

# Wordsworth's Solitary Song: The Substance of "true art" in "The Solitary Reaper."

GEOFFREY J. FINCH

IT has become a truism in recent years that the Romantic poets were preoccupied with the fundamentals of their own poetic talents. Clearly, a view of poetry which places so much emphasis on the poet not as an interpreter, nor as a mirror, but as a creator of reality, must impose a severe self-consciousness on the individual artist, and it is not surprising that running through Romantic poetry there is a sense of awe, sometimes precipitated into uncertainty at the immense power of the imagination. Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper," unlike his "Immortality ode," or Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," is not normally a poem which we associate with this turbulent introspection, nevertheless it has become increasingly apparent to admirers of Wordsworth's poetry that many of his short lyrics are self-reflective even when they seem least to be so. "The Solitary Reaper," I believe, provides us with a good instance of what we frequently feel to be true of his shorter poems, which is, that beneath the lyric grace there is a quite startling intensity of imaginative commitment. Wordsworth's imagination always transfigures what it touches, and in one important sense this particular poem is only marginally concerned with what appear to be its principal subjects; the reaper and her song. I want to look at the poem in some detail, for despite its apparent plainness I believe it to be a work in which Wordsworth meditates with considerable subtlety on the status of the creative act, and its importance as a

basic human endeavour. As my discussion of the poem is, as I have said, fairly detailed, I think I ought to reproduce the entire text first of all:

The Solitary Reaper

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

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

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

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang  
As if her song could have no ending;  
I saw her singing at her work,  
And o'er the sickle bending;—  
I listened, motionless and still;  
And, as I mounted up the hill,  
The music in my heart I bore,  
Long after it was heard no more.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the power of this very haunting poem comes from a series of ironies or paradoxes which Wordsworth allows to emerge implicitly through the imagery and structure of the verse. As G. Ingli James has remarked,<sup>2</sup> we do not normally associate the use of irony or paradox with Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper," but there seems to be no other way of describing the enigmatic quality of the poem. The first, and most obvious point, which we notice in reading it, is that for the first three stanzas the pretence is made that the incident is occurring in the present,

whereas in the fourth stanza the whole event is distanced by use of the past tense. More important than this, however, is the paradoxical nature of the song, which in substance is sad, but which does not produce sadness in the poet. Then again, the song is "thrilling," it profoundly moves Wordsworth, but nevertheless its final effect is not to stimulate, but to set the emotions at rest. The song itself is a human entity, made as a work of art is made, but yet Wordsworth sees it as profoundly natural, as the song of a bird is natural. Yet again, the song is a product of the girl's solitariness, but it suggests to the poet the glamour and warmth of "Arabian sands." Finally, although the title is "The Solitary Reaper," we learn practically nothing of the girl herself.

Wordsworth's mode could be described as meditative, because the poem does not explain, but contemplates. The frequent repetition of words and ideas suggests the way in which Wordsworth's imagination centres round certain important facets. There are a number of allusions, for instance, to the girl's activity: stanza one, "reaping and singing," "cuts and binds"; stanza four, "singing at her work," "And o'er the sickle bending." Wordsworth listens not only "still" but "motionless." The subject matter of the song is qualified, in the first half of the third stanza, by "old," "far-off," "long-ago," and in the second half, by "sorrow," "loss" and "pain" (words which if not completely identical nevertheless connote the same idea). The girl herself is "single," "solitary," "by herself," and "alone," while the reader is commanded three times in the first stanza:— Behold . . . Stop . . . listen." Wordsworth's method has the indirect quality of the meditative mode similar to that attributed by Conrad to Marlow's tale in *The Heart of Darkness*: "The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel

but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.”<sup>3</sup> I am not suggesting that “The Solitary Reaper” is mysterious in the sense that Marlow’s tale is, but simply that Wordsworth’s poem is of a kind that does not obviously state what it is about. We learn nothing material about the girl or the song she sings. The poem has an indefinite, imprecise suggestiveness which only on reflection crystallizes into a precise meaning. Wordsworth skilfully manages to arouse the reader’s interest without completely satisfying it. The form of the poem in its use of the present and past tenses balances the vividness of the incident against its fundamental remoteness. If we approach the poem, then, with the idea of getting at the kernel inside, it will elude us. The real meaning lies in the outer shell of Wordsworth’s own response.

