

The River Wye: The Connecting Force of “Tintern Abbey”

Megan E. Looney, Lyon College, Arkansas Iota

The British poets of the Romantic period wrote so many of their poems about landscapes that M. H. Abrams acknowledges that “‘Romantic poetry’ has to the popular mind become almost synonymous with ‘nature poetry’” (9). William Wordsworth, of course, was one such poet, and a particular quality of his early nature poetry explains one appeal of such poetry. As Gary Harrison explains, “Wordsworth’s appeal as a ‘nature poet’ was due largely to the demands of society for a landscape saturated with moral value and a desire for a vision of nature that could renew faith in the rural life” (180). The chief moral value Wordsworth expresses in his nature poetry is connectedness. In a world divided by political, economic, and military struggles, in a world marked by intellectual alienation, Wordsworth seeks and finds connectedness in Nature. This connectedness has something to offer to the contemporary, postmodern world as well.

Wordsworth developed a four-step theory regarding humans’ connection with Nature. He believed that infants possess a union with nature that they can neither understand nor appreciate. As children mature and realize their individuality, they lose this union. However, as adults they can remember, understand, and appreciate the lost union. At this point of realization, they can recreate the bond between themselves and Nature. Although Wordsworth articulates these four steps of man and Nature’s relationship—unity, disunity, realization, and reunion—in many of his poems, the most powerful expression occurs in “Tintern Abbey.” According to Abrams, “In [‘Tintern Abbey’], Wordsworth inaugurated what some critics call his ‘myth of nature’; that is, his presentation of the ‘growth’ of his mind to maturity, and the development of his emotional and moral life, as an interaction between his mind and the outer world” (220). Making himself the speaker of the poem, Wordsworth articulates precisely the four steps of his theory. He speaks of the union:

. . . when like a roe
I bounded o’er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led: more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then
.....
To me was all in all. . . .

(ll. 67-75).

Then he speaks of the disunity: “That time [when nature was all in all] is past, / And all its aching joys are now no more, / And all its dizzy raptures”(ll. 83-85). He also speaks of the realization of the lost union’s significance:

And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity
The picture of the mind revives again

(ll. 58-61)

Finally, partly through the agency of the Wye River, Wordsworth reconnects with nature, then with his sister, and finally with himself. The river’s connecting power flows from the speaker’s identification of it as Nature’s representative, from its power to dominate the landscape, from its aid in overcoming alienation, and from its inspiration of self-development. The river functions this way through the characteristics of its sound, its sheltering presence, and its breaking down of

time.

The speaker of “Tintern Abbey” identifies the river as a representative of Nature and all its power. In the beginning sections of the poem, as the speaker describes Nature, he asserts that to
These beauteous forms [of Nature]

.....
... I have owed ...
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration
(ll. 22, 26-30).

Nature as a whole restores him. He also says, “To them [the beauteous forms] I may have owed another gift, / . . . / that serene and blessed mood, / In which the affections gently lead us on—” (ll. 36, 41-42). Again, Nature as a whole moves him spiritually. Only a few lines after these utterances, however, the speaker narrows the receiver of his thanks from the entire natural scene to only the river: “How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee, / O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer thro’ the woods, / How often has my spirit turned to thee!” (ll. 55-57). As John Williams says, “‘Tintern Abbey’ of 1798 emphasizes the strength to be drawn from the remembered landscape” (55). The speaker has made the river into the representative for not only the entire natural scene but also for Nature herself. By its identification as a representative of Nature, the river connects the speaker to Nature.

The speaker also identifies the river as an essential connector within Nature. He begins his description of the landscape with “again I hear / These waters [of the river], rolling from their mountain-springs / With a soft inland murmur” (ll. 2-4), suggesting the river’s ability to connect the present scene to an unseen inland scene far away. Then the river seems to connect the present scene to those unseen because they are distant in time. As he remembers his past experience in Nature, a river always seems to run through it:

... when like a roe
I bounded . . . by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
.....
... The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion
(ll. 67-69, 76-77)

Finally, he hopes the river will connect this scene to the unseen future. When the speaker addresses his sister in the last portion of the poem, he tells her, “For thou art with me here upon the banks / Of this fair river” (ll. 114-15) and “on the banks of this delightful stream / We stood together” (ll. 159-60). The speaker recognizes the importance of the river in Nature and its connecting role there. It connects the speaker to his sister at the present moment and this moment to the future.

Having made the river Nature’s representative and having recognized it as an essential connecting power, the speaker goes on to identify the river as a means to overcome feelings of alienation from the world. Through memories of the scene surrounding the river, the speaker is refreshed and calmed when he is “in lonely rooms, and ‘mid the din / Of towns and cities” (ll. 25-26). He reminds his sister of what the world does to send them into those lonely rooms, the world with its “evil tongues” and “rash judgments” and “sneers” and “greetings where no kindness is,” with “all / The dreary intercourse of daily life” (ll. 129-31). So when he is

In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of [his] heart
(ll. 51-54),

he turns “to thee, / O sylvan Wye” (ll. 55-56). When the speaker feels alone and alienated from the world, the river helps the speaker overcome his feelings of alienation by reaffirming his connection to Nature. Then it inspires him to leave his lonely room and perform all the “acts / Of kindness and love” (ll. 34-35) that demonstrate his renewed sense of connection with the human world.

