

On Understanding the "Mutability" of Poetic Meanings

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William Wordsworth (1770-1850) might be considered the arch-typical Romantic poet and this poem "Mutability," written late in his career (1821), is an excellent example not only of his craft but of his Romantic idealism. With this explication it is intended to show not only the varied meanings of the poem but also the Romantic idealism demonstrated in Wordsworth's writings. This particular poem was included along with a group of poems expressing Wordsworth's feelings on the Church of England entitled *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, which might explain why he chose a hymn like theme to express his idea (Greenblatt 320). Reading the poem aloud it has a moody, musical quality to it that fits well with the words Wordsworth chose to express the poem's ideas about change. Using this musical quality as metaphor in his poem, Wordsworth expresses his ideas on how change is the truth in life. Through his judicious choice of words, the use of nature, the metaphor of music as change with internal pattern, and one of his favorite images of a crumbling tower, Wordsworth conveys his vision of an internal pattern in life that is truth even in the face of the ever apparent dynamic quality of nature, and that that "Truth" is God.

Not using the word in the body of his poem, Wordsworth titles this poem "Mutability" to help insure there is no doubt what the poem is speaking upon. Mutability was a common theme used by English writers dating as far back as Chaucer, and a major tenet of the Romantic Movement as well as a common theme in Wordsworth's works. Using "Mutability" as the title, the author sets his readers thinking about change, channeling their thoughts before they even get started. Placing the word as title also helps emphasize that this poem could be not only be about change, but the capacity to change, the ability to do so. Simply using the word "change" would not emphasize this capacity for change as well as mutability because of the internal word "ability." The idea of mutation is also expressed by the term. Although mutation did not take on the connotation it currently has at the time this poem was written, after Charles Darwin wrote *Origin of Species*, mutability's modern connection has given this word a richer meaning for this poem.

Although written in sonnet form, this poem breaks many of the conventions of a sonnet in its structure and rhyme scheme. The first six lines form a sentence and the last eight a second, reversing the usual pattern in a sonnet. The pattern, in the first two lines especially, gives a seesaw rhythm to the poem adding to its musical imagery. The poem's pattern strongly accentuates the musical metaphor of the poem aided by Wordsworth's rhyme scheme and uses of alliteration and assonance. Alliteration is found in the first ("doth dissolution") and fifth ("musical" and "melancholy") lines as well as assonance in line six with the repetitions of the "a" sound ("avarice" and "anxious") and "o" ("nor" twice and "over"). His use of the rhyme scheme ABBA AC CA DACDCA ties together the first sentence to the second and the beginning of the poem with the end. Using "climb" and "time" as the first and last words in the poem changes the overall feeling of the poem. The beginning of the poem seems very solemn but changes to being uplifting by uniting "climb" with "time."

Paraphrasing the first sentence, the speaker explains through a musical metaphor, that like notes on a musical scale change naturally ebbs and flows for those who take notice. Wordsworth's choices of words in the first two lines create a feeling of harmony, balance and rhythm giving them a musical quality. Through his selection of repetitive letters and vowel sounds he creates an internal pattern to his changing words. His use of the repetition of the words "high" and "low," starting first with "low" and climbing to "high" and reversing them in the second line he conveys the meaning of the words, along with the moving up and down sensation a musical scale creates, showing an internal pattern. The first sentence is talking about not only that change happens but also showing that there is an internal pattern to change. Literally talking about ascending and descending of a musical scale, the first sentence imitates the musical quality of the metaphor with its use of word order, assonance and alliteration. With this pattern of rising and falling, the rhythmic cycle of the metaphor evokes other images, such as the sun's rise and fall or ocean waves' ebb and flow.

