

Narration and the
question of isolation
in 'their lonely betters'
and 'resolution...'



Both 'Their Lonely Betters' and 'Resolution and Independence' convey the feelings of how, along with how great the gift of speech is in allowing us to be unique and communicate with one another, we should appreciate nature for what it is, for revealing to us the finer details in life. Yet, particularly in Wordsworth's poem, he emphasises the danger of becoming too reliant on nature as guidance. However, most importantly, I have chosen these poems to compare, as they make vivid how pleasurable the interaction between others can be, and however solitary human existence becomes, there is the interaction with nature to allow a peaceful reminder that you are not alone.

Auden's and Wordsworth's poems are written and narrated in the first person, and so we immediately get a certain intimacy which we enjoy between the interactions these narrators are having. When describing "the rustling flowers" in Auden's or the "courteous speech" in Wordsworth's, through a certain free indirect discourse, we receive an emotional insight into the narrators, gaining intimations of his true feeling through the way they describe their interactions. The poems start almost in media res, as if things had been events prior to this. "As I listened from a beach-chair" as Auden's starts has a colloquial, domestic, familial feel which sounds as though this is a common event and one that goes on for some time. The fact the narrator is just "listening" and not looking is interesting as it makes explicit what Auden is trying to say, that communicating with nature is a lovely way of escaping the verbal interactions with other people which are "Words are for those with promises keep"- by verbalising and communicating, often you speak lies and break promises, but actually all you need to communicate and understand nature is just to listen. Auden I feel in this last

line has a positive outlook on human interaction as, despite all the disingenuous, sly connotations that often arise from bad communication, it is better to have that than nothing at all. Wordsworth's poem begins, "Himself he propped, limbs, body, and pale face" which appears sudden and the fact we have the reflexive pronoun with the verbal pronoun juxtaposed, creating a aspirated, hushed, alliterative sound, makes it evident that he is independent and doing it without help- unlike the narrator is. The asyndeton makes it flow nicely and the fact that only 'face' has an adjective is interesting, perhaps signifying that the façade is the primary feature with which we communicate emotion. The description of the man uses very basic, generalising language, and along with the "shaven wood" he is leaning on, helps to create an image of reduction and the revealing of the elements of our natural selves, and the long assonantal sounds of "wood...moorish flood//Motionless...stood" make it feel very elemental and comforting. Indeed, the enjambment here enacts the sudden stop and stillness as the man stands 'motionless.

The meter and the rhyme scheme in Auden's poem convey a certain control and resolute decisiveness about his interpretations of natural gifts. The way in which it is written in heroic couplets but the first two lines in the stanzas are iambic pentameter, to reflect more sincere, grave overtones like "lying...dying", and the next two are hypermetric, to reflect more upbeat, positive ones like "rustling flowers", emphasises, through a strong pattern, this dichotomy between the realities of communication. Similarly, Wordsworth's poem is written in flowing iambic pentameters, which sound almost natural in themselves like a heartbeat, linking the description of the

old man with nature, interspersed with hypermetric lines, carrying more loaded content. The royal rhyme scheme is different in the fact it is ABABBCC which means that the nice couplet at the end creates a dramatic finality to each stanza. We see in Auden's poem almost a depiction that the garden itself is alive and communicating like humans "all the noises my garden made" and the personification here, along with the soft 'm's and the stressed metric foot of 'made' constructs a nice feeling of an animated, warm, friendly organism we are reading about. In Wordsworth's, it is said that "A gentle answer did the old Man make, // In courteous speech" and this similarly, as the man comes to stand for the whole of nature itself, makes it feel nurturing and alive. The hyperbaton here is emphatic in that it stresses by position that he made no malicious response, but a gentle one, and the presence of 'm' is soothing in alliteration.

