

Wordsworth's Metrical Architectonics: A Study of the "Intimations Ode" Part III

Steven J. Willett

Stanza IX had ended with a strange and haunting moment of synaesthesia. The shadowy recollections that are the "fountain light of all our day" have the power to make "Our noisy years seem moments in the being / Of the eternal Silence," and from that silence our soul can see in certain moments of calm reflection immortal children sporting on the shore and hear "the mighty waters rolling evermore."

Stanza X opens with an outburst of radiant mundane song. The joy that has always been with us since stanza IV is summoned back, by an obvious almost peremptory rhetorical gesture ("Then sing, ye birds . . .") in line 169, to the foreground of the Ode. Again the lambs are bounding "As to the tabor's sound" in May, to the spirit ditties of no tone. Suddenly we too are called back in line 172 from the "eternal Silence," which is also a sound of "waters rolling evermore," to join the noisy crowd of natural and human celebrants in thought. But this is of course not the noise of our noisy years; they have been as it were swallowed up in silence. Two substantial passages of trochaic tetrameters acatalectic (line 183 is the only variation from trochaic movement in the two runs) provide a dance-like celebration of the poet's reconciliation with the loss of vision.

The first passage, in lines 172-175, is a transposition of the pastoral joy in stanza IV. "We in thought" will join the crowd of May revelers. The nominative pronoun makes clear what the frequent use of "us" and "our" in stanza IX implied: that the truth found there is not unique to Wordsworth. We all, in some measure, possess it. The addition of "in thought" does not mean he is feeling his joy coldly and intellectually. He will join the celebration not literally but in sympathetic thought; he does indeed hear the joy, feel it all. But it is a maturer mind that now sees with a with "an eye / That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality" (198-199).

The second passage, in lines 180-186 proclaims in a strangely hovering rhythm certain compensations that follow from the interpretation of memory in IX.149-161. The lasting metaphysical consequence, if you will, is that we can occasionally see the immortal sea; the daily emotional consequence, on the other hand, is a complex feeling of "primal sympathy," "soothing thoughts" sprung from human suffering and "faith" in life beyond death. This complex constitutes the "philosophic mind" of later years. Wordsworth has here proclaimed something as a prophetic teacher, as a *vates* in Horace's sense of the word, that we must either face or ignore. He has proclaimed difficult compensations. He won't let us ignore them by the rhythm. What I called the strangely hovering meter above tries to impart dance to compensations that resolutely refuse to be dan

ce-like. The effect of the falling rhythm is more like a march than a dance. It is a march into the philosophic mind. If the meaning of memory is truly what the poet says it is, then we are all souls destined to sport by that immortal sea. Each of us is, therefore, infinitely precious and must be perceived that way. The "primal sympathy" is this perception. The stresses of the downward march fall heavily on key words: "primal," "soothing thoughts," "human suffering" and "faith that looks through death." The pastoral joy that insensibly has become a march steps decisively into a summarizing iambic pentameter at the end of the stanza. The transition from falling to rising meter is sharp and all the more unexpected given the parallel syntax with the trochaic passage: it almost seems to spring from the word "death" at the end of line 186. This is one of three or four words (depending on lineation) that lack rhyme, and is no accident. By refusing a rhyme to "death" Wordsworth forces us to notice the internal consonant rhyme of "faith" with "death" in the final tetrameter line. He also doubles the effect by building up to the unrhymed word through five pairs of couplet rhyme from 175 to 185, the longest such sequence in the poem. The absence of an expected rhyme to "death" not only foregrounds that word but makes us look for the corresponding rhyme to "mind." That rhyme occurs some distance back in 180-181, where the poet says we shall not grieve but "rather find / Strength in what remains behind." Couplet rhyme, absence of rhyme and meter all come to the strongest possible focus on the "philosophic mind."

It is easy to say that years spent in company of a philosophic mind are no recompense for "the radiance that was once so bright" (176). But it is only easy if one ignores the complex process by which Wordsworth reaches those years. He pays full respect to what is lost, but also full respect to what has been gained. On the one side, the lost "visionary splendour;" on the other, the "master light of all our seeing." He has won through to this resolution by suffering, and by facing its consequences, not by evading them. The sense of learning by suffering in fact suffuses the last two stanzas in a way reminiscent of Aeschylus.¹ In the Hymn to Zeus from the parodos of the Agamemnon, the chorus, while commenting on the incidents that preceded Agamemnon's departure from Aulis, notes (176-183) that for mortal men wisdom comes by the law which they also call a blessing in lines (182-183) that suffering shall win understanding:

τὸν φρονεῖν βροτοὺς ὀδώ-

σαντα τῶι πάθει μάθος

θέντα κυρίως ἔχειν.

