

The Valorization of Nature in William Wordsworth's “Tintern Abbey”

Tuğba Karabulut
Çankaya Üniversitesi

William Wordsworth, often called the poet of nature, emphasizes the significance of nature, and how it inspires his imagination in his poems. In one of his letters to his sister, Dorothy, written between September, 6 and 12, 1790, he expresses his feelings about his love and admiration towards nature,

“I am a perfect Enthusiast in my admiration of nature in all her various forms; and I have looked upon and as it were conversed with the objects which this country has presented to my view so long, and with such increasing pleasure, that the idea of parting from them oppresses me with a sadness similar to what I have always felt in quitting a beloved friend.”¹

His words reveal how much he loves and respects nature in all its forms. In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where he defines poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity,”² he dwells on the significance of nature for a Romantic poet. He emphasizes the impact of nature and rural life on the passions and self-maturation of human beings:

“Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended; and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.”³

He claims that poetry naturally comes by the expression of feelings which have deeply been inspired by and cultivated in silent nature. As he maintains a simplistic way of expression in his poetry, he emphasizes the importance of simple life in nature. In this article, I will analyse Wordsworth's appreciation of nature and his gradual self-awareness

-
1. William Wordsworth, *Letters of William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.16.
 2. William Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” in Stephen Gill (ed.), *The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.598.
 3. William Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” p.597.

and maturation in “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798.” With respect to his concept of nature, I will also deal with his reflection of Pantheism, a religious belief among the Romantic intellectuals which identifies nature with God.

“Tintern Abbey,” whose emphasis on the importance of nature for humanity was an eminent contribution to the Romantic literary movement, was in the first volume of *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems*. Written in blank verse, the poem is divided into five stanzas, each of which talks about a different phase of the poet. The title tells us when, where and how the poem was composed. The word “revisiting” suggests that this is not the poet’s first visit. He composed it in three days’ time after the rest of the book he wrote in collaboration with Coleridge was at the printers while returning from Tintern along with Dorothy. He rushed it to the printers without making any alterations; therefore, “Tintern Abbey” became the concluding poem of the book. In line with his notion of poetry as the spontaneous expression of feelings, Wordsworth reflected his particular feelings about how he was suddenly inspired by the environs of the Tintern Abbey in his notes:

“No poem of mine was composed under circumstances more pleasant for me to remember than this. I began it upon leaving Tintern, after crossing the Wye, and concluded it just as I was entering Bristol in the evening, after a ramble of 4 or 5 days, with my sister. Not a line of it was altered, and not any part of it written down till I reached Bristol. It was published almost immediately after in the little volume of which so much has been said in these notes.”⁴

When Wordsworth first visited Tintern Abbey and the Wye valley, which gave him inspiration to write this celebrated poem at the age of twenty eight, he was highly influenced by the beautiful and splendid atmosphere. He revisited the same place five years later along with his sister, Dorothy, and this time he realized not only its natural beauty, but also its grandeur. This distant place away from urban life both gives him pleasure, and leads him to remember his childhood years. His re-realization of nature results in his self-awareness. In that way, by comparing the two visits, the poet underlines his transformation from youth into maturity to compare and contrast his feelings and perceptions in each visit.

4. William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour,” July 13, 1798, in Stephen Greenblatt *et al.* (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th edition, Vol. II. (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), p.258, (The following references to this poem will appear as “Tintern Abbey”).

Throughout the poem, Wordsworth reflects the impact and the healing power of nature on his mind for it contributes to his spiritual development. Kamrunnessa Khatun indicates, "In every line of the poem, he personifies the natural objects as if lost in profound thought he perceives one-to-one correspondence between man and nature."⁵ In the opening stanza, the repetition of the length of time that Wordsworth was away from the Wye valley for five years saying, "Five summers, with the length of five long winters!,"⁶ suggests that being away from this beautiful and natural scene for so long was a burden on the poet. He is there again with a fresh vision to evaluate all the natural beauties he remembers from his first visit. His admiration towards the glory of nature is described as "Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs, / That on a wild secluded scene impress / Thought of more deep seclusions; and connect / The landscape with the quiet of the sky."⁷ The repetition of the word 'seclusion,'⁸ which Wordsworth underlines as an important characteristic of Romantic poetry in his Preface, expresses how the poet's feelings are stimulated in this isolated place. While relaxing under the shade of a sycamore tree, he begins to list all the particular charms he remembers from his last visit to the River Wye, such as the 'cottage-ground'⁹ and "these orchard-tufts."¹⁰ At that moment, "the poet's mind traveled back past that day of ecstasy five years earlier to the still further-removed time of carefree schooldays and forwards again through fleeting shadows to the present."¹¹ He describes 'these pastoral farms'¹² as part of the peaceful landscape. In the first part of the poem, the images the speaker describes elicit not only an innocent and pure nature, but also the life of common people in great harmony with nature, a characteristic of Romantic poetry, mentioned before.

