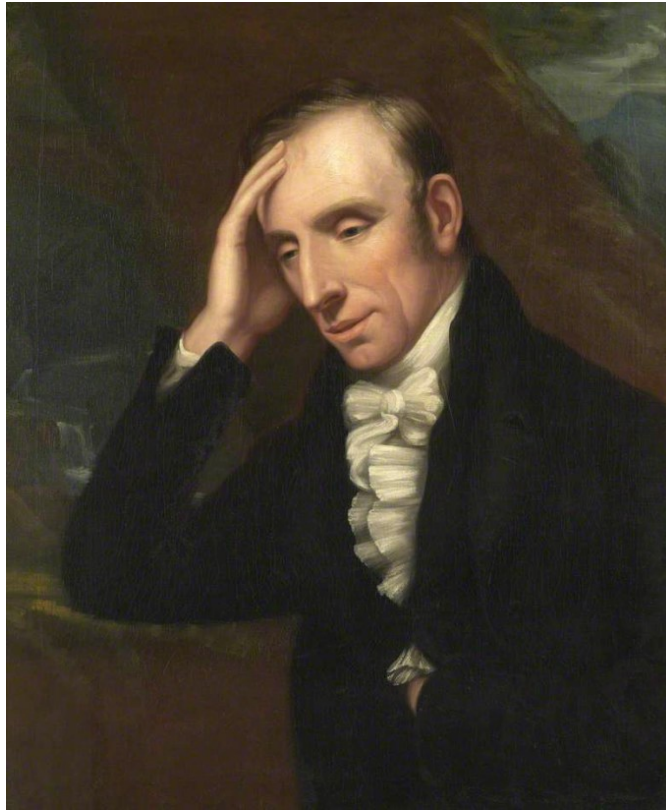


William Wordsworth, “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal”



William Wordsworth

I recently heard an accomplished musician say that there is not a single note that could be added or taken away in the music of Bach and Mozart, compositions wondrously seamless in both harmony and melody. Their music is, well, perfect.

Can a poem be perfect? If so, this one is. I find that readers of poems have a tendency, born of a desire for verbal stimulation, to celebrate the wonderfully expressive gifts of John Keats, the brilliant young poet of the generation succeeding that of William Wordsworth. By comparison, Wordsworth can seem prosaic, plodding, of modest gifts. A simple and rough-hewn poet compared to the dazzling Keats. But in the short poem you will read in a moment (it is only eight lines long, only 57 syllables, containing only six words of two syllables and one word of three) we encounter, I think, perfection.

Deep, complex, moving, “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” comes to us dressed in the most humbly garb.

If any have doubts that Wordsworth was a great poet, this lyric should resolve them. If any think poems should be written in ‘poetic language,’ these eight lines written by a poet who uttered a clarion call to eliminate poetic diction and write using “a selection of language really used by

men," this poem should serve as a powerful counter-example showing how the language of poetry can be taken from the language of everyday life. Wordsworth's diction was a matter of conscious choice, for as he wrote in the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* [1800]:

There will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction; as much pain has been taken to avoid it as is ordinarily taken to produce it; this has been done for the reason already alleged, to bring my language near to the language of men.

In the essay which follows I write about how this poem kept coming into my mind as I journeyed over many long miles in the Chinese desert, its rhythms somehow prompted by the emptiness as the bus travelled down a long road with little of note to see. I kept reciting, in my mind and not out loud, lines from "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal."

Poems can and will do that: seize hold of our minds so that they possess us almost completely. We usually think we possess poems, and that is often the case. But sometimes poems can possess us.

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.

I would have sent a poem out earlier, but I was on a Senate staff trip to China and long travels, large banquets, and the continuing marvel that is modern China – roads and more roads, building and skyscrapers and more buildings, airports, cellphone towers: everywhere, there is construction and enormous investment in infrastructure – was not particularly conducive to writing about a poem.

There were long trips to the west of China – to Inner Mongolia, to Gansu province – that gave me time to think on the plane, and on the bus ride through the Gobi Desert. I had two main thoughts. One was that I should send out a more upbeat poem. The first one I sent, by Zbigniew Herbert, elicited this caustic response from an old friend: "I go to work on Monday morning, and what do I find? A poem about executions. What a way to start the week." I'd argue that the poem was ultimately one of praise for poems and for the human imagination, but there is no arguing that the subject immediately addressed was the execution of five men. The second poem was about a moment of illumination, but what was illumined is that we live surrounded by the void.

