

NATURE, MEMORY, AND THE SUBLIME: A STUDY OF WORDSWORTH'S PHILOSOPHICAL VISION IN *TINTERN ABBEY*

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Abstract

The present paper analyzes Wordsworth, in his poem *Tintern Abbey*, as how he dealt with nature, memory, and the Sublime in the Romantic tradition. Based on the notions of the Sublime, as proposed by Burke and Kant, the analysis explains how Wordsworth redefines nature as a companion and as a tutor and not an object of distance and awe. The poem relates the connection between the poet and nature as a continuum of relations, which develop as time goes by. When the poet is still young, he enjoys the natural environment as against when he is older and is indulged into reflective meditation about the environment. Furthermore, nature is assumed to be constitutive of the moral consciousness and behavior. To describe nature as a nurse, a guide and the soul of moral being, Wordsworth anticipates nature not only as an object of aesthetics but as an ally that strengthens human agency and develops self-awareness. The paper also questions how Wordsworth has used various imagery and language devices that mediate the outer scenery and subjective recollections in alternative ways, thus defining a unique Romantic understanding of nature. As a result of this, the article argues that the ethos of Romanticism is summed up in the article of *Tintern Abbey*. Also, the paper relates Wordsworth meditations with contemporary climate-change rhetoric, indicating that his focus on what nature provides prefigures the issue of ecology in the modern times. Locating nature outside of time and human constraints, Wordsworth increases the topicality of his works, demonstrating a timeless interest of people in nature with the help of consciousness.

Keywords: Wordsworth, Romanticism, Sublime, Nature, Memory, *Tintern Abbey*, Environmental Thought

Introduction

The Romantic Movement began at the end of the eighteenth century as a reaction against the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, with its focus on feeling and imagination being given more emphasis than ever before. It, too, gave a sense of reverence towards nature. Romantic poets bargained between humanity and the natural world nature was seen not only as the source of aesthetic pleasure but also as a source of wisdom. At the heart of the movement was the vision of the Sublime which were the experiences caused by emotions of awe, wonder, and sometimes a feeling of fear that people experience upon encountering forces of power and the infinite nature.

The poetry of Wordsworth evidences a richness that distinguishes him among other Romantic poets with regard to their attitudes towards and philosophical thoughts about nature. The enduring impact of the natural environment on the memory and the self is explored in his oeuvre, such as in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and *The Prelude* (1850). The most famous work of Wordsworth, *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, reflects on the time, human consciousness, emotional conditions and the constant influence of the nature on human mind. The poem is written in blank verse. It was written at a later stage when Wordsworth visited the Wye Valley after a period of five years and this visit enhanced his admiration of nature. In comparison with traditional landscape poetry, *Tintern Abbey* does not simply offer an outward description of the ruined abbey, nature is an external and internal presence, which influences the cognition and feeling of the poet. This paper questions the manner in which Wordsworth

uses imagery of nature to invoke the Sublime in the poem, *Tintern Abbey*, and argue that the landscape, imagery of the senses, and the tone of the poem create an all-inclusive image of the natures.

Literature Review

The poem *Tintern Abbey* by Wordsworth, which basically revolves around the idea of the Sublime, recollection and the transformative power of nature as a fundamental element of the Romantic thought, has become the subject of many scholarly studies over time. Researchers have explored how Wordsworth has approached the natural world in light of the Romanticism philosophy, his self-referential approaches, and how these approaches contributed to the themes in the poem, or how the poet himself predicted the current environmental and ecological issues of the contemporary world. This literary analysis provides a synthesis of the main scholarly perceptions of the past of the *Tintern Abbey* with special emphasis on its relationship with the Sublime, memory, and the human mind; this analysis will evaluate as well the role of Wordsworth in the Romanticism and environmental rhetoric.

The Sublime in *Tintern Abbey*: Burkean vs. Kantian Readings.