The poem begins, as Ingham James notes, with an arresting tone, to which the present tense gives a heightened sense of immediacy. But “Behold” does more than this. It has an archaic biblical ring about it, and as such adds dignity and weight to the command. Together with the measured movement of the rhythm it conveys the feeling of powerful admiration. The girl’s solitariness obviously fascinates Wordsworth, but it is not simply that she endures an existential aloneness that is common to all. The girl has a quality of “apartness” or distinctiveness that is best conveyed by the word “single.” The metrical regularity of “reaping and singing” and “cuts and binds” suggests the rhythmic style of her labour. She is working to the accompaniment of her song. She clearly is absorbed, but not simply in the ordinary sense of absorption. It is important to notice that she does not stop to sing, for the song is not only an accompaniment to her work but in some way is linked to the hard, unremitting nature of her lot. The girl, the reaping and her song are fused in the poet’s con-

temptation. She is not an instance of alienation, but of belonging. Nevertheless, although the singer belongs to her labour and her environment, she is distinguished from it in the mind of the poet by the sound of her voice. The quality of its music is suggested in the last two lines in which the tone of command in "Behold" and "Stop" has softened to an almost reverential appeal, "O listen." Together with the soft s's, f's, and l's, and the open vowels of "sound," "profound," it conveys the exceptional sweetness of the song. Thus the stanza moves from a simple contemplation of the girl to what is going to be the essential concern of the poet; the beauty of the song in which the girl and her work are transfigured. She is a type of the artist forging from humble material a sweet sound, a preserver of joy, and it is in this that her "apartness" lies. She is fundamentally a creator and as such deserves the awe with which Wordsworth contemplates her.

The first stanza then, establishes certain paradoxes which the rest of the poem explores. In this way Wordsworth implicitly suggests to the reader the synthesizing quality of the aesthetic response, in which opposites are held together. The girl is apparently ordinary yet distinctive; she is alone and yet there is no sense of alienation; her song is sad but it produces pleasure. The imagination of the poet creates a unity out of disparate elements, and the remaining three stanzas of the poem each explore a different aspect of this unity. In the second stanza, Wordsworth's imagination expands beyond the narrow confines of the Highland setting to suggest a strange exotic quality about the song; "shady haunt" and "Among Arabian sands" do not bring to mind the arid wastes of the real Arabia, but the eastern romance of the kind invoked by Pope in "And all Arabia breathes from yonder Box" (*The Rape of the Lock*, Canto I, l.134). The imagination, as Wordsworth frequently tells us, is not passive in appreciation, but active. The senses "half create" the object of perception ("Tintern Abbey," ll.106-8), so that it is the

poet as listener who completes the song of the girl. It absorbs him, and becomes a fundamentally aesthetic mode of communication in which the poet joins with the girl, her song and her work. The use of the archaism "chaunt" is significant here. It is clearly convenient because it rhymes with "haunt" — and perhaps Wordsworth is also using the secondary meaning of "haunt" to suggest the haunting quality of the song — but more than this, the archaism avoids the impression of mechanical utterance in "chant" and with its richer vowel sound indicates the fulness of the music. The nightingale image then conveys the richness of the song and the sense of wonder aroused in the poet. The cuckoo image, however, alters the perspective. The nightingale's song is restful and welcoming in a luxuriant sense, and it is interesting here to note the way in which the run-on lines throw the voice forward on to the significant phrase "Among Arabian sands," but the cuckoo's is "thrilling" and dramatic; it takes us from the east to the far north. The rhythm picks up speed and gives to the lines a buoyant, vibrant quality. We associate "spring-time" of course with the awakening of life, with activity and movement, not with rest. This meaning is vividly rendered by the stress on "Breaking." The voice breaks into the quietness of the line — "the silence of the seas" — creating ripples, like a stone dropped into a still pond. We have then, in stanza two, a further series of paradoxes which expand the significance of the song; it is both exciting and peaceful, dramatic and yet exquisite; it makes Wordsworth think of the warmth of the east as well as the cold austerity of the north; and finally, and perhaps most interestingly of all, it seems spontaneous, a thing of nature like the songs of the nightingale and cuckoo, but yet it is the product of human endeavour. The reaper's song, like all important art, represents a form of human distinctiveness in which the marks of conscious effort are hidden. For the poet it is the apex at which art tips over into nature, providing for both singer and listener a uniquely human naturalness.

Stanza three explores yet another dimension of the girl's song. Putting it briefly, in the second stanza Wordsworth's imagination extends in space; in the third it extends in time. The reiteration in "old," "far-off," and "long ago" arouses the impression of vast ages of time, receding backwards into the mists of history. The girl's song suggest to Wordsworth the grand scale of time. Not only this; it would seem that if the song arouses a present joy, it does so paradoxically by perpetuating the memory of past unhappiness. But the most important aspect of Wordsworth's speculation that the subject matter is something secreted in the history of the girl's race, is that it implies that the song has the impersonal quality of art. This is interesting because the suggestion in the second half of the stanza touches on a quite different aspect of the song. Wordsworth realised, I think, that an historical subject matter has an intrinsic romantic sweetness about it. "And battles long ago" is reminiscent of a child's storybook. But there is for Wordsworth a powerful hint of real "pain" about the song. Whilst the first half then suggests the typical impersonal quality of the traditional ballad, the second half intimates the presence of a strongly felt personal element in the song, which moves the poet to ask whether it concerns the girl's own life. "Humble," "familiar," and "natural," balance "old," "far-off," and "long ago." The rhetorical repetition in "sorrow," "loss," and "pain," in which the focus gets sharper, and the sombre reflection in the last line "and may be again," create the powerful impression of a continuing unhappiness. In the third stanza, then, we are presented with different perspectives, which, as in the previous stanza, arouse the reader's awareness of the strangely paradoxical quality of the song. In the first half the girl is dwarfed by the impression of a vast time scale, whilst in the second half the lens is adjusted to a close-up view of the girl's own situation. The inherently romantic element of the traditional ballad is balanced by the implication of genuine personal grief. The song is both impersonal and personal.