Not all poems are somber, I told myself, and it is time you send out a happier and more celebratory poem. I even knew the poem I would send: section 24 of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," not only an irrepressible poem even apart from the rest of "Song of Myself," but quite possibly the greatest lyric ever written by an American.

But as I rode on a five hour bus ride through the desert to see the remarkable Buddhist caves at Dunhuang, works of religious celebration in both elaborate paintings and statuary dating back as far as eighteen hundred years, a different poem kept coming to mind. A poem that in its own fashion is perhaps as dark as any I know. A poem that I have come to think of as 'perfect' for its combination of depth and economy. It achieves its depth in eight seemingly simple lines.

What one notices at first in Wordsworth's "A slumber did my spirit seal" is how simple, how basic, its vocabulary is. One of the major resources for those who write poems in English is that our language is comprised of the remains of two tongues which crashed into one another. One language Anglo-Saxon, is of Teutonic origin and it consists of strong words about things and actions. The other language, that of the conqueror, is Latin, and it brought complexity of thought to the English people. Things meet ideas in English, where directness meets the circumlocution of abstraction. Often these meetings take place within a particular sentence. The conflict between experience and consideration, between emotion and thought, comprises the fundamental syntax of our sentences.

Poets, of course, exploit this, and nowhere is it more evident than in Wordsworth. He often seems plain, 'unpoetic.' When I first encountered his poetry, in college, I was greatly put off by the flatness of his verse, by his willingness to use Anglo-Saxon words instead of the more beautiful locutions that had attracted me to many of the poems I read.

In the eight lines of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" there are only three Latinate words: spirit, human, diurnal. Everything else seems to be hewn of elemental Anglo-Saxon, the language of acts and things.

The verb tenses are striking, too. The first stanza is in the past tense. The second is in the present tense. That first stanza tells us that the speaker has been asleep so profoundly that he was sealed off from everything: "A slumber did my spirit seal." So thoroughly was he asleep that some of the primary emotions that afflict us, emotions that are elementary and fundamental to being human, were closed off, and he did not feel them. No fear, no anxiety, no dread, no uncertainty.

This is one of a set of five lyrics on love that Wordsworth wrote in a series, the so-called 'Lucy poems'. In the first stanza, though he feels love, he feels none of the fears that come with love. The object of his love "*seemed* a thing that could not feel the touch of earthly years." Later, after we have jumped over into stanza two, we will come to understand, along with the poet, just how deeply that 'seeming' was at odds with the actuality of human life.

There is, to my mind, a hypnotic beauty to this first stanza. Caught up in love and desire, the speaker's world was totally still, untouched by time or change or threat. His spirit was sealed off, caught in a world beyond time, in a world where neither the physical – the earth – nor the passage of time could 'touch' the beloved. This is the world, although the speaker did not realize it at the time he felt it, of the fairy tale, where the beautiful princess is encapsulated out of time, sleeping in her rare beauty and awaiting the kiss of a rescuing prince to awaken her to the world of time and earthly passion. It is the world that John Keats of which would write two decades later in his famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn:"

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss
Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Between the first and second stanza something happens, something enormous. I think the space, the blank line between stanza one and stanza two, speaks more than any of the words in the poem. It, this blank space, is one of the triumphs of literature. In the space between the first and second stanza, a great horror occurs. Perhaps we might defer to Emily Dickinson, who writes of a similar horror,

And then — a Day as huge
As Yesterdays in pairs,
Unrolled its horror in my face —
Until it blocked my eyes —

with her strange and powerful metaphor of a day larger than other days, as large as a pair of days, of pairs of yesterdays.

For what has happened to the poet between stanza one and stanza two is that his beloved has died. There is no mention of the death, nor even how he felt at the death. The poet's restraint is what overwhelms us. The suggestion is that what has happened is too terrible, too full of horror, to be put into words.

Thus far we know two things. We know the poem began in the past tense, and now after the ellipsis – what has been left out – the poet is speaking in the present tense. And we know the ‘seeming’ of stanza one was all encompassing, so that ‘she felt no human years’ and he ‘had no fears,’ is totally ruptured.

“No motion has she now,” he writes. And then, despite the restraint I just mentioned, he cannot help but pile it on. She has “no force.” “She neither hears nor sees.” In two short lines, we have four negatives: no motion, no force, no hearing, no seeing. He won’t tell us she is dead: the word is too strong for him, too final, and so we must figure it out for ourselves. It may be – I can’t say this for sure – that the willful ignorance which kept all human fears at bay in the first stanza still operates on the speaker’s consciousness, that he cannot fully encompass her death, nor come to terms with the finality of death¹.

