

# Freedom and Constraint: The Blank Verse of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*

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In his preface to the 1800 Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth famously wrote that the poet is “a man speaking to men.”<sup>1</sup> He decried “poetic diction” and argued powerfully that the language of poetry is not, and cannot be, distinct from that of common prose.<sup>2</sup> And yet, when he describes prosaic language used poetically, he calls it “language...naturally arranged and according to the strict laws of metre.”<sup>3</sup> This description sets up an apparent contradiction: how can language be at once “naturally arranged” and at the same time bound strictly to a rhythm of expression never sustained in normal speech? I argue that in proposing this contradiction, Wordsworth is pushing his readers towards a particular vision of the state of humanity and its relationship to poetry. In an industrialized society, humanity is no longer in its natural state. Instead, our state is one of perpetual tension between the essential and the artificial. It is this dynamic tension between the essential and the artificial—between freedom and constraint—that the imposition of meter<sup>4</sup> on “natural” language reflects.

Of the various poetic meters employed by Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads*, one stands out as particularly well-suited to the mission he asserted in his preface. The form allows plain, undecorated English to be woven together to create pieces that simultaneously move the reader, and induce great pleasure.<sup>5</sup> The character and the placement of

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<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth, William, Preface, *Lyrical Ballads With Other Poems*, 1800, Vol. I <Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8905/pg8905-images.html>>

<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth, “Preface.”

<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth, “Preface.”

<sup>4</sup> This paper will use the American spelling of “meter.” However, I have adhered to the British spelling, “metre,” in places where I have quoted from British sources.

<sup>5</sup> Wordsworth, “Preface.”

Wordsworth's assertions harken back to Milton's preface to *Paradise Lost*, in which he contends that "true musical delight...consists only in apt Numbers, fit quantity of Syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from one Verse into another."<sup>6</sup> Like Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Milton used his preface to justify his poetic endeavor to a potentially resistant audience. In Milton's case, the source of that potential resistance was his use of a poetic form that had heretofore been known only to English drama: the uninterrupted repetition of lines of iambic pentameter known as "blank verse." More than one hundred and thirty years later, Wordsworth draws on Milton's pioneering spirit with his own use of the form in the 1800 Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, but this time, to achieve a markedly different end. It was Milton's aim that "ancient liberty [be] recovered to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of riming."<sup>7</sup> He sought to elevate English heroic poetry to the status of the great ancient practitioners of the art, Homer and Virgil, and so he chose a form that, like theirs, was metered but unrhymed. Wordsworth's mission, on the other hand, was not one of elevation so much as democratization. He describes his endeavor "to bring [poetic] language near to the real language of men."<sup>8</sup> One can infer from this that his choice to write in blank verse aligns more closely with the choice of blank verse by English dramatists, Shakespeare and Marlowe among them, than with Milton's, because Wordsworth's, like the dramatists', hinged on the verse form's conversational naturalism, allowing even those not well-versed in poetry to appreciate its content without becoming lost in its form.

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<sup>6</sup> Milton, John, "Preface," *Paradise Lost* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2005) 2.

<sup>7</sup> Milton, "Preface," 2.

<sup>8</sup> Wordsworth, "Preface."

Surprisingly, given the prominence of blank verse among the English poetic meters, there has been little critical attention paid to Wordsworth's use of the form. This dearth of scholarship appears to stem from the impression of Wordsworth as a "natural" poet<sup>9</sup> for whom the strictures of meter are not of primary concern. The popular conception of Wordsworth as the "walking poet," composing as he takes his leisure in the countryside, is reinforced by the lack of scholarly attention paid to the technical merits of his composition. Some critics, such as Jonathan Bates, have even gone so far as to argue that artful writing is somehow antithetical to the very idea of Romantic poetry.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, this focus on the "natural" at the expense of technical proficiencies is not borne out by Wordsworth's own writing on the subject. In a letter dated 1831, Wordsworth wryly admonishes William Rowan Hamilton, warning him not to confuse the deliberate craft of writing naturalistic verse with effortless natural expression:

Milton's claim to be 'pouring easy his unpremeditated verse [is] not true to the letter, and tends to mislead. . . . I could point to 500 passages in Milton upon which labour has been bestowed and twice 500 more on which additional labour would have been serviceable.'<sup>11</sup>

In a subsequent letter written to Catherine Grace Godwin, he tells her that blank verse is "infinitely the most difficult metre to manage, as is clear from so few having succeeded in it."<sup>12</sup> Over the course of his lifetime, Wordsworth employed the form with increasing frequency. The 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was the first volume in which Wordsworth tried his

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<sup>9</sup> Bennett, Andrew, *Wordsworth Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 42.

<sup>10</sup> Bennett, *Wordsworth Writing*, 42.