One of the main subjects of the discussion among scholars is how the Sublime is addressed in the way, in which it is done in *Tintern Abbey*. In his work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) Burke defines the Beautiful as a state that yields harmony and pleasure, and the Sublime as a state of enormity, strength and even fright. According to Weiskel (1976), the way Wordsworth treats the subject is consistent with the Burkean notions since it depicts nature to be infinitely grand and awe-inspiring and yet in the end benevolent or nurturing. Although the poem includes descriptive accounts of cliffs and rolling scenery that remind the classic image of the Sublime, Wordsworth does not prefigure the aspects of the Sublime that may induce fear, rather, he stresses upon the ability of nature to mend and remake the self and the spirit. In comparison to this, the Sublime, in Kant, of the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) is a mental experience of the infinite or the too much. Bate (1991) argues that Wordsworth has a conception of nature that can be described as Kantian rather than Burkean: nature does not crush him but provokes him to reflection, making his reaction to it more philosophical than sensory. The river and the cliffs in *Tintern Abbey* very strongly influence the imagination and the mental state of poet; the sublime experience in this case is both internal and external and this affirms the meditative nature of the perception and the time that the poem is reflecting.

Reminiscence and the Transforming power of Nature

Another critical theme in *Tintern Abbey* is the association of memory and nature. According to scholars, Romantics were of the view that nature could be reconstructed in some ways so as to distill moral and intellectual faculties. Bate (1991) addresses Wordsworth and his idea of spots of time, moments that are defining, rooted and lifelong. In *Tintern Abbey*, the poet reminisces a landscape that he had known previously in his life and its changed perception. Whereas it was full of joy and unconsciousness when one was young in their interaction with nature, adulthood presents the realization of the nature in terms of wisdom and inner peace. According to James (1984), Wordsworth at one time thought that nature can heal or put the mind back. The poet claims that Wye Valley constantly interacts with him and its memory can comfort him when the poet is deprived of it. This is in line with the larger Romantic perception that nature is a solution to the alienation and disintegration in industrial society. The thematic treatment of memory in the poem *Tintern Abbey* has also been compared with others of the Romanticism period including the *Frost at Midnight*, the poem by Coleridge, which also gives the hint that nature has the ability to change the human mind over time.

Nature a Moral and Spiritual Guide

One of the central themes in the poem *Tintern Abbey* is that nature is the teacher and the moral guide and would easily fall under a more Romantic philosophy. It has been noted by critics that there is a lot of spirituality in the way Wordsworth views nature, although in a different sense. According to Abrams (1971), Wordsworth and his fellows had developed a kind of natural supernaturalism where nature is a source of transcendence instead of organized religion. This is seen in *Tintern Abbey* wherein Wordsworth describes nature as the nurse and the guide and the guardian of my heart and soul of all my moral life. The poet thus attributes divine qualities to nature to some extent, which moulds human morality and strengthens morality determination.

Wordsworth and the Impact on Romantic and Environmental Thought.

Outside its Romantic context, *Tintern Abbey* has been mentioned with respect to environmental issues, ecocriticism and ecology. As the works of Bate (2000) and Kroeber (1994) have implied, the poetry of Wordsworth foresaw the ecological issues of today by anticipating the complexity of interdependence between man and nature. His faith in the healing power of nature promotes the modern environmental stewardship and sustainability. Further, the perception that Wordsworth had of nature became a source of Transcendentalism and other literary trends that adopted the same ideals. Thoreau and Emerson were inspired by Wordsworth and his focus on the ability of nature to influence thought and moral knowledge which Thoreau shows through the *Walden* (1854). In ecocritical theory, the text of *Tintern Abbey* is mentioned as one of those that connects the present-day concerns with climate change and environmental destruction, which supports the idea that literature can educate ecological awareness. In this way, Wordsworth comes out not just as a Romantic poet of the Sublime, but also as a forerunner of ethical and spiritual association with nature. Academic analysis shows that the ideas of Romanticism, the Sublime, memory, and spiritual communication with nature remain relevant in the present day in relation to *Tintern Abbey*. Having been interpreted through diverse philosophical and literary prisms: Burkean and Kantian approaches to the Sublime, psychological studies of memory, the ecocritical theory, the poem of *Tintern Abbey* will always be an exemplar of Romantic poetry, which in turn suffices to ensure that Wordsworth continued to trust nature as he did.