Death is encountered powerfully, and yet not fully absorbed. Or perhaps it is fully absorbed, but not fully comprehended? I’m not sure: I used to think the recognition of death in stanza two was absolute. Now I am not so certain. (Great poems are like that: they keep demanding we reread them, because we never fully encompass what they have to tell us.)

Certainly, there is a great deal of recognition. No motion. No force. Neither hears, nor sees. And, most powerful of all, she has moved from being a person, a ‘she,’ into a thing, rolled around with other things, with “rocks and stones and trees.” In stanza one she is a figurative “thing;” in stanza two, she has quite literally become part of the unfeeling, un-vital, world of things.

I love the “rocks and stones.” Unless I am kind of stupid, I don’t think we can distinguish greatly between rocks and stones. I suppose one might be larger than the other – maybe. But I reckon the line is ‘rocks and stones and trees’ rather than ‘rocks and brooks and trees’ because the rocks and stones are so thing-y, so inanimate, so without motion. They are impenetrable objects of the earth which the beloved has now, in death, become.

¹ At the end of this discussion, I will append what seems to me an unjustly forgotten poem, John Crowe Ransom’s “Janet Waking.” It recounts a brief narrative, in which a young girl wakes up and goes out in the yard to kiss and caress her pet chicken. Unbeknownst to her, that chicken died in the night, of a bee sting. But death is something the child Janet cannot understand, as the ending of the poem reveals: she “would not be instructed in how deep/Was the forgetful kingdom of death.” In a way with which we can all identify, the speaker of Wordsworth’s poem cannot quite be instructed in how deep is the kingdom of death, either. He sees it, he knows it, and yet he cannot say it.

And yet the poem doesn't end quite like that, even though "with rocks and stones and trees" is its last line. The dead lover may have no motion and no force, but she – like 'Ole Man River' does in the famous song from Hammerstein and Kern's musical *Show Boat* – she just keeps rolling along².

Would I be going too far to note that in addition to being rolled along with "rock and stones" she is also rolled along with "trees," providing a hint of Wordsworth's pantheistic faith (derived from Spinoza) which allows that death may not be final, without motion, without force, but that life writ large will continue, even in despite of death? In one of the greatest poems on this continuity of life, Section 6 of "Song of Myself," Whitman notes that grass grows even out of graves, and so,

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to
arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

But Wordsworth is not Whitman, and what Whitman embraces Wordsworth only hints at – if we can even consider the trees a hint. (They may not be.)

For what we really feel, in those first two lines of the second stanza when the poet re-emerges into language after this traumatic and wordless collision with the death of his beloved, is the awful immediacy of her non-feeling. In stanza one she "seemed a thing that could not feel." In stanza two, she is a thing, literally a thing, and she truly cannot feel: "She neither hears nor sees."

That reversal is stark and dramatic. It is followed by another reversal. The speaker has just told us, emphatically, "no motion has she now." STOP. "No force." But when we continue reading, and arrive at the concluding lines, she is "rolled round" in continual motion, in the daily "course" (a course is a track, a trajectory for motion) of planetary motion. So although in death she is without motion, the world of existence goes on: growth continues even though her growth has ceased.

² "But Ol' Man River...He jes' keeps rollin'/ He keeps on rollin' along."

I've shied away from the most obvious of the formal element of the poem, and will address it now. The verse form, alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter (eight syllables followed by six syllables, with four beats/three beats), in four line stanzas with the first and third line rhyming, and the second and fourth likewise, is known as common meter – and it is the form in which ballads are traditionally written.

Ballads tell stories. And the story this ballad tells is one of the most profound of stories, and likely the oldest story in each of our lives. It is the story of loss³.

The ballad is remarkably short, and the story is simple. I had her. I lost her. I thought time didn't matter, and that she (and I) could not feel the touch of earthly years. Time, I have learned, does matter, and the earth each day, diurnally, touches everything.

Let me conclude with something that I know is 'speculative'. Earlier, I wrote that we are never done with great poems. Not only do we keep working on them, reading them differently as we age or as our experience changes us, but they work in us, engendering different responses. So what follows is what I thought as I recited the poem to myself, over and over, as our bus made its way through the Gobi Desert along the same path that Marco Polo had travelled just under 700 years ago. (He, obviously, didn't take a bus.)

The poem first appeared in the second edition (1800) of *Lyrical Ballads*, a slim but revolutionary book of poems by Wordsworth and his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge wrote of the poem, shortly after its composition in 1799, "Some months ago Wordsworth transmitted to me a most sublime Epitaph ... whether it had any reality, I cannot say. – Most probably, in some gloomier moment he had fancied the moment in which his Sister might die."