In plain language the first line says that all things little or great fall-apart (dissolve), change, at an increasing rate. Everything, from simple to complex, from the smallest to the largest, changes over time. The choice of the word "dissolution" in the first sentence is very interesting with one of its meanings being the dissatisfaction with or loss of faith in something. Wordsworth was said to have lost faith in the hope for social change that the political revolutions in Europe brought early in his life. Critics claim his later writing suffered, noting that he produced significantly less material, and he seemed disenchanted with many of the Romantic ideas he once held. Expectations of social reforms promised by the French Revolution, and contacts with many refugees forced out of France were a couple of reasons Wordsworth had become "dissolved" from the Romantic Movement. "Dissolution" also can mean the disbanding of a group or the bringing of something to its termination. Very cleverly, the reader sees the presentation of an internal pattern within the poem speaking about the ending of something through change. Although there is change, "mutability," at the same time there remains an underlying pattern. Finally, it is notable that at the time this poem was written "dissolution" had a common musical meaning involving the moving down of consecutive notes in a musical scale, of which Wordsworth's contemporary audience would have been aware, carrying through his musical theme. "Climb," the last word of the first line, like "dissolution," conveys an idea of a gradual change. To "climb" is the patterned upward movement of evenly placed steps, like in a musical scale, the rise and fall of the sun and moon, or the crest and fall of ocean waves, all keeping the ongoing theme of pattern within change. The "dissolution" of a solute in a solution is also a gradual process.

After the opening line, Wordsworth switches to an obvious musical metaphor. Lines two and three present the idea of moving up and down a musical scale; that the change taking place in line one has a pattern to it. In the second line the reader sinks down from their high climb and reverses direction completing the scale. "Sink" is commonly associated with water as in a ship sinking in the ocean, as well as the sinking of the moon, again carrying through on the imagery of the sun rising and moon sinking or waves rising and sinking, rhythmic internal pattern. These first two lines, ripe with possibilities, convey the overall imagery of the natural world changing in a gradual rhythmic pattern. Furthering the connection is the repetition of the s sound in the words "sink" and "scale."

Line three continues to reinforce the idea of rhythm in the nature of change. Paraphrasing, line three says that musical notes inspired by God have a harmonic pattern which will never "fail." Using the word "awful" might confuse the contemporary reader with the modern connotation of being something very bad but the older meaning of full of awe, inspiring a sense of the sublime, more likely fits for a Romantic poet. And what is inspiring this awe is the notes of the music nature is creating for us in its rise and fall. Along with the meaning of a musical note, there is also the idea of importance contained in using the word "note." A "note" is an important legal document used when borrowing money or a person of "note" is one who carries some kind of distinction or importance. These "notes" create a "concord," a harmonious agreement, a harmonious legal agreement, a legal agreement following the laws of nature. "Concord" in musical terms is specifically a harmonious agreement between notes whose pattern resolves it so that it can stand alone without the need of additional notes or chords. The other definitions of "concord" carry through the idea of a harmonious union of words, people, or nations. The constantly changing notes used creating music must have an internal pattern holding them together. The completion of this line with the phrase "shall not fail" also presents an interesting use of words. "Shall" is an imperative commanding that something will be done in the future, giving a sense of permanence to change, of moving forward. Using "shall" gives this underlying pattern, which seems to be holding change together, permanence. The pattern "shall not fail;" it will never be lacking or inadequate. Another meaning of "fail" is to die so this change projected into the future will be faithful even after death. "Shall" also carries a religious connotation, a strong undertone within the poem.

Remembering the narrator is speaking about "dissolution," the dissolving of something, the change and decay of all things over time, line four finishes this metaphor about the musical nature of change. This change is "musical," it is harmonious and pleasing to the ear but at the same time it is "melancholy." The line is saying that despite the pleasant, musical, natural pattern to change, it can also cause remorse. At the time this poem was written melancholy was still understood by many as relating to medicine as one of four basic humours that controlled human health and well being. Too much melancholy made a person sad, angry, and depressed and so was associated with these feelings. In context to this poem change is normally not desired and often makes a person pensive, moody, and mournful with a feeling of loss of order, disharmonious. The line finishes with "chime," again a harmonious combination of music pleasing to the ear. A chime can also be the instrument itself, normally a group of bells. The poem expressing that change is both welcome and depressing as people enjoy having a steady state, a status quo, but at the same time like spontaneity and differences, changes. Human beings often desire change while resisting it, even knowing in reality that only the pattern underneath nature is unchangeable. Change is unavoidable.