Besides identifying the river as helping to overcome feelings of alienation, the speaker acknowledges that the river inspires his self-development, connecting him to his truer, fuller self. According to the speaker,

. . . [Nature] can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us

(ll. 125-32)

As David Bromwich writes, “Tintern Abbey” is “a poem about the adaptation of landscape to consciousness” and “it has sometimes been read as the original poem in English about the crystallization of a self, and how that process follows from reflection on the relations between a thinking subject and the objects it chooses in the world” (69). Edwin Stein agrees that according to Wordsworth, the self is realized and developed through nature: “The natural universe has become a permanent frame for man’s existence . . . where man either responds to being simply through the creative exercise of consciousness or falls into unconsciousness, the sleep of death” (101). By influencing the speaker’s actions and providing stability for the speaker’s life, the river connects the speaker to himself.

As the speaker shows how the river connects him with Nature, the human world, and himself, he suggests some of its specific traits that give it its connecting power. The river connects through its sound. Though the speaker uses a plethora of visual imagery, painting precise pictures of the landscape, he describes only one definite sound in the country landscape—the sound of the river. It speaks for the landscape. It is Nature’s voice. He has remembered the river’s sound, and hearing that sound again, he returns to his memories, inspired by its “soft inland murmur” (l. 4). In those memories of his early union with Nature, the speaker describes only the river as having sound: “The sounding cataract” (l. 76). Other elements of the landscape are explicitly silent: “the *quiet* of the sky” (l. 8), “wreaths of smoke / Sent up, in *silence*, from among the trees” (ll. 17-18, emphasis added). Though the speaker mentions three other specifically human sounds in the poem: “the din / Of towns and cities” (ll. 25-26), “the still, sad music of humanity” (l. 91), and “thy [his sister’s] voice” (l. 237), the river is the only sound in the landscape. As such, the river is Nature’s voice connecting the speaker to his memories of his former union with Nature, and inspiring hope of renewed connection.

Besides connecting through its voice, the river also connects through its sheltering care of the speaker. In a sense, its voice becomes a mother’s voice, its presence a mother’s presence. Like a mother, it is the source of serenity, comfort, and stability for the speaker. The speaker turns to the river like a child in a nightmare when he is “In darkness and amid the many shapes / Of joyless daylight” (ll. 51-52). The speaker goes so far as to explicitly personify the river, saying that he is

. . . well pleased to recognize
In nature . . .
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

(ll. 107-11)

The “soft inland murmur” (l. 4) then becomes the cooing of a mother’s voice. As Thomas McFarland writes, “It seems almost unarguably to be the case . . . that Wordsworth projected his infant relationship with his mother into his conception of nature” (87). Wordsworth often displays toward nature “attitudes and sentiments that human beings had earlier felt not only for God, but also for a father, a mother, or a beloved” (Abrams 10). The river of “Tintern Abbey” connects the speaker to Nature and himself by comforting and calming as a mother would.

Unlike the voice and presence of a human mother, the river and the Nature it embodies can never be lost, for the final connecting power of the river is its ability to break down the barriers that time creates, bringing together past, present, and future. The river is a wanderer, flowing from the past through the present and into the future. The river saw the dizzy antics of the speaker when he was a boy when he “bounded o’er the mountains, by the sides / Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams” (ll. 68-9). It is flowing in the present when the speaker and his sister are together “upon the banks / Of this fair river” (ll. 114-15). And it will be there in the future: “If I should be where I no more can hear / Thy voice . . . wilt thou then forget / That on the banks of this delightful stream / We stood together” (ll. 147-51). The river breaks down the barriers of time for the speaker by simply existing in all three dimensions of time—the past, the present, and the future. The river having broken down time’s barriers, the speaker is able to visit his memories of the past, revel in the present, and clearly see the future.

The river in “Tintern Abbey” is a connector. It gives the speaker of the poem comfort and serenity, and breaks down the barriers that time places on human existence. It is a representative of Mother Nature, anchoring and nursing the speaker’s soul. It provides the means to overcome the speaker’s feelings of alienation and to rejoin him with Nature and with the human world.

The last three lines of the poem—“these steep woods and lofty cliffs, / And this green pastoral landscape, were to me / More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!” (ll. 157-59)—indicate the speaker’s desire for his sister to experience the same connection with nature and himself that he has found through the river. Wordsworth desires that his readers seek the union with nature that the speaker of “Tintern Abbey” has found through the river. Perhaps he does so because he both recognizes and answers the postmodern psychology of Jacques Lacan. Lacan argues that humans can never recover the loss of the original connection with nature they experience through their mothers but are doomed to seek to do so in the symbolic order of their fathers, the realm of words. Wordsworth recognizes the loss Lacan writes of and the alienation humans feel in its face, but he poses an alternative route to reconnection—not the symbolic words of the father’s language but the murmuring voice of Mother Nature’s River Wye.

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