking the silence of the seas
16. Among the farthest Hebrides.

17. Will no one tell me what she sings?--
18. Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
19. For old, unhappy, far-off things,
20. And battles long ago:
21. Or is it some more humble lay,
22. Familiar matter of to-day?
23. Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
24. That has been, and may be again?

25. Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
26. As if her song could have no ending;
27. I saw her singing at her work,
28. And o'er the sickle bending;—
29. I listened, motionless and still;
30. And, as I mounted up the hill,
31. The music in my heart I bore,
32. Long after it was heard no more.

Notes

1] Coleridge, Wordsworth, and his sister had visited the Scottish Highlands in 1803. Dorothy’s Recollections for September 13 that year notes: “It was harvest time, and the fields were quietly—might I be allowed to say pensively?—enlivened by small companies of reapers. It is not uncommon in the more lonely parts of the Highlands to see a single person so employed.” In a note to the 1807 edition, Wordsworth traced the poem’s source: “This Poem was suggested by a beautiful sentence in a MS Tour in Scotland written by a Friend, the last line being taken from it verbatim.” Thomas Wilkinson’s manuscript, Tours to the British Mountains (London, 1824), states: “Passed a Female who was reaping alone: she sung in Erse as she bended over her sickle; the sweetest human voice I ever heard: her strains were tenderly melancholy, and felt delicious, long after they were heard no more” (12). [Note: “single” is a revision from “singing” in an earlier manuscript.]

2] Highland: mountainous region in northern Scotland associated with the Celtic clans.

7] Vale profound: broad, deep valley between two high ranges; possibly the world itself, as a place of suffering (OED “vale” 2b). Wordsworth takes this from conventional poetic diction; cf. Gilbert West’s “Education. A Poem” (1751), lines 617-20: On to the Centre of the Grove they stray’d; / Which . . . / Disclosed to sudden View a Vale profound . . .”

9] Nightingale: a small song-bird, well-known for the male’s musical notes in the mating and nesting season. In Classical myth, the female nightingale is that to which Philomela, tragically raped and mutilated by her sister Procris’s husband, metamorphoses on carrying out her revenge.

13] [Note: “voice” is an abbreviation from “sound” in an earlier manuscript.]


18] plaintive numbers: Wordsworth uses a conventional poetic phrase here [“numbers”=‘musical rhythms’ or ‘poetic meter’]

21] humble lay: Wordsworth uses conventional poetic diction again here (“humble”=”lowly” or “of low birth”; “lay”=”song”]


Wordsworth's preface to the 1800 Lyrical Ballads argues that poetry "contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents." It ought not be judged by the presence of artificial, poetic diction. Rather, "the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society" can be its medium. "The Solitary Reaper" exemplifies these beliefs.

Written seven years after Lyrical Ballads, it describes a nameless listener's delight in a young woman's melancholy song in an unknown language as, working by herself in a Scottish valley, she swings a sickle, reaping grain. Four eight-line stanzas, each closing with two couplets and all written in octosyllabic lines, have a musical lilt. Short lines deliver the rhymes at a quick pace. Sentences normally need two or more such short lines to complete, so that few lines are strongly en-dropped; most freely enjamb. Diction is conversational. Often lines consist mainly of monosyllabic words (4–5, 13, 17, 21, 24, 27, 30–32). Wordsworth prefers common verbs, "bewail," "reap," "sing," "stop," "pass," "cut," "bind," "chant," "hear," and "break." Words imported into English from Latin or Greek, like "solitary" and "melancholy" or forms with "-ive" and "-ion" endings (e.g., "plaintive" and "motionless"), are infrequent.

Wordsworth writes plain, almost undemanding verse. For example, he repeats the simplest idea in varying words. The girl is "single," "solitary," and "by herself" (1–3). She is "reaping" (3), that is, "cuts and binds the grain" (5), "over the sickle bending" (28). The onlooker is both "motionless and still" (29). The lass "sings" (3, 17, 25, 27) or does "chant" (9) a "strain" (6), a "lay" (21), or "a song" (26). The speaker relies on everyday idioms, worn to vagueness by overuse in ordinary talk. Her "theme" (25) is of "things" (19) or "matter" (22) "That has been, and may be again" (24). This excludes only what never existed at all. Whenever the speaker might become elevated in speech, his language seems prosaic, even chatty: "Will no one tell me ..." (17), "What're the theme" (25), and "Long after it was heard no more" (32). Wordsworth notes, pointedly, that this last line comes verbatim from a prose travel book.

"The Solitary Reaper" does not implement, programmatically, his dogma of plain diction. For example, "Vale profound" (7), "plaintive numbers" (18), and "humble lay" (21) are semi-formulaic catch phrases in the very eighteenth-century verse whose artificiality he rejects. These exceptions may be deliberate, characterizing the speaker (not Wordsworth) as someone for whom poetry means much. He resorts to formulas as if to hint that the girl's song is out-of-place in the valley, however separated from the traditions of fine verse by her class, occupation, and location. Wordsworth may deliberately impoverish his speaker's language so as to contrast it with the reaper's song.

Unlike other poets, this lass sings alone, isolated from both her predecessors (her "poetic tradition") and any audience. Dryden, Pope, Gray, and so many others defined themselves by quoting from classical literature and each other. Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" shatters this continuity. Her song, like a found poem, springs directly from nature, like a found poem, springs directly from nature, with no self-conscious inclusion of "real" words or phrases. She does not refer to the traditions of fine verse in her count. Her language seems prosaic, even chatty: "Will no one tell me ..." (17), "What're the theme" (25), and "Long after it was heard no more" (32).

This simple confession redeems the speaker from his own impoverished language. He bears witness to something that eighteenth-century poetry seemed at times embarrassed of. What transfixes him in song is not its content, but its emotionally expressive music. The listener does not understand why she sings in melancholy, only what the emotion itself is. This feeling "could have no ending" (26), as if she, like Keats' Ruth amid the alien corn, communicates wordlessly something universal about the human condition. Despite its sadness, the song helps the speaker to mount up the hill (30). In current psychology, the capacity to feel emotion and link it to goals makes life, indeed survival itself, possible. The speaker's "heart" (31), by bearing her music, can go on. For that reason, "The Solitary Reaper" relates an ecstatic moment in which a passer-by transcends the limitations of mortality. Both the song and he go on together.

Bibliography