Wordsworth reveals how the remembrance of 'these beautiful forms'¹³ of nature helps him cope with the hectic city life after he leaves Tintern Abbey in the second stanza. He knows that these memories of nature bring him "tranquil restoration"¹⁴ and 'unremembered pleasure.'¹⁵ As time passes, he becomes aware of the importance of

5. Kamrunnessa Khatun, "Re-Reading Eco-Critical Themes in Romanticism with reference to William Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey," *Indian Streams Research Journal*, 2/11 (2012), p.3.

6. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," l. 1-2

7. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," l. 5-8.

8. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," l. 7.

9. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," l. 11.

10. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," l. 11.

11. Russel Noyes, "Lyrical Ballads 1798," p.42.

12. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," l. 16.

13. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," l. 22.

14. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," l. 30.

15. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," l. 31.

these memories, which he describes as “the best portion of a good man’s life.”¹⁶ Whenever he feels upset because of the “weary weight of all this unintelligible world”¹⁷ while he is away from nature, he recalls the beauty of nature, and feels the “serene and blessed mood.”¹⁸ He describes the power of this mood by saying “the power of harmony, / and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things.”¹⁹ In “Tintern Abbey,” Charles Gray claims that “Wordsworth speaks of the hope that he will carry away sensations from this present visit which will be a comfort to him in other times when far from the scenes themselves, just as the earlier visit had afforded him sustaining food for his imagination.”²⁰

By starting the fourth stanza with ‘And now,’²¹ the poet integrates his past and his present with his future. He says “Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts / That in this moment there is life and food / For future years.”²² Wordsworth considers that the present experience will be beneficial for him in the future, just like his previous experience. When he was a child, he used to perceive nature with pure sensual appetite, “The coarser pleasures of my boyish days.”²³ He becomes aware that those passionate feelings do not exist now that he has changed in five years’ time and the joys of the past years “. . . are now no more, / And all its raptures.”²⁴ He does not “mourn or murmur”²⁵ for all those lost feelings that remain in the past. When he looks at nature, he can hear the “sad music of humanity,”²⁶ which suggests his criticism of humanity and how people neglect nature. By saying “. . . For I have learned / To look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth;”²⁷ the speaker emphasizes his change from innocence into adulthood. Now, he is consciously fond of nature, and is aware of his “elevated thoughts.”²⁸

Wordsworth’s realization of the impact of nature on his self-development leads him to guide his sister, Dorothy, in the last stanza of the poem through his address: “. . . thou my dearest Friend, / My dear, dear Friend.”²⁹ He is glad that she is with him

16. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 33.

17. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 39-40.

18. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 41.

19. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 47-50.

20. Charles Gray, “Wordsworth’s first visit to Tintern Abbey,” *PMLA*, 49/1 (1934), p.123.

21. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 58.

22. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 63-65.

23. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 73.

24. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 83-85.

25. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 85.

26. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 91.

27. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 88-90.

28. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 95.

29. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 115-116.

there. When he looks at her, he sees his former immature self, and sees a similarity between himself and Dorothy saying “. . . in thy voice I catch / The language of my former heart, and read / My former pleasures in the shooting lights / Of thy wild eyes.”³⁰ According to the poet, Nature is trustworthy because it “. . . never did betray / The heart that loved her.”³¹ By capitalizing the word nature, he dignifies her by describing her like a God-like power. Nature is such a guide to human beings that,

“. . . neither evil tongues,
Rash judgements, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e’ver prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith that all which we behold
Is full of blessings.”³²

In short, he wants his sister to learn how to turn ‘wild ecstasies’ of nature “into a sober pleasure.”³³ He advises her to remember the memory of this experience in the future whenever she feels “solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,”³⁴ as this experience will contribute to her maturity just as his development. The “unripe fruit”³⁵ mentioned at the beginning of the poem represents the young persona’s immaturity, which eventually turns into maturity towards the end of the poem “after many wanderings, many years”³⁶ the poet has had.

The role of the poet as a guide is in line with his notion of a poet expressed in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth defines a Romantic poet as “a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind.”³⁷ For Wordsworth, a poet should act like an instructor, having considerable knowledge about human nature, as well as a greater talent of creativity and imagination than common people. As Russel Noyes claims, Wordsworth “was to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a

30. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 116-119.

31. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 122-123.

32. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 128-134.

33. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 139.

34. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 143.

35. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 12.