<sup>11</sup> O'Donnell, Brennan, *The Passion of Meter* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1995) 179.

<sup>12</sup> O'Donnell, 179.

hand at the meter, and by the 1800 edition he had increased the number of blank verse poems from three to thirteen.

In the only text uniquely devoted to the study of Wordsworth's prosody, *The Passion of Meter*, Brennan O'Donnell, analyzes a sample of one thousand lines from the blank verse poems of *Lyrical Ballads* to demonstrate the ways in which Wordsworth's use of the meter diverges from that of two prominent predecessors, Milton and William Cowper. Comparing the Wordsworth sample to samples of *Paradise Lost* and Cowper's *The Task*, O'Donnell finds the placement and frequency of mid-line pauses to be far more consistent in Milton's and Cowper's works. Both favor midline pauses after a stressed syllable, Milton favoring the sixth and Cowper the fourth. Wordsworth, on the other hand, distributes his midline pauses almost evenly between the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh syllables. He is also twice as likely as Cowper and three times as likely as Milton to use two pauses within a single line.<sup>13</sup> These figures suggest that Wordsworth moves more freely than his predecessors within the confines of the meter, which one might expect from a Romantic, finding freedom within the constraint of the form.

A study of the same samples with respect to enjambment found that Wordsworth uses the technique in just over half the sampled lines, compared to Cowper, who endstops almost two-thirds of his lines, and Milton, who endstops only one-third.<sup>14</sup> These findings indicate that Wordsworth was continually oscillating between the stoppages imposed by the metric form and those dictated by the thoughts expressed. In this way, he was neither a slave to the line, as might be said of many 18<sup>th</sup>-century poets, nor was he perpetually transcending it in favor of a Miltonic

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 187.

<sup>14</sup> O'Donnell, 188.

passage-dominated format. Instead, Wordsworth seems to give equal weight to the forces of freedom from, and constraint within, the line-based confines of the meter.

The final, and arguably the most interesting, conclusion reached by the study of the samples was uncovered by O'Donnell only after comparing the data generated by each sample as a whole to smaller selections drawn from single poems that comprised the larger samples. What he found was that, with respect to Milton and Cowper, the data of the larger samples reveal tendencies that the smaller samples of their work bear out. With respect to Wordsworth, on the other hand, the smaller samples display a wide range of tendencies from the Miltonic to the Cowperian. The data drawn from the larger sample, then, is "a statistical fiction, an average of a very wide variety that does not accurately describe any one part of the sample."<sup>15</sup> Wordsworth, therefore, employed a considerably more variable approach to versification than the other two poets.

The analyst of this data is then left with the question of what, if not personal style, informed Wordsworth's versification from one poem to the next. The answer, O'Donnell argues, is the interplay between the subject of the poem and the expressive ends of the poet.<sup>16</sup> Building on his statistical analysis of two poems from *Lyrical Ballads*, "Michael" and "Tintern Abbey," and adding to that analysis an exploration of a third poem, "Brothers," one can clearly see the ways in which Wordsworth uses meter "to effect the complex end[s] that [he] proposes"<sup>17</sup> in the preface, democratizing poetry by grounding it in language a broader public can understand, and to expose that literate urban public to a segment of the

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 189.

<sup>16</sup> O'Donnell, 190.

<sup>17</sup> Wordsworth, "Preface."

population that was seldom in the foreground of increasingly urbanized English life.

One method Wordsworth employed to achieve that end was to elevate the language and experience of rural life by imbuing it with feeling “that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.”<sup>18</sup> Here, Wordsworth is asking his reader to simultaneously acknowledge that the actions and situations his poems describe may seem beneath the endeavor of poetry, and to transcend that sense by allowing the poem’s depth of feeling to reshape their understanding of the actions and situations it describes. In so doing, Wordsworth is also subtly inviting his readers to reassess the actors in his poems: the rural poor.

“Michael: a pastoral poem” is a narrative poem that recounts the tale of an old shepherd and his son. The characters are common people, simple yet dignified, who labor over their land from dawn to dusk, day to day, year after year. The rhythm of the poem reflects this steady and predictable progression, and there is little of the tension between rhythm and meter so prevalent in many of Wordsworth’s other works. Forty percent of the poem’s lines are unbroken by medial stops, a significantly greater percentage than is reflected in the larger sample, and those stops, where they do occur, occur overwhelmingly after the sixth syllable,<sup>19</sup> creating a Miltonic pattern of pause that slows the forward momentum of the poem.<sup>20</sup>

To deem that he was old,—in shepherd’s phrase,  
With one foot in the grave. This only Son,  
With two brave sheep-dogs tried in many a storm,  
The one of an inestimable worth,

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*,

<sup>19</sup> O’Donnell, 190.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 190.

