“Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798”

– William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur.—Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves 'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.

These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
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:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

If this
Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft—
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 my heart—
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!

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:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years. And so I dare to hope,
Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first
I came among these hills; 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
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days
And their glad animal movements all gone by)
To me was all in all.—I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite; a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, not any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.—That time is past,
And all its aching joys are now no more,
And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts
Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
Abundant recompense. 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,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue.—And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; 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. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and 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.

Nor perchance,
If I were not thus taught, should I the more
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:
For thou art with me here upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once,
My dear, dear Sister! and this prayer I make,
Knowing that 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, 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, or disturb
Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
Is full of blessings. Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee: and, in after years,
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind  
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,  
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place  
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then,  
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,  
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts  
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,  
And these my exhortations! Nor, perchance—  
If I should be where I no more can hear  
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams  
Of past existence—wilt thou then forget  
That on the banks of this delightful stream  
We stood together; and that I, so long  
A worshipper of Nature, hither came  
Unwearied in that service: rather say  
With warmer love—oh! with far deeper zeal  
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget,  
That after many wanderings, many years  
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,  
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me  
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!

Originally printed in:


About the poem:

The poem was first published in 1798, as the concluding poem of *Lyrical Ballads*. It was composed on 13 July 1798, while William Wordsworth and Dorothy Wordsworth were returning by the valley of the Wye, in south Wales, to Bristol after a walking tour of several days. As Wordsworth would later say, “Not a line of it was altered and not any part of it written down till I reached Bristol”. The poems planned for *Lyrical Ballads* were already in the hands of the printer in Bristol when *Tintern Abbey*, so different in theme and style, was added to the volume.

Background to the poem:

The poem has its roots in William Wordsworth’s personal history. He had previously visited the area as a troubled twenty-three-year-old in August 1793. Since then he had matured and his seminal poetical relationship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge had begun. Wordsworth claimed to have composed the poem entirely in his head, beginning it upon leaving Tintern and not jotting down so much as a line until he reached Bristol, by which time it had just reached mental completion. Although the *Lyrical Ballads* upon which the two friends had been working was by then already in publication, he was so pleased with what he had just written that he had it inserted at the eleventh hour as the concluding poem. Scholars generally agree that it is apt, for the poem represents the climax of Wordsworth’s first great period of creative output and prefigures much of the distinctively Wordsworthian verse that was to follow.
The poem is written in tightly-structured decasyllabic blank verse, and comprises verse-paragraphs rather than stanzas. Categorising the poem is difficult, as it contains some elements of the ode and of the dramatic monologue. In the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth noted: "I have not ventured to call this Poem an Ode but it was written with a hope that in the transitions, and the impassioned music of the versification, would be found the principle requisites of that species of composition." The apostrophe at its beginning is reminiscent of the 18th-century landscape-poem, but it is now agreed that the best designation of the work would be the conversation poem, which is an organic development of the loco-descriptive. The silent listener in this case is Wordsworth’s sister Dorothy, who is addressed in the poem’s final section. Transcending the nature poetry written before that date, it employs a much more intellectual and philosophical engagement with the subject that verges on Pantheism.

**Summary of the poem:**

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 this location, encountered 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.

The speaker 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 view into “the life of things.” The speaker then says that his belief that the memory of the woods has affected him so strongly may be “vain”—but if it is, he has still turned to the memory often in times of “fretful stir.”

Even in the present moment, the memory of his past experiences in these surroundings floats over his present view of them, and he feels bittersweet joy in reviving them. He thinks happily, too, that his present experience will provide many happy memories for future years. The speaker acknowledges that he is different now from how he was in those long-ago times, 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.” And he can now sense the presence of something far more subtle, powerful, and fundamental 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 that reason, 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.”

The speaker says that even if he did not feel this way or understand these things, he would still be in good spirits on this day, for he is in the company of his “dear, dear (d) Sister,” who is also his “dear, dear Friend,” and in whose voice and manner he observes his former self, and beholds “what I 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.” 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. The speaker then encourages the moon to shine upon his sister, and the wind to blow against her, and 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 dead, she can remember the love with which he worshipped nature. In that case, too, she will remember what the woods meant to the speaker, the way in which, after so many years of absence, they became dearer to him—both for themselves and for the fact that she is in them.

The Three Principal Divisions of Thought:

The poem’s tripartite division encompasses a contextual scene-setting, a developing theorisation of the significance of his experience of the landscape, and a final confirmatory address to the implied listener.

Lines 1–49: Revisiting the natural beauty of the Wye after five years fills the poet with a sense of ‘tranquil restoration’. He recognises in the landscape something which had been so internalised as to become the basis for out of the body experience.

Lines 49–111: In ‘thoughtless youth’, the poet had rushed enthusiastically about the landscape and it is only now that he realises the power such scenery has continued to have upon him, even when not physically present there. He identifies in it “a sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns” (lines 95–97), and the immanence of “A motion and a spirit, that impels/ All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things” (lines 100–103). With this insight he finds in nature: “The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/ Of all my moral being” (lines 108–111).

Lines 111–159: The third movement of the poem is addressed to his sister Dorothy, “my dearest Friend, / My dear, dear Friend”, as a sharer in this vision and in the conviction that “all which we behold is full of blessings”. It is this that will continue to create a lasting bond between them.

Form of the poem:

“Tintern Abbey” is composed in blank verse, which is a name used to describe unrhymed lines in iambic pentameter. Its style is therefore very fluid and natural; it reads as easily as if it were a prose piece. But of course the poetic structure is tightly constructed; Wordsworth’s slight variations on the stresses of iambic rhythms are remarkable. Lines such as “Here, under
this dark sycamore, and view” do not quite conform to the stress-patterns of the meter, but fit into it loosely, helping Wordsworth approximate the sounds of natural speech without grossly breaking his meter. Occasionally, divided lines are used to indicate a kind of paragraph break, when the poet changes subjects or shifts the focus of his discourse.

Critical commentary:

The subject of “Tintern Abbey” is memory—specifically, childhood memories of communion with natural beauty. Both generally and specifically, this subject is hugely important in Wordsworth’s work, reappearing in poems as late as the “Intimations of Immortality” ode. “Tintern Abbey” is the young Wordsworth’s first great statement of his principle (great) 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. Additionally, the presence of his sister gives him a view of himself as he imagines himself to have been as a youth. Happily, he knows 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.

“Tintern Abbey” is a monologue, imaginatively spoken by a single speaker to himself, referencing the specific objects of its imaginary scene, and occasionally addressing others—once the spirit of nature, occasionally the speaker’s sister. The language of the poem is striking for its simplicity and forthrightness; the young poet is in no way concerned with ostentation. He is instead concerned with speaking from the heart in a plainspoken manner. The poem’s imagery is largely confined to the natural world in which he moves, though there are some castings-out for metaphors ranging from the nautical (the memory is “the anchor” of the poet’s “purest thought”) to the architectural (the mind is a “mansion” of memory).

The poem also has a subtle strain of religious 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 linked in Wordsworth’s poetry for the rest of his life, from “It is a beauteous evening, calm and free” to the great summation of the Immortality Ode.