Theoretical Framework

The sublime has become an essential component of the Romantic literary language; it is often referred to by poets in order to express the tremendous energy of nature and the deepest emotional and intellectual reactions that it produces in people. Contrarily, the picturesque is conditioned on the basis of the harmonious compositional balance whereas the beautiful refers to the aesthetic consonance. The sublime due to its enormity, grandeur, and sheer presence, tend to produce the feeling of terror. It is thus vital to distinguish between these categories of aesthetics. Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley- among other Romantic singers- were always praising sublime landscapes, where nature amazed the human mind, and at the same time aroused the poet and the awe in the reader. Of interest to note is how Wordsworth has approached the sublime, where he links it with the memory and himself to make it personal and subjective instead of just a response to the external stimuli. Therefore, in his *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth goes beyond a description of high cliffs and broad rivers as sublimity; he does not only focus on the changing nature of his perceptions of these landscapes through time.

In *Tintern Abbey*, Theories of the Sublime Burkean and Kantian.

The poetics of Wordsworth is an example of interaction between the conceptualization of the sublime as expressed by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. A philosophical position of

Burke is dominated by one framework, that of Kant. The question therefore comes whether Wordsworth follows a Burkean paradigm, a Kantian paradigm or a syncretic paradigm. Explaining the unequal responses of the sublime and the beautiful, Burke outlined in his 1757 treatise, a Philosophical Enquiry into the *Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, that both the sublime and the beautiful instigate varying states of affect. The beautiful as Burke defines it is smooth and delicate, and symmetrical creating a calm pleasure. The sublime on the other hand is characterized by size, indistinctiveness and pure force and generates awe, fear and reverence. Burke argued that the experience of objects inaccessible to human beings like vast mountains, raging storms or endless oceans, was the central theme of sublimity, which produces a combination of wonder and awe, which force the human mind to struggle with its own inabilities. The references to these concepts in Wordsworth Tintern Abbey, (such as those to the sublime, via description, wherein he highlights the sublimeness and permanence of nature, i.e. the steep and lofty cliffs which impress thoughts of greater seclusion) can be viewed as Burkean aspects of the sublime (as described above). However, Wordsworth does not follow the line of Burke on the focus on terror by defining the sublime as a source of spiritual and intellectual revitalization instead of a sheer power.

There are two types of Sublimes, differentiated by Kant:

1. The Mathematical Sublime, which is aroused by objects that seem infinitely large like expansive vista and nocturnal firmament thus beyond human understanding.
2. The Dynamical Sublime, that is caused by the action of the forces of nature that are considered to be beyond human control, e.g., stormy weather or huge mountains.

Kant claims that the mind responds to the sublime in that it tries to justify it therefore establishing its superiority to the nature and the ability of reason to capture even the strongest forces of the nature. The reaction to nature expressed by Wordsworth in Tintern Abbey shows that he was conversant with Kantian concepts. Instead of focusing his discussion on the beauty of nature, he reflects on how he has been able to change his perception about nature. That is, the sublime is not unchanging but evolves over time with the help of memory, growth, and reflection. Unlike Burke, the sublime Wordsworth bases his on internal processes. Thus, the sublime as imagined by Wordsworth is similar to the concept of Kant who believes that the real sublime is in the ability of the mind to connect with greatness and eternity.