Made all their household. I may truly say,  
That they were as a proverb in the vale  
For endless industry.<sup>21</sup>

(ll. 89-95)

In this passage, the sixth-position stops in lines 89, 90, 93 and 95 slow the pace of the poem almost to a crawl. But, whereas in Milton this slowing suggests a stateliness and grandeur commensurate with the lofty subject of his work, in “Michael,” the slowing suggests the aging of the title character, the gentle plodding pace of his labor, and the unsettling march towards impending tragedy. In these ways, the midline stops weave themselves into the fabric of the poem to such extent that they no longer function as metrical disruptions.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, “Michael” is characterized by the interplay of meter and rhythm, line and phrase, that is as simple and predictable as the scenes and characters the poem relates.

“The Brothers: a pastoral,” on the other hand, employs greater metric variation than does “Michael,” due in part to the fact that it recounts dialogue between characters.<sup>23</sup> Borrowing from the traditions of blank verse dramatists, Wordsworth, in “The Brothers,” makes a number of otherwise rare divergences from the decasyllabic requirement by adding to the end of some of his lines an additional unstressed syllable known as the “feminine ending.”<sup>24</sup> This practice can either complement or counteract enjambment, sometimes propelling the reader into the next line by tricking the ear into thinking the line has already begun,<sup>25</sup> other

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<sup>21</sup> Wordsworth, William, “Michael,” *Lyrical Ballads With Other Poems*, 1800, Vol. 2 Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8912/pg8912-images.html>

<sup>22</sup> O'Donnell, 191.

<sup>23</sup> O'Donnell, 182.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 182.

<sup>25</sup> Shaw, Robert B., *Blank Verse: A Guide to Its History and Use* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007) 43.

times landing heavily at the end of a line, adding emphasis to an endstop by forcing the reader to pause before picking up the meter in the subsequent line.

In the following passage of "The Brothers," Wordsworth uses the feminine (or, as he calls it, "trochaic") ending, three times:

And who would grieve and fret, if, welcome come  
 And welcome gone, they are so like each other,  
 They cannot be remembered? Scarce a funeral  
 Comes to this churchyard once in eighteen months;  
 And yet, some changes must take place among you:  
 And you, who dwell here, even among these rocks,  
 Can trace the finger of mortality,<sup>26</sup>

(ll. 124-130)

The first use is in line 125, where the trochaic ending works against the line's terminal comma, forcing the reader through what would otherwise be an endstop, resulting in the enjambment of lines 125 and 126. Line 126, with its heavily punctuated seventh-position medial stop, is also hyper-syllabic, with a trochaic eleventh syllable if one employs syncope to the word "funeral" by dropping the middle vowel, or dactylic eleventh and twelfth syllables if one does not. The strong midline pause and messy unaccented ending create a serious disruption in the meter, forcing the reader forward in search of a metric resolution that should be found in the subsequent line. But, although line 127 is punctuated with a semicolon which would seem to indicate an endstop, the forward momentum established by the previous lines carries the reader straight through the punctuation, and it is not until line 128, where strong endline punctuation and a trochaic ending occur together, that the weight of the line becomes heavy enough to stop the reader and allow for the endline

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<sup>26</sup> Wordsworth, "The Brothers," *Lyrical Ballads With Other Poems*, 1800, Vol. 2.



pause necessary to end the metric sequence, and pick the meter up anew for the passage that follows. The effect is one of naturalistic speech that sets the prosaic tone that persists through the emotional climax of the poem.

This is of particular interest because, Wordsworth writes in the "Preface,"

More pathetic situations and sentiments, that is, those which have a greater proportion of pain connected to them, may be endured in metrical composition . . . than in prose.<sup>27</sup>

This is so, he asserts, because meter introduces a pleasure all its own that serves as a necessary counterpoint to a highly emotional narrative, preventing such narratives from imparting more pain than pleasure to the reader. Thus, the constraints imposed by meter actually free the poet to write narratives of greater emotional import than a meter-less form would allow. In lines 412-433, as the emotional climax of the piece is reached, trochaic endings become evermore frequent and the pauses within lines so numerous and so varyingly placed that the meter is almost entirely subsumed. There is no pleasurable sonic pattern to temper the grief the reader feels reading of the tragic youthful death described. Once, however, the poet has moved through the emotional climax of the piece, the dialogue ceases, and there returns the gentle metric voice of the narrator, providing welcome relief to the reader by establishing a sonic pattern that reestablishes the poem as a work of art that reflects on tragedy without becoming mired in the tragedy itself. In this way, Wordsworth's deft use of meter allows him to move his reader to the very edge of emotional overinvestment with the knowledge that he possesses

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<sup>27</sup> Wordsworth, "Preface."

a tool that can retrieve the reader and deliver him safely back to the world of reflection, where the tragic can be transmuted to the sublime.