Lines five and six abruptly switch the flow of thought by the narrator. The speaker is now describing why people are not aware of these changes around them. They express that only virtuous, moral people recognize change happening. Summarizing the first sentence, the speaker uses a musical metaphor to express how people who are moral and not overly preoccupied with their daily lives can see an underlying pattern, an ebb and flow in the natural change in the world created by God. Similar to the ideas expressed by Wordsworth earlier in "The World Is too Much with Us," people who are preoccupied with themselves and not nature, do not perceive these changes. This poem is different from "World" with its strong moral component. Specifically, immoral people are the ones who miss the changes. Continuing with the musical metaphor the speaker is now discussing who is able to perceive this pattern of change. "Which they can hear" is obviously referring to those people who can hear the music. The phrase, to hear the music, is used to denote a person who can see change on the horizon, understanding its inevitability. The second half of the line begins to define who it is that can hear the music. Of the multiple meanings of the word "meddle," to mix or mingle seems the only appropriate choice when paired with "crime." To engage in conflict or sex or to interfere do not seem appropriate here. Often a word choice a poet makes is to keep pattern intact and it seems that in this instance the choice of "meddle" may well be an example. Excluded are people who are criminals or engage in "crime," crime more likely being used in the broader context as doing something morally objectionable than in its meaning of breaking the law. It is interesting the speaker uses a negation to explain this section. Wishing to appear humble, the speaker uses a negation, placing emphasis on his being moral, but at the same time doing so with humility. The vices singled out include "avarice," which refers to people who wish to gather extreme amounts of wealth and, or who are not willing to share that wealth, and lastly those with "over-anxious care" (6). "Over-anxious" is the suffering mentally from anticipating something might happen, or over the future consequences of that something happening. It can also be fear or doubt about the outcome of an event, or contrarily, full of anticipation with an excitement towards a coming event and not its dread. The narrator here seems to be referring back to the "melancholy" he has referred to regarding change. Giving examples of things, which are immoral or improper to demonstrate why a person cannot hear the music, the word "over" is used to emphasize excess. It is not just anxious but "over-anxious" and this anxiety is directed toward caring. "Care" is the common name for a kind of ash tree the author would have been familiar with, but it is unlikely this has significance here. Most of the other meanings do fit such as to be in charge, to be responsible for the safekeeping of another, and could very well cause one to be anxious. To be the center of that anxiety, the cause, could also be called the "care" and even to provide medical treatment could possibly be applicable here. Being "overly" worried about natural change as an improper or immoral action, grouped with "crime" and "avarice" are the examples used of things preventing someone from hearing the music. These lines are trying to connote the old adage that a person cannot see the forest for the trees. If someone is too concerned with acts of daily living, then that person will miss the music by not attending to it.

The next sentence begins at line seven talking about "truth" not failing. Wordsworth has chosen to repeat the use of the word "fail" used earlier in reference to "concord." Shifting from his musical metaphor the speaker is now explaining what holds the world together in this chaos of change, "Truth." "Truth" often has a religious meaning as that which God knows but humans only guess. "Truth" is the actuality, reality, the immutable essence, in religious convention, known only by God that humans merely speculate upon with their senses, which are fallible, whereas God's truth is not. Humans who are believers in God's "truth" have a "concord" with Him in the Christian belief and this author was Christian. "Truth fails not," by repeating the use of "fail" leads the reader back to the previous sentence. The speaker is referring back to the underlying pattern to change he has introduced, to the "mutability" of nature, of corporeal things altering without changing their core pattern, their "spirit." "Truth" then is this "spirit," the true reality; the insensible reality not based on belief but actuality, the pattern infused into all things by God.

The sentence continues with the speaker defining to what "truth" here is referring. Paraphrasing lines seven and eight, the speaker explains that what always holds true is change; that the internal pattern in life created by God is the "truth" which never changes, while the physical things in the world do. The sentence continues "but her" so it is understood that the subject of "her" is "truth." "Her" is "truth" personified and the "but" makes the expression following it a conditional phrase excluding possibilities. "Truth" never "fails" "but" other things do. And what are the things which are not true, which "truth fails?" The speaker explains, "but her outward forms that bear / The longest date do melt like frosty rime" (7/8). The pattern God has infused into the world is "truth," which is immortal, unlike the corporeal world that people live in which is mutable. In simple, everything but God's "truth" changes. "Outward forms" is an interesting use of words. "Outward" means on the surface or moving away from the center. "Outward" is superficial and not the essence of the "form." "Outward" refers to the external, corporeal nature not the true nature. "Form" is a model, a manner or representation but not the actual thing itself. Again words chosen here have religious meanings and connotations. One must have proper "form," proper decorum in church; and "outward" thoughts are corporeal or secular ideas that interfere with one's concentration on God. Both "outward" and "form" are words relating to a part of the whole reality of a thing, a representation having only partial truth. These forms "bear," they wear, "the longest date." "Bear" in this usage again places superficiality to the meaning. Of the multiple meanings of "bear," none of them gives a sense of permanence. To "bear" is to tolerate, to sustain or to support, again dealing with the external the surface of a thing, the sensual reality and not its truth. Another interesting meaning of "bear" is to give birth, to yield, or to bring forth, which calls forth a different connotation to the idea of change as the transformation from one "form" to another, the rebirth of things by change. "Form" can also be a mold used to give birth to something. "Form" is also an allusion to Plato and his philosophy. Plato's "forms" being true reality and not these sensuous representations; "forms" being an ontological term dealing with "truth" but again like in "World," using an earlier pagan argument.

