

## William Wordsworth and *Tintern Abbey*

William Wordsworth was born on 7 April, 1770, at Cockermouth in Cumberland, England. His parents died during his boyhood. Raised amid the mountains of Cumberland alongside the river Derwent, Wordsworth grew up in a rustic society, and spent a great deal of his time playing outdoors, in what he would later remember as a pure communion with Nature. In the early 1790s, he lived for a time in France, and then, in the grip of the French Revolution, Wordsworth's philosophical sympathies lay with the revolutionaries, but his loyalties lay with England, whose monarchy he was not prepared to see overthrown. The chaos and bloodshed of the Reign of Terror in Paris drove him to books on philosophy; he was deeply troubled by the rationalism he found in the works of thinkers such as William Godwin, which clashed with his own softer, more emotional understanding of the world. In the mid-1790s, however, Wordsworth's increasing sense of anguish forced him to formulate his own understanding of the world and of the human mind in more concrete terms.

Freed from financial worries by a legacy left to him in 1795, Wordsworth moved with his sister Dorothy to Racedown, and then to Alfoxden in Grasmere, where he was closer to his friend and fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Together, Wordsworth and Coleridge began work on a book called *Lyrical Ballads*, first published in 1798 and reissued with Wordsworth's monumental preface in 1802.

The publication of *Lyrical Ballads* represents a landmark moment for English poetry. According to his theory that poetry resulted from the "spontaneous overflow" of emotions, as Wordsworth wrote in the preface, he and Coleridge made it their task to write in the simple language of common people, telling concrete stories of their lives. According to this theory, poetry originated in emotions recollected in a state of tranquility; the poet then surrendered to the emotion, so that the tranquility would dissolve into the emotion in the poem. This explicit emphasis on feeling, simplicity, and the pleasure of beauty over rhetoric, ornament, and formality changed the course of English poetry, replacing the elaborate classical forms of Pope and Dryden with a new Romantic sensibility. Wordsworth's most important legacy, besides his lovely, timeless poems, is his launching of the Romantic era, opening the gates for later writers such as John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron in England.

Following the success of *Lyrical Ballads* and his subsequent poem *The Prelude*, a massive autobiography in verse form, Wordsworth moved to the stately house at Rydal Mount

where he lived, with Dorothy, his wife Mary, and his children, until his death in 1850. The last decades of Wordsworth's life, however, were spent as Poet Laureate of England. Until his death he was widely considered the most important author in England.

First published in 1798, as the concluding poem of *Lyrical Ballads*, **Tintern Abbey** was composed on July 13, 1798, while Wordsworth and his sister were returning by the valley of the Wye, in south Wales, to Bristol after a walking tour of several days. The full title of this poem is "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798." It opens with the speaker's declaration that five years have passed since he last visited the location, saw its tranquil, rustic scenery, and heard the murmuring waters of the river. He recites the objects he sees again, and describes their effect upon him: the "steep and lofty cliffs" impress upon him "thoughts of more deep seclusion"; he leans against the dark sycamore tree and looks at the cottage-grounds and the orchard trees, whose fruit is still unripe. He sees the "wreaths of smoke" rising up from cottage chimneys between the trees, and imagines that they might rise from "vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods," or from the cave of a hermit in the deep forest.

He then describes how his memory of these "beauteous forms" has worked upon him in his absence from them: when he was alone, or in crowded towns and cities, they provided him with "sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart." The memory of the woods and cottages offered "tranquil restoration" to his mind, and even affected him when he was not aware of the memory, influencing his deeds of kindness and love. He further credits the memory of the scene with offering him access to that mental and spiritual state in which the burden of the world is lightened, in which he becomes a "living soul" with a vision of "the life of things."

Even in the present moment, the memory of his past experiences in these surroundings floats over his present view of them, and he feels a mixed joy in reviving them. He thinks happily that his present experience will provide many happy memories for future years. He acknowledges that he is different now from how he was in the past, when, as a boy, he "bounded o'er the mountains" and through the streams. In those days, he says, nature made up his whole world: waterfalls, mountains, and woods gave shape to his passions, his appetites, and his love. That time is now past, he says, but he does not mourn it, for though he cannot resume his old relationship with nature, he has been amply compensated by a new set of more mature gifts. For instance, he can now "look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth; but hearing

oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity.” He can now sense the presence of something far more rich and pure in the light of the setting suns, the ocean, the air itself, and even in the mind of man; this energy seems to him “a motion and a spirit that impels / All thinking thoughts... / And rolls through all things.” For this, he says, he still loves Nature, still loves mountains and pastures and woods, for they anchor his purest thoughts and guard the heart and soul of his “moral being”, in other words, himself. So, he describes a few stages in his relation with Nature.