Its beauty represents a triumph, but whilst it preserves joy it also keeps alive the sense of sadness. The song in fact has for the poet a multiple suggestiveness. It no longer seems to be a particular song but to have the larger inclusiveness of art itself.

In the final stanza the questions raised by Wordsworth are left, and we return completely to the world of the poet. The poem has been in the nature of a flashback, a few moments of contemplative intensity which leave the poet and the reader with the final enigma as to what the song is really about. The song itself continues as if belonging to an external world — “as if her song could have no ending” — but the poet belongs to the world of time. It is true that he bears the music in his heart and in this sense it is timeless. Nevertheless, there is the unmistakable ring of sadness, a kind of “dying-fall” about the last line “Long after it was heard no more.” The final paradox of the poem is that beauty must essentially be remote. Hence I think in Wordsworth’s case his wistful fascination with the solitary girl and her song. In a sense he is writing about his own solitariness, about his feeling of being left out. They belong to a world which the poet can contemplate and even briefly enter, but never finally possess, yet it is only because of this that the song, and consequently Wordsworth’s poem, can achieve the profoundly moving, yet fundamentally impersonal quality of all creative art.

The point is made clearer in Wordsworth’s final summation of his attitude as listener: “I listened, motionless and still.” The repetition is not only designed to tell us that he did not move. The effect of the music was not simply to make him keep still, but to set the emotions at rest. The line itself, with its calm stately movement, underlines the sense of tranquillity. In spite of the song’s dramatic quality its final effect is one of serenity. The movement of Wordsworth’s imagination is both towards and away from the object of contemplation. In the second



stanza we have a powerful imaginative identification of the poet with the girl's song in which the circle of girl, poet and song is closed. In the third stanza, Wordsworth has moved back to the position of bystander: "Will no one tell me . . ." Finally, the poet is content not to know "Whate'er the theme . . .," and it is because he stands both inside and outside the world of the song, and because the poem balances the urge to possess against the need to let be, that Wordsworth's final aesthetic experience is "static," in the sense in which Stephen Daedalus uses the word in Joyce's *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*: "I mean that the tragic emotion is static. Or rather the dramatic emotion is. The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I used the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing."<sup>4</sup> Wordsworth's response moves from an appreciation of the song's quality, to an apprehension of its formal unity as music. It is not only the poet who is "still." The reaper's song has the stillness of Eliot's Chinese jar which "Moves perpetually in its stillness" ("Burnt Norton," V, 6-7).

Both Eliot and Joyce are talking about the kind of tranquil intensity — "the mind is arrested" — which Wordsworth is contemplating and also experiencing in his poem. In the poet's case however, it is an experience reached not through "desire and loathing," but through the contrary movement of the imagination. Paradox is central to this movement because it suggests the substance of Wordsworth's own aesthetic response. The suspension of activity which he experiences is reached not through lack of emotion but through the very force of it. Aesthetic experience, the poem implies, is at its deepest level the moment when the urge for identity is held against the sense of

separateness. Interestingly, Lawrence was to make the same point about sexual love in its most ecstatic moments, but perhaps Wordsworth's lines point forward most surely to T. S. Eliot's "still point" where "the dance is" ("Burnt Norton," II, 63), and where for a fragment of life the human condition is transfigured in a vision of unity. In conclusion then, Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" is a poem in which the main subject is more than its apparent subject matter. It defines for us the nature and substance of aesthetic enjoyment, but it does so by resisting the urge to define. In contemplating the reaper and her song Wordsworth was clearly drawn in kinship to a fellow creator. He was contemplating not simply another song, but what he considered to be true art, and his poem is surely the best vindication of the human importance of such singing.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. T. Hutchinson, rev. E. de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 230.

<sup>2</sup>"Wordsworth's Solitary Reaper," *Essays in Criticism* (January, 1965), XV, no. 1, 67-76. This is a very interesting and useful article. There is however some truth in Malcolm Pittock's comments, *EIC* (April, 1965), XV, no. 2, 243-44, that it resembles a sermon and neglects the structure of the poem.

<sup>3</sup>(Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup>(Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1961, rpt. 1966), 204-5.