36. William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” l. 156.

37. William Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” p.603.

feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and wonders of the world before us."³⁸

In "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth reveals his pantheistic vision by viewing nature as a reflection of God. He draws attention to the immanence of God within all the forms of nature. For Richard Gravil, the poet's pantheistic views can be considered in the framework of his idea that "God was everything and everything was God."³⁹ In a manuscript fragment plainly intended for the *Prelude* in 1799, Wordsworth's pantheistic viewpoints are apparent. He writes ". . . the one interior life / That lives in all things. . . / In which all beings live with god, themselves / Are God, existing in mighty whole."⁴⁰ His love towards nature is related to his love towards God because nature is a creation and reflection of God. As James Benziger suggests "It was through Nature that Wordsworth experienced some contact with the Divine..."⁴¹ Hence, he believes that one who loves God also loves Nature. Besides, for him, everyone living on this earth has responsibilities towards nature because nature is not only a protector, but also a good teacher for mankind. Thus, he believes that nature should be treated attentively as a living entity that should be cultivated. For example, in the first stanza of "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth refers to a hermit, who is a nature-lover living away from people and society, and has a simple way of life in the first stanza. He appreciates the hermit's life style and his commitment to nature. In the third stanza, Wordsworth is grateful to the "Sylvan Wye" river⁴² for the effects it imprinted in his mind: "How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee."⁴³ This river with its peaceful atmosphere, which also illustrates his pantheistic ideas, inspires him to write these lines. In the fourth stanza, saying that nature is ". . . the language of the sense, / The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being,"⁴⁴ Wordsworth glorifies nature. In this stanza, the speaker associates nature with God as the most powerful being. Another example of pantheism can be seen in the last stanza where the speaker wishes his sister to remember him as "A worshipper of Nature"⁴⁵ expects her to become another worshipper always remembering this pleasurable experience in nature.

38. Russel Noyes, "Lyrical Ballads 1798," in Herbert Sussman (ed.), *William Wordsworth* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p.24.

39. Richard Gravil, "'Tintern Abbey' and The System of Nature," *Romanticism*, 6/1 (2000), p.41.

40. Written in 1799 as a fragment by W. Wordsworth and quoted by Nicholas Riasonovsky, *The Emergence of Romanticism* (New York: Oxford, 1992), p.72.

41. James Benziger, "Tintern Abbey Revisited," *PMLA*, 65/2 (1950), p.160.

42. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," l. 56.

43. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," l. 55.

44. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," l. 108-111.

45. William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," l. 152.

To conclude, when Wordsworth revisits the Tintern Abbey and the Wye valley five years later, and witnesses the beauty of this nature, he discovers that the distinction between these two perceptions of nature stems from the difference of the three stages in human life, namely childhood, youth and adulthood. When people are in the childhood stage, they are innocent and wild. They perceive nature with all its beauties without thinking deeply on what they observe, and they have a pure relationship with nature. As they grow up, this relationship is dissipated, and they begin to act wild and restless. They do not bother to think about the changes happening in their lives and their minds. In adulthood, their immaturity turns into maturity. Their wilderness slows down, and they become calmer. Thus, they start to question the significance of nature and its connection with their own lives and with God. Therefore, the stages of human life are closely related to nature and the divine power. What is more, nature includes not only enchanting elements giving people serenity and happiness, but also moral and spiritual awareness. Undertaking the instructive role of a Romantic poet, Wordsworth signals that the nurturing strength of nature can help us grow, and its sheltering feature can protect us from the turmoil of urban life throughout the poem. Besides, it has a divine power which can ease people, refresh their memories, and heal their painful feelings. He successfully integrates the trilogy: nature, God and human mind. For Wordsworth, these three matters are closely interrelated. Wordsworth's desire is to transfer the immense power and the joyful harmony of nature to his sister, who at that time possesses the simplistic delight of nature.

REFERENCES

- Benziger, James. "Tintern Abbey Revisited," *PMLA*, 65/2 (1950), pp.154-162.
- Gravil, Richard. "Tintern Abbey and The System of Nature," *Romanticism*, 6/1 (2000), pp.35-54.
- Gray, H. Charles. "Wordsworth's First Visit to Tintern Abbey," *PMLA*, 49/1 (1934), pp.123-133.
- Khatun, Kamrunnessa. "Re-Reading Eco-Critical Themes in Romanticism with Reference to William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," *Indian Streams Research Journal*, 2/11 (2012), pp.3-6.
- Noyes, Russel. "Lyrical Ballads 1798," in Herbert Sussman (ed.), *William Wordsworth* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p.24-42.
- Riasonovsky, Nicholas. *The Emergence of Romanticism* (New York: Oxford, 1992), p.72.
- Wordsworth, William. *Letters of William Wordsworth*, in Alan G. Hill (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.16.
- Wordsworth, William. "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour," July 13, 1798," in Stephen Greenblatt *et al.* (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. II, 8th edition (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2006).

Wordsworth, William. "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," in Stephen Gill (ed.), *The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

Wordsworth, William. "Prelude," in Stephen Greenblatt *et al.* (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. II, 8th edition (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2006).