He says that even if he had not felt this way or understood these things, he would still be in good spirits on the particular day, for he is in the company of his “dear, dear Sister,” who is also his “dear, dear Friend,” and in whose voice and manner he observes his former self, and beholds what he “was once.” He offers a prayer to nature that he might continue to do so for a little while, knowing, as he says, that “Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her,” but leads rather “from joy to joy” – from sensuous joy to spiritual joy. Nature’s power over the mind that seeks her out is such that it renders that mind impervious to “evil tongues,” “rash judgments,” and “the sneers of selfish men,” instilling instead a “cheerful faith” that the world is full of blessings. He then exhorts the moon to shine upon his sister, and the wind to blow against her. He says to her that in later years, when she is sad or fearful, the memory of this experience will help to heal her. And if he himself is no more, she can remember the love with which he worshipped nature. He wishes that she will remember what the woods meant to him, the way in which, after so many years of absence, they became more dear to him—both for themselves and for the fact that she has been with him.

The subject of ‘Tintern Abbey’ is memory—specifically, childhood memories of communion with natural beauty. Both generally and specifically, this subject is very important in Wordsworth’s works. The poem is Wordsworth’s first great statement of his major theme: that the memory of pure communion with nature in childhood works upon the mind even in adulthood, when access to that pure communion has been lost, and that the maturity of mind present in adulthood offers compensation for the loss of that communion—specifically, the ability to “look on nature” and hear “human music”; that is, to see nature with an eye toward its relationship to human life. In his youth, the poet says, he was thoughtless in his unity with the woods and the river; now, five years since his last viewing of the scene, he is no longer thoughtless, but acutely aware of everything the scene has to offer him. To add, the presence of

his sister gives him a view of himself as he imagines himself to have been as he once was years back. He has the knowledge that this current experience will provide both of them with future memories, just as his past experience has provided him with the memories that flicker across his present sight as he travels in the woods.

The poem has a subtle strain of spiritual sentiment; though the actual form of the Abbey does not appear in the poem, the idea of the abbey—of a place consecrated to the spirit—suffuses the scene, as though the forest and the fields were themselves the speaker's abbey. This idea is reinforced by the speaker's description of the power he feels in the setting sun and in the mind of man, which consciously links the ideas of God, nature, and the human mind—as they will be related in Wordsworth's poetry for the rest of his life. We know it as his pantheistic attitude to Nature. So, the description of his encounters with the countryside on the banks of the River Wye grows into an outline of his general philosophy. Transcending the nature poetry written before that date, it employs a much more intellectual and philosophical engagement with the subject that verges on Pantheism.

One should be very particular about what Wordsworth had meant by "we see into the life of things". Like thousands of travellers before him, Wordsworth's perception of the valley and its picturesque centre piece is informed by the aesthetics of tourism and by the genre of the landscape poem. But 'Tintern Abbey' is distinguished from other writings on this subject written in the late 18th century by its complex integration of landscape description, self-reflection and sheer philosophical content. After the opening description the speaker claims that he owes to the memory of his initial visit 'sensations sweet / Felt in the blood and felt along the heart' that have calmed and restored him in difficult times. He confidently states that the landscape has inspired 'another gift, / Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood / In which the burden of the mystery' of the world is 'lightened' and, with 'an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things'. Wordsworth looks beyond surface appearance to gain insight into a deeper level of existence by describing a trance like state in which the body is almost asleep, blood circulation almost suspended and we become "a living soul".. Distinguishing the 'coarse pleasures' that his younger self took in the forms of nature from the sober reflections of his mature self, the poet states that he has

“ ...a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.”

In contrast to the superficial unity of the picturesque, Wordsworth uses repeated connectives: ‘And the round ocean, and the living air’ and they are used as a means of fusing mind and nature in a living whole. The ‘sense sublime’ that ‘rolls through all things’, including all ‘thinking things’ is, as many critics noted, a pantheistic life-force.

Another important thing to note is Wordsworth’s mention of the language of his former heart. In the later part of the poem, it introduces a new figure, the poet’s sister Dorothy. In Dorothy’s ‘wild eyes’ Wordsworth is able to ‘read’ his ‘former pleasures’. The sister, in whom the poet is able to behold what he “once was”, thus serves as a final point of connection between past and present. With Dorothy established as a ‘dwelling-place’ for recollections of the moments, Wordsworth concludes ‘Tintern Abbey’ with a confident assertion of the ability of memory to overcome distinctions of time and space.

**The following topics may be prepared for long answers:**

1. Wordsworth’s attitude to Nature, as revealed in *Tintern Abbey*
2. *Tintern Abbey* as a philosophical poem

**For semi-long answers, the following may be prepared:**

1. What does Wordsworth mean by “we see into the life of things”?
2. How does Wordsworth describe his boyhood and youth in his relationship with Nature?
3. Locate the context and explain the lines:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.
4. What does Wordsworth say about Dorothy’s role in his worship of Nature?