Lines seven through fourteen express three related ideas about the pattern of change. First, that no matter how long something exists, it changes. That these changes happen both quickly and slowly without regard to whether the things changing are natural or manmade and that the reasons for change is unknown to man. Wordsworth shifts from using a musical metaphor to using personifications and similes of corporeal objects. The second sentence shifts to the pantheistic explanation of change; keeping a distinction between the religious nature of the God (male) and the pantheistic expression of the essence of change (female) caused by this essential pattern God instilled in life. Paraphrasing, truth (the pattern God infused in all creation) never fails, but natural and man made objects do; they change. Moreover, this change has no barriers, no compassion, and its true causation is unknown to man.

Next, come the words "longest date" obviously referring to the temporal length of existence these "forms" have. No matter how long something exists, it is still subject to change, that the only thing immortal and permanent is the pattern, the "truth"

essential to all nature. The idea of things being temporal, markers to a specific period of existence, reinforces the theme of the poem. The idea of "dating" something, as making it something that has passed, obsolete, is also interesting to think of in this context of change although not the direct meaning here.

What happens to these "longest lasting forms" is that they "melt like frosty rime" (9). The final sentence the speaker uses two examples, one of how change takes place very rapidly in a matter of a few hours, a morning, or over the length of the memory of a man. First he uses an example in nature of a beautiful "frost" rapidly melted by the sun and then switches to a man made "tower" falling into decay over many years. "Melt" is another example of Wordsworth's choice of words linking meanings. "Melt" is nearly synonymous with "dissolve" used in the first line tying the two together. "Melt" is also referring back to time and the temporal nature of things, as being that period in spring when the ice melts and spring transforms winter from white to green. "Melt" can also mean to overwhelm with emotion. The reference here of course is to the melting of the "frost" but the other connections are obvious to the close reader and add to the richness of the imagery. Choosing a simile, the speaker has moved from appealing to our sense of sound to adding the touch of cold and the visual white. The phrase is completed by the tautology "frosty rime" introducing these two new sensations into the poem. The speaker has personified "truth" (7) as the female essence that remains after all else changes. God is normally referred to as male, but here, the choice of this internal unchanging essence that seems to be the embodiment of God infused into nature, is addressed as female. Wordsworth has also chosen to use the term "bear" in reference to "truth" giving birth to change, tightly packaging the personification. Line nine continues the thought and describes the "frost" painting a pastoral scene for a brief part of the day rapidly changing back to green from white. The connotation of beginning is also within the word "morning." The use of "morning" as the time of day, although logical, brings forth to the mind of the reader mourning, as in the sadness of loss, linking back to the "melancholy chime" (4). The "chime," the internally ringing bell in our minds when a person is suddenly awakened, when there is the sudden recognition of a significant, "awful" change. "Whitened hill and plain" would be our speaker trying to include all nature in change; "hill and plain" an expression commonly used to describe encompassing everything in the world. The use of the color white, the symbol of purity and of aging holds together here. The "frost" that has aged nature passes quickly has more change follow it. "Whitened" here used as a verb making it the active process of change; with "whitening" and "frost" both words used to express change through aging.

