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Keats once wrote, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter...” Romantic poets often likened or contrasted their poetry to other art forms, such as painting and music. A poem reads in a linear way, but its overall composition may not be linear. In the mind of the reader, imagery may accumulate into a painterly moment of stasis. A painting has a more immediate sensuality than poetry, with its imagery and mood conveyed by pigment, the stuff of the earth, brushstrokes, and placement of forms. For the Romantic poets, orchestral music might have seemed the most elusive and evanescent of all art forms. Unless one counts the brassy clang of cymbals and the throaty friction of bow on string, orchestral music has neither the palpable sensuality of painting nor the permanent, communicative voice of printed poetry. Music can be about nothing more than the present experience of listening, evocative and redolent with mood. It appeals to the romantic sense of the elusive and exotic, of what lays beneath the surface of objective experience.

In his poem *The Solitary Reaper*, William Wordsworth finds *melodies unheard* in an unlikely place, a wheat field. Here an earthy reaper sings more sweetly than a nightingale—a birdsong light and lilting, forever attuned to poets and naturalists alike. Wordsworth frames the poem with gilded words, which to the modern reader also have the odd feel of a carnival barker: “Behold her, single in the field,/ Yon solitary Highland Lass! Reaping and singing by herself;/ Stop here, or gently pass!” The poem has a defined perspective, a third-person observer. Like an art object at a museum, the reaper betrays no awareness of covetous eyes. Yet Wordsworth seems unconcerned with sensual forms of beauty, be it the female form or the pastoral setting. Instead, he uses the rhetorical *O* to convey an unmediated experience of music: “Alone she cuts, and binds the grain,/ and sings a melancholy strain;/ O listen! for the Vale profound/ is

overflowing with the sound.” With this *O*, the poet’s formal repertoire of language vanishes from the page; instead, he strives for the silent evocativeness of sheet music. Subtly, the poet projects his desire to create *melodies unheard* onto the maiden song.

In the next stanza, Wordsworth likens the reaper’s song to exotic realms: “No Nightingale did ever chaunt/ So sweetly to reposing bands/ Of Travellers in some shady haunt/ Among Arabian Sands: No sweeter voice was ever heard/ In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,/ Breaking the silence of the seas/ Among the farthest Hebrides.” Yet before embarking on this exotic voyage, Wordsworth neglects to mention basic qualities of the song, and just how he knows the melancholy nature of the tune. Does she sing a familiar song with lyrics, passed down by generations of reapers? Or does she sing wordlessly, her vocal cords a veritable pan flute? In this manner, the comparison to the nightingale seems apt. Yet in the first two stanzas, the similes are subordinating and give no aural echo. She does not sound like a nightingale, nor does she sound like a Cuckoo-bird; rather, her melancholy voice seems indescribably sweeter than both. Here, one wonders why Wordsworth chooses no aural descriptions, such as timbre or pitch, or why he doesn’t find apt figurative language, such as *velvety* or *scratchy*, to evoke the experience of vocalized music. In the first two stanzas, the reader experiences the *melodies unheard* by a seemingly inadequate conductor, who doesn’t even try to capture the experience through words.

However, as the poem progresses, this negligence begins to seem purposeful. The third stanza attempts to quantify the song more, and for the first time, the voice trembles with doubt and tension. As if he can hear the tune but not the words, Wordsworth asks, “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 today?/ Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,/ That has been, and may be again!” Here the poet gropes for content, but

the reader senses that he cannot sustain this search. Indeed, Wordsworth once warned against over-interpretation by saying, “We murder to dissect.” At the same time, these rhetorical questions distance the reader even more from the immediate experience of the singing reaper, framed in the opening lines of the first stanza.

The final stanza provides a sense of narrative closure to the poem, and most directly reveals Wordsworth’s true concern. Indeed, well-worn lyrics seem mundane within the evocative and expressive quality of music, which echo in the mind long after listening. He writes, “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...” The comparatively abstract theme of the song seems less important than its mood, so life-sustaining amidst back-bending toil. Wordsworth also brings the reader back to the scene within the frame, the singing reaper with her sickle in the field. In this way, he can smoothly give his poem a narrative ending—a meditative experience balanced by a bit of sensuality, the huffing up a hill. He says, “And, as I mounted up the hill,/ The music in my heart I bore,/ Long after it was heard no more.” Here one thinks of fragmentary lines by Timon of Athens, cited by the poet Anthony Hecht in his aptly titled book, *Melodies Unheard*. Wordsworth’s heart has become full of potential, like so many “sweet instruments strung up in cases, that keep their sounds to themselves.” Here, one touches the pulse of poetry, its hidden music. At first, a poem finds its musical pace in stressed and unstressed beats, a natural cadence unnoticed by most readers. But then a poem loses its tethers to material reality, moving from the printed page to the subjective consciousness of its beholder. In the end, a poem seems airy and invisible yet lasting, like music itself, *the music in my heart I bore*.