

**SOUND AND MOTION
IN WORDSWORTH'S
POETRY**

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Sound and Motion in Wordsworth's Poetry by May Tomlinson

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ACAREFUL reading of English poetry will reveal the fact that the sense of the beauty of sound and motion is more largely developed in the poets—with, perhaps, two or three exceptions—than is the sense of the beauty of form and color. We read of sunshine and shadow, of the gleam, the glow, the sheen; but we find comparatively little mention of color. Indeed, the poets themselves seem to place the latter sense on a lower plane of estimation. Wordsworth, in his autobiographical poem, tells us that he was never "bent over much on superficial things, pampering myself with meagre novelties of form and color." And yet Ruskin declares that "of all God's gifts to the sight of man, color is the holiest, the most divine, the most solemn." It is the painter, we must remember, to whom the beauty of color seems the highest beauty. To the musician, the deepest pleasure is the pleasure that he re-

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ceives through the ear. Color is naught to him except as it is represented in intensity of sound, in crescendo and diminuendo, in a delicate shading of tone. And the poet, in his susceptibilities, is more akin to the musician than to the painter.

The painter's interest is in objects, his aim is to reproduce; so, necessarily, he is concerned with form and color. The poet's art, more than that of the painter,—more than that of the musician, even,—is suggestive: it makes larger demands upon the imagination. And so, because, among the arts, poetry, both in him who creates and in him who merely enjoys, demands the largest exercise of the imagination, it is the most "effective agency for cherishing within us the ideal." "Its great function," says one who is great and good, "is to keep alive man's sensibilities and instincts, and thus fit him for the reception of high spiritual truths."

I have said that the poet's first delight is in sound and motion. Passages innumerable, from many poets, might be cited as illustrative of this sensitiveness. There is Coleridge's

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"Kubla Khan," with its seething turmoil and mazy motion. The poem is itself a strange wierd melody. Shelley's description in "The Revolt of Islam" of "an eagle and a serpent wreathed in fight" affords a remarkable example of life and power, of dizzy speed and impetuous flight, of wheeling, floating, fluttering, leaping motion. Tennyson's reminiscence, in "The Gardener's Daughter," of a certain May morning with all its sound is proof enough of his delight in melody. We know what joy even the memory of the thrush's song gave Browning, when, far from home, he thought of England in May time, when "the white-throat builds and all the swallows!" Every student knows the morning and evening sounds as enumerated by Milton in those companion poems, "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso." Mrs. Browning's poetry is fairly vibrant with sound. I have in mind as I write some very beautiful lines in "The Drama of Exile," suggestive of smooth-flowing motion and soft, low sounds.

But, of all the poets, Wordsworth, in his enjoyment of nature, is most alive to the pow-

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er and beauty of sound. When a boy, he would walk alone under the quiet stars, and, at such times, he felt "whate'er there is of power in sound to breathe an elevated mood, by form or image unprofaned." "And I would stand," he tells us, "if the night blackened with a coming storm, beneath some rock, listening to notes that are the ghostly language of the ancient earth, or make their abode in distant winds." Of this boyhood time we read,

"Ah! 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 did the loud dry
wind
Blow through my ear! the sky seemed not a
sky
Of earth—and with what motion moved the
clouds!"

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Wordsworth always heard voices : the voice of the mountain torrent, the tones of waterfalls, the murmur of the streams, the sighing of the wind through the leaves of a tree, the soft murmur of the vagrant bee.*

The number of poems in which we fail to find some mention of waters—of sea or lake, of river or brook, of mountain torrent or waterfall—is not large. Indeed, by actual count, among the whole number of Wordsworth's poems, there are scarcely thirty which have not some reference to sound or motion : sound or flow of waters, song or flight of bird, or the movement of clouds. Wordsworth described with rare truthfulness what he saw and heard. A daily wanderer among woods and fields, familiar with mountains and lakes and sounding cataracts, it is not strange that he should report of smooth fields; of white

*All through my paper I have woven into my sentences phrases and clauses, which the student of Wordsworth's poetry will recognize as quotations. I have not thought it necessary, in these instances, to use the marks of quotation.

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sheets of water; of the cuckoo's melancholy call; of the trembling lake; of motions of delight that haunt the sides of the green hills; of breezes and soft airs; of mists and winds that dwell among the hills; of notes which, in his tuneful course, the wind draws forth from rocks, woods, caverns, heaths, and crashing shores.

The following description of "The Simplon Pass" is one of the finest of Wordsworth's *sound* poems:

—"Brook and road
Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy Pass,
And with them did we journey several hours
At a slow pace. The immeasurable height
Of woods, decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And in the narrow rent, at every turn,
Winds thwarting winds bewildered and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-
side

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As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and regions of the
 heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the
 light—
Were all like workings of one mind, the fea-
 tures
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without
 end."

Another instance of the poet's alertness to the voices of nature is the passage in the fifth book of "The Prelude," beginning, "There was a boy." The famous description of winter sports—

 "All shod with steel
We hissed along the polished ice"—

affords a good illustration of Wordsworth's delight in both sound and motion.

No lovelier example of Wordsworth's