“TINTERN ABBEY”: REFLECTIONS OF MATURATION AND MORTALITY
RACHEL LIPMAN

The inevitability of aging is an unstoppable force similar to nature’s infinite, kinetic power. While experiences galvanize the progression toward maturation, reflection and introspection also bring a sense of elevated knowledge to an individual. Therefore, memory infinitely creates concepts just as nature will grow unchecked if not tamed. According to Harold Bloom, poets, such as William Wordsworth, have an agenda that moves beyond merely reading a poem for pleasure. Instead, poems are “scaffoldings for a more imaginative vision, and not ends in themselves” (3). Through this concept, we see that the Romantic poets use what Bloom refers to as a “map of the mind,” and this “map can be put to a saving use” (3). The map for Wordsworth’s poem, “Tintern Abbey,” wholly embodies the Romantic notion that being conscious of one’s self and having awareness of one’s identity, in relation to the larger world, is an indefinable point of contention. How can we juxtapose the mortality of mankind with nature’s everlasting beauty? Wordsworth addresses this question in his poem, “Tintern Abbey,” yet it is a question that deeply troubles him. However, while the poet in “Tintern Abbey” does darkly meditate upon the fickle nature of the human disposition, he also combines his sensory experiences in nature with his emotions regarding nature as a way to “celebrate the God-like imagination of the creative mind” (Watson 170). The poet lauds the power of reciprocity between memory and nature; memory produces creative thoughts that give meaning to immutable objects, such as nature, while nature, by simply existing, awakens the poet’s ability to come to terms with his mortality. Therefore, “Tintern Abbey” is not only a dirge that laments the mortality
of humankind, but it is also similar to a prayer that rejoices in nature’s ability to aid one in meditative self-reflection.

The first and second sections of “Tintern Abbey” amplify the Wordsworthian poet’s meditative tone through the combination of his sensory experience and emotion. While it has been “five summers with the length of five long winters” (1-2) since the speaker of the poem has visited the Wye, the familiar cliffs and mountain springs that he once again beholds “impress/ Thoughts of more deep seclusion: and connect/ The landscape with the quiet of the sky” (6-8). These images, emphasized by the poet’s repeated use of the words “secluded” and “quiet,” draw attention to the solitary wreathes of smoke that the pastoral farm’s chimney breathes. The poet parallels the solitude of the farmland and the solitude that surrounds him. Within this solitude, the speaker reflects and meditates upon nature, and he also recalls it within his imagination to help semi-placate his thoughts of mortality. Kjell Morland argues that, ”It might be noted that Wordsworth seems to have avoided determining what the subject matter of “Tintern Abbey” actually is” (33). However, within the first and second sections of the poem, Wordsworth’s poet moves toward the subject matter of “Tintern Abbey,” which focuses on introspection about the process of maturation and contemplation about mortality. The juxtaposition of the green landscape with the “wreathes of smoke/ Sent up, in silence, from among the trees” (18-19) indicates that the poet intends to revisit his thoughts on the solitary banks of the Wye. Furthermore, the description of the hermit in the last two lines of the first section proves that introspection of one’s self occurs “when he is alone with his
own heart or alone with nature” (Hough 10). As a result, the poet is similar to the hermit because his processes of contemplation take place when he is by himself.

In the second section, the poet reaffirms that although he has been absent long from the Wye River Valley, he is able to recall, through his memory, “These forms of [nature’s] beauty,” unlike a blind man who will never know what a landscape looks like (25-26). According to J.R. Watson, “The poet is reflecting on his good fortune in being present before the same beautiful landscape which he remembered from the previous visit” (188). The poet does not simply reflect on his good fortune, however. As Sandro Jung argues, “Wordsworth’s imagination does not merely recollect the past, but [it] refines both the memory as well as the sensations first experienced (66). Wordsworth’s poet uses nature’s forms of beauty, these first experienced sensations, as poetic inspiration to create a more meaningful understanding of himself when he revisits the Wye. The poet states,

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 may have had no trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man’s life;
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
The poet owes his memory, with its ability to recall the “tranquil restoration” that nature provides, these fleeting glimpses of contentment when he is overwhelmed by the face-paced life of city dwellers. In this section, the poet also comments on the infinitesimal mark humans make on the world in their lifetime. However, the use of the phrase, “unremembered pleasure” places a damper on the mind’s power of infinite recall. The poet is not entirely certain that he remembers his initial feelings when he first visited the Wye. Consequently, if the poet cannot recall memories with perfect clarity, how can he overcome the physical decay of the body? In other words, the only way to achieve a sense of immortality and immutability, like nature, is to preserve the “little, nameless, unremembered acts/ Of kindness and of love” (36-37). It is through the poet’s reflection, when among nature, that enables him to feel, at least partially, this immortality, which humans cannot otherwise feel.