στάζει δ' ἀνθ' ὕπνου πρὸ καρδίας

μνησιπήμων πόνος· καὶ παρ' ἄ-
κοντας ἦλθε σωφρονεῖν.
δαιμόνων δέ που χάρις βιαίως
σέλμα σεμνὸν ἡμένων.²

The "pain of remembrance of suffering" that "trickles before the heart" exactly captures that pathos of memory at the center of the Ode. But the pain is a blessing, Aeschylus thought, and Wordsworth had the courage to face the blessing even if some of his modern critics—who perhaps have never felt either "visionary splendour" or "primal sympathy"—do not. The poignant lines on the lost "splendour in the grass" (X.176-179) or, more powerfully, the following lines from the last stanza (193-200), evoke this Aeschylean sense of suffering transcended by wisdom:

I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
Is lovely yet;
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.

This is why I have argued that attention to the progression from one complex of feeling to another is so important in stanza IX. We come to see μ' only by following Wordsworth through , to see the "master light" only by following loss back through "those obstinate questions / Of sense and outward things." The poem, like life, must be lived through. We can live it through in full sensitivity or we can retreat into willful refusal. Wordsworth chooses the former.

Let's look a little more closely at these two passages in which Wordsworth restates his sense of loss from the perspective of a hard-won wisdom. He encloses the first (176-179) between the two trochaic runs in stanza X. Loss is remembered between one passage of joy and another of mature reflection, and the loss is faced by giving it full expression through metrical variations:

 ' x x ' x x x ' x '
What though the radiance which was once so bright
 B
 x ' x ' x ' x x x '
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
 B

child (the dimeter in line 196 does the same thing by metrical shortening), and one on "kept watch" (199) with stress final pairing to accentuate the "faith that looks through death." And then the whole passage stretches out into another valedictory hexameter precisely like the one in stanza X, but here it is a farewell of pure calmness that recalls the closing words of the chorus (1755-1758) from *Samson Agonistes*:

His servants he with new acquit
Of past experience from this great event
With peace and consolation hath dismiss,
And calm of mind all passion spent.

Although there has been no tragic catastrophe, no Yeatsian "Black out! Heaven blazing into the head," the issues raised are of equal moment to humanity. Wordsworth has made us feel them to be so with a very simple repertory of images, with things so simple as brooks and flowers, with the commonplace that is not common if we know how to look at it.

The final stanza is completely in pentameter except for the one dimeter and one hexameter I have already noted. This is the closest to the confident rhythmic movement of blank verse that we find in the Ode, and suggests an epideictic presentation of serene joy. Three initial inversions, like chased gold, gleam in the burnished regularity of the last four lines:

 ' x x ' x ' x ' x '
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,

 ' x x ' x ' x ' x '
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,

x ' x ' x ' x ' x '
To me the meanest flower that blows can give

 ' x x ' x ' x ' x '
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

These four lines are, of course, a generalizing recapitulation of the wisdom Wordsworth has achieved and in the climax of the Ode glow with the placid, almost reticent, joy thrown on them by the inversions. The final stanza also returns to the first personal singular pronoun (191, 193, 194) in a sign, perhaps, that this is the particular wisdom the poet has won and we must, by the same process, win our own.

We have now completed our long rhythmic analysis of the *Intimations Ode*. The results show clearly that Wordsworth has used meter not only to heighten local emotional effects but to organize theme, rhetoric and structure. To read the Ode metrically is read it architecturally, to trace out its dynamic architectonics. Stanzaic meter has sometimes been compared to a horizontal movement that plays against a vertical movement of rhyme. That play reaches its highest degree of complexity in stanza IX before passing through the joy of stanza X to end with the meanest flower that blows in stanza XI. The craftsmanship is so intricate it seems invisible, as invi

sible as that mean flower unless one knows how to look.

- 1 The classical scholar Gilbert Highet briefly noted a parallel with the Aeschylean conception of suffering in *The Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford UP, 1949) 252. He cited the line “Another race hath been, and other palms are won” as an example of it.
- 2 *Aeschylus Agmemnon*, ed. Eduard Fraenkel, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1950) 1:100. See 2: 113-14 for Fraenkel’s analysis of this passage.