The tone of the narrator in Auden's poem could be interpreted as being perhaps a little melancholy with "only proper that words // Should be withheld from vegetables and birds" as if he wishes that mundane, domestic nature would not be thus attainted with what constitutes a language. He also ambiguously could be asking humans to be gracious for what we have in communication, and indeed the last stanza says "We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep: // Words are for those with promises to keep" which, through the caesura, breaking up the flowing meter, and the series of decisive monosyllables, sounds as if it is a positive outlook; as if it is better to communicate with imperfections than to not at all. Wordsworth in his last stanza says, "his words came feebly, from a feeble chest // But each in solemn order followed each" which sounds imperfect and uncomfortable,

stressed by the polyptoton of feeble in adverbial then adjectival form to emphasize the weakness of what he is saying, and the nicely mirrored repetition of ' each' mimetically as the line says in order, following the other. The use of the harsh consonants in " lofty utterance drest" further develop a feeling of uncomfortable anxiety.

In Auden's poem we see that in nature " Not one of them was capable of lying, // There was not one which knew that it was dying". The simplicity of nature is captured by the almost incredulous isocolonic repetition of ' not one...' and the hypermetric line 10 emphasises not in concordance with the meter scheme, the turbulence associated with death. As opposed to the deceit and imperfections of Auden's poem, Wordsworth paints a man who with " choice word and measured phrase, above the reach // Of ordinary men; a stately speech" faces the world with rational thinking and a cautious, observing approach. The rhythm is controlled and steadfast, and the enjambment helps emphasise the fact he is far beyond the capabilities of the " lying" and " dying" that Auden speaks of.

Wordsworth depicts the arrival of something unknown to the old Man as something uncomfortable: " At length, himself unsettling, he the pond // stirred with his staff" which is contrasted with Auden's depiction of nature, being content in its known surroundings, as " with rhythm and rhyme, // assumed the responsibility of time". Wordsworth uses hyperbaton to break up the rhythm and meter, making the awakening feel unwanted and then the enjambment enacts the stirring and the sibilant consonant duos are effective in highlighting a discontent. Conversely, Auden's couplet is in

perfect fulfilled iambic pentameter, and feels much more comfortable with soft sibilants, devoid of harsh consonants.

The pleasure and eagerness for nature and humans to communicate is encapsulated in both poems. Auden says that “ a robin with no Christian name ran through// The Robin- Anthem which was all it knew” which, via the emphasis of the simplicity of the workings of nature- not having names- and the flowing asyndeton, creates a nice pace and energy for this bird song understood by others. Wordsworth, through the oxymoron of “ as I drew near with gentle pace” highlights an evident desire to want to communicate and feels energised and excited with the prospect of contact. Similarly, “ drawing to his side, to him did say” with the mirroring of the possessive pronoun and pronoun creates a nice feeling of intimacy in the repetition; a desire to be near. Indeed, the direct speech in this poem is a blatant example of how pleasure is derived from asking questions and communicating- the narrator is actively addressing the unknown old Man for pleasure, who “ ere he replied, a flash of mild surprise”, through the partial internal rhyme, nicely conveys almost a pleasant reaction to the opportunity in being able to communicate. The sad image of the old man being in a “ lonesome place” is mirrored in Auden’s poem with “ let them leave language to their lonely betters” as if hinting at the bleak portrayal of humanity as being a solitary existence, and that we, no matter how much we want to be like nature’s incessant buzz and life and community, have to be alone. The hypallagy of Wordsworth; s description of the man is damning and Auden’s use of languid, lengthy ‘ l’s and soft assonance sounds miserable, as if humanity is cursed with the fate of having to speak untruths and imperfections.

The breaking from the “sable orbs of his yet-vivid eyes” in Wordsworth’s compares nicely with natural imagery of the “rustling flowers...to say which pairs, if any, should get mated”- it is as if the old Man has to break from animated nature by which he has lived his life happily, to communicate, but actual nature, the flowers and the shrubbery, does not, as it does not have that capacity. The Auden line 8 feels like a marital image as if there is marriage within nature, but the old man in Wordsworth’s feels torn between marriage between nature and humanity.