Furthermore, the poet’s love of nature is a type of religious love one has for a spiritual entity. Continuing in the second section, the poet states,

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[...] (38-44)

Nature, with its “sublime aspect,” is awe-inspiring for the speaker. He is able, through this “blessed mood” of contentment, to partially transcend the mystery of
the unintelligible world and understand it by being part of nature. In the last few
lines of the second section, Wordsworth’s poet finally acknowledges the discrepancy
between mortality and achieving a sense of sublime recognition, or knowledge. He
states,

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. (47-51)

The poet, entranced by nature, reaches a state of spiritual elevation made
discernible by his creative imagination. He senses the harmony within nature, and
these feelings enable him to connect to it emotionally, and thus, fill him with “the
deep power of joy” (50). However, in the third section of “Tintern Abbey,” the poet
markedly states that he is not sure this “sublime aspect” of nature is anything more
than “a vain belief,” (53) reaffirming the poet’s darker tone that acknowledges his
mortality. The poet’s feeling of unease demonstrates his ability to change his
feelings to mirror his mood. The poet does cry out, however, that his spirit has often
turned to the “sylvan Wye” as a catalyst to bring forward restorative feelings of
peace and tranquility. Nevertheless, the poet indicates that the way he used to feel
about Tintern Abbey five summers before is no longer the way he feels now.

In the fourth section of “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth’s poet transitions to a
state of mature reflection, proving that while the imagination has the power to
recall, emotion has the power to alter one’s perception about the same event or
place. Kjell Morland indicates “[The poet] states his faith in a benevolent Nature which guides the growth of his mind, but at the same time he draws an enticing picture of the youth who visited the river five years earlier” (46). When Wordsworth’s poet first comes “among these hills” he is “more like a man/ Flying from something he dreads, than one/ Who sought the thing he loved” (73-5).

However, there is nothing enticing about this picture the Wordsworthian poet paints. The poet uses rhetoric such as “coarser pleasure” and “animal movements” to describe how nature “was all in all” to him (76-78). True to the Romantic movement, though, Wordsworth’s poet uses nature to compare his youthful feelings and his mature reflections. The youthful poet uses nature as a means of escape; the mature poet explores nature as a pantheistic entity, as a “presence” and “A motion and a spirit, that impels/ All thinking things, all objects of all thought,/ And rolls through all things” (103-105). This “presence” in nature, which the poet was unable to understand in his youth, enables him to continue to be “a lover of the meadows and the woods” (106). Harold Bloom argues, “Wordsworth wants the poem to be about renovation, about carrying the past alive into the present, and so being able to live on in the future with a full sense of continuity” (325). Renovation does not occur without first understanding and coming to terms with the past, which the poet does when he returns to the river. Therefore, the poet utilizes his imagination in order to recreate and revisit the meaning of the nature that surrounds him. By doing so, the poet subtly claims that nature is essentially meaningless without someone to give it meaning, yet nature duly guides the poet as “The anchor of [his] purest thoughts, the nurse,/ The guide, the guardian of [his] heart, and soul/ Of all [his] moral being”
Therefore, Wordsworth’s poet uses the past as a stepping stone that enables him to achieve this new sense of mature contemplation, albeit his contemplation is overshadowed by “The still, sad music of humanity,” (94) or lament of mortality.

In the last section of “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth’s poet indicates that nature, true to the Romantic theme of the positive influence of emotion, lends one the power to lead a life “from joy to joy” (129). The poet’s address to his “dearest Friend,” or sister, illustrates the part of “Tintern Abbey” that is more similar to a prayer than to a lament. She becomes the focus in this last section, proving that she feels how the poet once felt when he first “came among these hills” (70). The speaker sees nature’s “aching joys” and “dizzy raptures,” these echoes of his “former heart” in the “wild eyes” of his sister (120-123). While the poet now has the resources for mature contemplation on the same scenery, it is through the power of his imagination, when he looks at his sister, which enables him to conjure similar feelings. He shares in the same joys and ecstasies she experiences when she gazes upon nature. The poet, therefore, not only lauds nature in “Tintern Abbey,” but also the mind, “as a dwelling-place/ For all sweet sounds and harmonies” (145-146). Even though Harold Bloom argues that, “this great poem is not a celebration, though it would like to be,” (325) the last section, is, in fact, closer to a celebratory prayer than to a lament. Nature, in conjunction with imagination, is the ultimate sublime power; it has the ability to heal, to soothe, and to prompt the recall of the Wordsworthian poet’s sentimental feelings. One of the poet’s last lingering remarks is,
[...]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. (155-163)

Nature is the poet's religion, and thus, he loves it "with far deeper zeal/ Of holier love" (158-159). Even though the poet is troubled by human mortality when juxtaposed with the wondrous, infinite beauty of nature, the poet can achieve a sense of immortality by extolling the reaction of his sister when she first gazes upon the Wye like the poet did when he was younger. Therefore, even though the poet has been absent five years, his return to the Wye River Valley marks a return to the contemplation of his youth, which in turn, marks his maturation, both physically and spiritually.
WORKS CITED


