

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770-1850)

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.

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 Procne's husband, metamorphoses on carrying out her revenge.

13+ *Note: "voice" is a revision from "sound" in an earlier manuscript.+

14] Cuckoo-bird: song-bird migrating to Britain in the spring and associated with renewal.

16] Hebrides: islands northwest of Scotland in the Atlantic.

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'+

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