These concepts of reflection, transmutation and sublimity are also forces at work in "Tintern Abbey." With respect to the broader sample from *Lyrical Ballads*, "Tintern Abbey" diverges in the opposite direction than does "Michael," employing significantly more enjambment, fewer unbroken lines, and midline pauses distributed evenly among positions four, five and seven.<sup>28</sup> The effect is that of a poem wandering through its meter, sometimes butting up against it and other times stepping over it as it moves hurriedly from one line to the next. The preference for medial stops after unstressed syllables creates a profound disruption in the line by additionally disrupting an individual iamb, and their varied placement over the three prominent positions never establishes a predictable sonic pattern. In this respect, the use of pause and enjambment recalls the complex churning of the human mind at work,<sup>29</sup> at times too halting to complete a thought and at other times moving so rapidly through them that the thoughts outpace the speech, necessitating resolution in a later, slower line.

In the opening lines of the poem, the meter is elusive:  
 Five years have passed; five summers with the length  
 Of five long winters! And again I hear  
 These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs  
 With a sweet inland murmur.—Once again<sup>30</sup>  
 (ll. 1-4)

Rather than beginning with a series of iambs, or even, as is common, a trochee to begin the opening foot, the poem begins with alternating stressed and unstressed pairs: spondee, pyrrhic, spondee, pyrrhic. Only the

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<sup>28</sup> O'Donnell, 191.

<sup>29</sup> O'Donnell, 192.

<sup>30</sup> Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey" *Lyrical Ballads With Other Poems*, 1800, Vol. 2.

final foot, “the length,” is iambic, but because it is unpunctuated and enjambed, one hardly notices. The first foot of the second line is likewise iambic, but the next foot, another spondee, pulls the stressed syllable from the first foot to be heard with it part and parcel, no longer the last half of an iamb but rather the first of three prominent sequential stresses “five long winters!” A proper verse is not established until the third line, when, appropriately, the natural scene—“these waters rolling from their mountain springs”—briefly anchors both the speaker and the meter, before the fourth line, echoing and balancing the first, begins with a gentle pyrrhic that opens into a still gentler spondee, mimetic in its recollection of the bubbling spring that it describes.

“Tintern Abbey,” the final poem in *Lyrical Ballads*, is a display of Wordsworth’s versification at its finest, and its placement at the closing of his seminal work should not be overlooked. As the preface to the text promises simple language, artfully arranged, as pleasing to the ear as it is emotionally poignant and intellectually purposeful, so “Tintern Abbey” delivers a poem in sensible language, the language of “man speaking to men,”<sup>31</sup> that at the same time can take the reader to such heights of emotion and such profound contemplations, all the while weaving a sonic landscape as beautiful and nuanced as the physical landscape that moves the poet so. With such a closing, one cannot help but return once more to the beginning of the volume and consider what it is that the poet has accomplished.

In his preface, Wordsworth sets forth his aim of introducing the world to “a class of poetry . . . well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and not unimportant in the multiplicity, and in the quality of its moral

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<sup>31</sup> Wordsworth, “Preface.”

relations."<sup>32</sup> This new poetry is well adapted to hold the reader's interest because it is written in the reader's language. It is not socially unimportant, because it spreads the reader's empathy across characters and situations foreign to, and, one might even say, beneath the reader's own. These new poems relate scenes of "low and rustic life . . . because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint" and "because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature."<sup>33</sup> One can detect in this, as in the poems themselves, a yearning for the simplicity of rural life, and a clear pronouncement that it is in such lives that humans are at their freest and most essential. And yet, it is only through the careful employment of the restraining influence of meter that Wordsworth is able to free himself to write in the language and on the subjects that embody our most essential selves. It is likewise a credit to the pleasure of his metrical arrangements that he was able, in *Lyrical Ballads*, to free his readers to reach beyond themselves and their positions—to slow their pace and to consider the things, people and places that they see but never notice—and in so doing to touch a deeper and more human passion than they experience in other facets of their increasingly fast-paced, urbanized and industrialized lives.

Speaking on his contemporary English society, Wordsworth had this to say in his preface:

For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*,

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*,

the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident.<sup>34</sup>

But constrained as we humans are by our cities, our work and the politics of our nations, we yet possess a “natural and unalienable inheritance”<sup>35</sup> that frees us to experience the most essential aspects of our humanity when we are moved by poetry that “traces in [it] the primary laws of our nature.”<sup>36</sup> Because “poetry is the image of man and nature,”<sup>37</sup> it must reflect back to us both the state in which we find ourselves, and the state of our human ideal. It is the dynamic and ever changing tension between these two states that the blank verse poetry of Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* embodies, juxtaposing, as it does, the forces of freedom and those of constraint.

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<sup>34</sup> Wordsworth, “Preface.”

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*,

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*,

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*,

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