For many years I had a different thought about its subject. During the early years of the French Revolution, Wordsworth had fallen in love with a woman named Annette Vallon. But the increasing violence of the Revolution, and its nationalist fervor, led Wordsworth to abandon both France and Vallon. Perhaps, I thought, the love poem memorialized the 'death' of that relationship.

³ Eric Erikson, the developmental psychologist, thought loss characterized the first formative stage of human existence: the loss of the paradise that is the child's seamless connection to its mother.

But now I think the loss which occasioned the poem lies somewhere else in the poet's life. (Yes, I know people can make things up, that no one really had to die or be lost to the poet; still, Freud taught us that what we make up, like the fictional dreams we have, are still our own makings, and bear the traces of what and how we think and on a deep level carry the residue of our experience). Let me cite several lines from *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's long autobiographical poem. I carry them in my mind always (although I always have to look the exact phrasing up) because to me they embody one of the deepest and most sustaining of all human truths. Insofar as poems can speak truth, here is a profound one. He writes of a formative experience prior to the loss that Erickson posited as our first shaping experience:

that calm delight
Which, if I err not, surely must belong
To those first-born affinities that fit
Our new existence to existing things,
And, in our dawn of being, constitute
The bond of union between life and joy.

As we are born into the world, thrown into existence, at the very beginning of our lives, we fit ourselves into the world and that experience is joyful – and so ever afterwards there is a ‘bond of union between life and joy.’”

Wordsworth is emphatic about the bond between life and joy because he recognizes it as a great truth of the human heart. (No poet, none, has felt more deeply how the heart moves than Wordsworth.) He is also emphatic because he is, in his longer poems – his magisterial “Tintern Abbey,” and his masterpiece *The Prelude* – the great poet of loss and the search for recovery. His emphasis on the bond of union between life and joy is not just description of our early years but also assertion. By having once been, it can be again. Wordsworth (anticipating Freud by a hundred years) teaches himself, and shows us, how we might regain joy after our world has been ruptured and joy has been lost.

Before Wordsworth was old enough to have many human fears, in his childhood, his mother died. He was eight years old. His earliest sense of loss reverberates throughout not just his life, or his autobiographical poems, but *this* poem about love. And, just as in this short eight-line poem, the loss (his mother's death) is so great he can never mention it directly in his autobiographical poems. He just elides it, as he does with the death here.

So I surmise. But it is a feeling, and you need not agree: the poem's depth has to do with the aftershock of his mother's death. That early loss is something he, the most autobiographical of poets, never writes about directly.

The loss of his mother? Heck, who knows, in five years I might not agree!

However, if Wordsworth is writing about his mother in some fashion, re-inscribing in the form of a love poem the confidence he felt in her seemingly continuing maternal presence and the absolute rupture he felt when she died, then that hint we noticed earlier – that though his love has no motion now, she still is “rolled round” and is one with not only stones but also growing “trees” – might be even more pronounced than we had first thought. For in this way of reading the poem, the mother he has lost is with him still, is a daily (“diurnal”) presence in the revolving planet, part of the natural world of things that rolls onward, a rolling that is not a rolling away, but a rolling round, a continual return.

Or maybe not.

Whatever we make of the ‘person’ who occasioned the poem, there can be little doubt for us that we have been in the presence of a great poem.

As promised earlier, here is John Crowe Ransom's poem:

Janet Waking -- John Crowe Ransom

Beautifully Janet slept
Till it was deeply morning. She woke then
And thought about her dainty-feathered hen,
To see how it had kept.

One kiss she gave to her mother.
Only a small one gave she to her daddy
Who would have kissed each curl of his shining baby;
No kiss at all for her brother.

"Old Chucky, old Chucky!" she cried,
Running across the world upon the grass
To Chucky's house, and listening. But alas,
Her Chucky had died.

It was a transmogrifying bee
Came droning down on Chucky's old bald head
And sat and put the poison. It scarcely bled,
But how exceedingly

And purplely did the knot
Swell with the venom and communicate
Its rigor! Now the poor comb stood up straight
But Chucky did not.

So there was Janet
Kneeling on the wet grass, crying her brown hen
(Translated far beyond the daughters of men)
To rise and walk upon it.

And weeping fast as she had breath
Janet implored us, "Wake her from her sleep!"
And would not be instructed in how deep
Was the forgetful kingdom of death.