The Sublime, Memory, and Personal Growth

One of the most striking characters of the poetry of Wordsworth is the combination of Sublime with the memory and time. Wordsworth, more than other poets of his time, argues that the nature perception depends on the person who perceives it:

" For I have learned

To look on nature, not as in the hour

Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes

The still, sad music of humanity." (Lines 89-92)

According to Wordsworth, the Sublime experience of nature is not historically absolute as it is believed by some of his contemporaries. As a child, he saw the natural world first of all in the expressed physical strength of it. He grew up as an adult to view nature as something with wisdom, healing properties and memory. This change of ontology is in line with the idea of the real Sublime proposed by Kant. Kant argues that the Sublime is not an outside force that cannot be understood by people. Wordsworth also writes that even without the physical presence of nature, the memory of nature is still imprinted in his psyche and so he is always sustained. This observation sheds light on the prerogative of Romanticism about the ability of the mind to recollect as well as to experience a re-awakening. The Sublime is therefore not a shallow manifestation but a living and moving reality in the mind. The concept of the

Sublime that Wordsworth is putting across corresponds closely with how he views nature as a spiritual and ethical guide.

Shelley and Keats were other Romantic poets who depicted nature as something transient and inspirational:

"Nature never did betray

The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy: for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts" (Lines 122-128)

Wordsworth ideologically characterises nature as a maternal power of divinity that leads him to the profound knowledge, emotional nourishment, and moral strength. Wordsworth, unlike Edmund Burke, sees immensity as a very mild, slowing influence on the human being, which builds up character as time progresses. On the contrary Burke defines sublime as overwhelming power. Nature is not just a beautiful and green world, still it has the light of freshness and the smell of the land and grass. Nature speaks to human beings. The natural world is an agent of human development. Wordsworth is said to have a tender heart and the spirit of trust. The idea that nature can guide humanity is emphasized by the fact that he believes that nature never betrays the heart that loves her. This view falls into the line of Abrams (1971) characterization of natural supernaturalism, which he uses to refer to the tendency of Romantics to reject the conventional belief in favor of nature as a way to raise oneself. Wordsworth avoids formal religion as a subscriber to his moral philosophy, and instead resorts to the silent, meditative capabilities of nature. According to Cindy Weinstein, an example of how Wordsworth tried to combine Burkean awe, Kantian transcendence, and Romantic introspection is his use of the sublime at *Tintern Abbey*. He recognizes the enormity of nature, but finally the sublime is what possesses personal value, which eventually develops with time.

Conclusion

In Tintern Abbey by William Wordsworth is not just a representation of nature, it shows that natural world can be a springboard to transformation and development of human beings. In addition, the poem assumes that nature enhances the consciousness of human beings. Using the tactical employment of descriptive language, philosophical speculation, and the intensely personal memory, Wordsworth introduces nature as a source of solace, moral guidance and spiritual uplifting. His activity with the Sublime is not limited only to the awing landscape but he intertwines all these with memory and self-reflection thus showing how the outer world tells the poet about his inner world.

The academic surrounding the poem claims that Wordsworth was of the view that Nature had the power to enhance human emotion. His attitude toward Nature changed with the exuberance of youth to the reflective manhood. The overpowering cliffs, winding rivers, and fields that he watches are not just points of observation but serve as symbolic means of delivery of his philosophical position. The poem argues that the nature is not a distinct entity because it has an inseparable connection with the memory and that memory influence's identity and moral values gradually. This vision adheres to the Romantic vision that nature is not incidental but a power that is informative and that is active and significantly influences human cognition.

Moreover, the memories aroused in *In Tintern Abbey* indicate that the natural setting offers a permanent legacy that makes up against the confusion and nonbelongingness of contemporary existence. The population is moving more towards neglecting nature as urbanization grows very fast. It is the importance of human-nature association and the need to appreciate its values that are brought out in the inquiry of Wordsworth. Nature, he claims, is at once aesthetically sublime, pedagogically recuperative, he urges his sister Dorothy to acquire wisdom in nature in the same way as he does as we see in his letter.

After all, *In Tintern Abbey* questions the power of nature to enlighten the human mind. Sense description, philosophical cogitation, and an increased feeling of the Sublime are utilized by Wordsworth in order to produce a masterpiece that breaks the boundaries of time and enhances the dialogue between human and nature. His vision is a condensation of humanity perennial desire to be at peace; to love and to understand and these are the qualities that are still highly relevant to the current ecological debates and the enlarging question of meaning in an ever more mechanised world.

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