However, our "frost" is no more and the speaker moves on to a new thought shifting from things in nature to things created by man. Line ten changes to imagery that Wordsworth was very fond of, "Tintern Abby" circa 1798, shifting to a beautifully man-made tower of times past which has collapsed into ruin through the "touch of Time." Using "tower" as a simile, the change one sees in nature expresses change as seen in made objects as well. The "tower" was "sublime," which taken literally would mean very tall and uplifted but also goes back to our "awful" musical "notes," filling humans full of awe, uplifting a person with a sense of the divine in this creation of man. "Sublime" expresses the pantheism Wordsworth saw in nature. "Sublime" is also the process of changing a gas into a solid without going through a liquid phase again conveying the idea of change. "Towers" multiple meanings all relate to being lofted, or exalted above whatever it is being compared. To "tower," is used in the context of exhaled; the words "tower sublime" form another tautology. The breaks between line nine and ten, and ten and eleven alters the thoughts of the reader. Line nine is nature and line ten is an image of an inspiring manmade creation, which in their next line is abruptly destroyed, with "is no more" and "of yesterday." Although the speaker is describing something that lasted for a very long time, a "tower," its demise is made sudden with the phrase "of yesterday" coming on the following line. The "tower" is personified, wearing "royally" (11) his "crown of weeds," (12) suggesting humility. The word "wear" is another word expressing gradual change. When something "wears" it normally does so with a pattern; the heaviest used parts showing the effects first. "Wear" also evokes a seasonal quality (winter "wear") carrying through with the idea of patterned change. The "tower" was so beautiful it could wear weeds, natural indigenous plants as opposed to cultivated flowers, royally, with great pomp and pride. The irony here, of royally wearing weeds, demonstrates the tower's humility, which coincides with the narrator's humility, expressed in lines five and six. The "tower" personified evokes the image of a poet laureate, a common person able to express the sublime with the use of simple words. "Crown" refers to royalty, to the "exaltedness" of a man continuing the parallel of both man and nature being equally affected by change. Sutton-Ramspeck notes that "weeds" were black clothes worn by widows, referring back to "melancholy" and "bear," as the image of the "tower's" death would be fitting here as well.

In line thirteen the "tower" collapses by "Some casual shout that broke the silent air." This is the first of two possible causes of the collapse of the "tower" and the tone of the poem suggests not the speaker's choice. The speaker explains change using the "tower's" demise in the last three lines, telling his reader that despite man's handiwork being strong and beautiful it is insignificant, unable to withstand the ravages of change. This change is sudden and unplanned seemingly contradicting the underlying pattern expressed throughout the poem. "Shout" is a loud exaltation; a warning or an exclamation of joy yelled loudly, resounded casually, haphazardly collapsing the tower. This loud cry is "casual," it is not interested nor emotional about whatever effect it caused as it "broke the silent air" (13). "Casual" can also denote something that is informal or not permanent continuing with the uses of words connoting change. "Broke" is a causal word as the effector of an action. The speaker is showing that whatever action caused the demise of the tower was sudden and not deliberate; it was simply through the design of nature, the thread of "truth" beneath nature that holds everything united. "Broke" can also mean to make obedient giving "shout" power over "silence." "Silent" means without a voice, and here could be indicating that the changes happening are inevitable, that nature has no voice to deny changes happening.

The second explanation for the tower's collapse is "the unimaginable touch of Time" (14). Here the contradiction of pattern within nature is erased. "Time" is personified, having the ability to "touch" the "tower" and crumble it to the ground. Because the speaker has placed "time" beyond the mental abilities of the human mind, "unimaginable," he has placed it in the same realm of understanding as "truth." The alternative meaning of "touch" in the sense of evoking a strong emotional response could also apply as a secondary meaning. "Time" continues the idea of pattern used in the poem. "Time" being a fixed, patterned measurement, an era identifiable normally as having passed - changed. Wordsworth capitalizes "Time" equating it to "Truth," carrying through the theme that change is the internal pattern of God. Nevertheless, like the "frost" the "tower" too cannot "sustain" time. Using "sustain," is again the use of a word pointing to upholding and supporting. All these words maintain the constant use of helping words, words that show aide, but cannot stand alone, pointing to the heavens, helping words that need a foundation to work from, an underlying pattern of "truth."

Wordsworth very craftily constructed a poem where he unites many elements and through careful word choice carries a unified theme throughout; that in spite of the changes made by time affecting all corporal things there is still a truth, a pattern underlying that is essential and immortal. Choosing multiple words with an upward movement or a sustaining quality he has unified and tied the word "climb"(1) with "time"(14) giving his poem an uplifting quality. Starting with a musical metaphor and then switching to a tower metaphor, he joined the natural world with the art of man, covering all beauty anywhere in reality and demonstrating that the truth underlying all of reality is a pattern held together by something awe inspiring and sublime, the pattern of God. Like a beautiful chord of music, Wordsworth has strung together a harmonious string of words held together by the rhythmic pulse of nature.

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