

# Trauma of Modernity in Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*

Associate Prof. Vijay Kumar Datta, PhD

**Abstract**— Critics of the 1960s and 1970s have largely interpreted Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* as projecting a Romantic poet "Cartesian /Kantian / Hegelian in his thinking, concerned more with imagination than with nature or history" (Richard Gravil 36). Their critical verdict is that Wordsworth, in the poem, has been looking "for transcendence through Romantic inwardness" (Thomas Brennan 14). Since the 1980s, however, there have been historicizings of Wordsworth.

New historicism, with its materialist strain, provides a fundamentally contradictory conception of the persona's self: rather than a transcendental, the person's self is thought of as empirical and defined by what Jerome McGann calls *The Romantic Ideology*, as a "false consciousness" (91). McGann cites *Tintern Abbey* as example to sustain his charge. He argues, according to Leon Waldoff, that the poem

*displace[s] and elide[s] specific social, economic, and political problems and discontents, as well as historical facts that serve as a background for the poems (bad harvests, poverty, war, the French Revolution, and transients and beggars). To the extent that the poems posit or recommend a transcendent or transhistorical (spiritual, religious, or psychological) solution to human problems, they are illusory. (4)*

This "illusory" tendency, according to McGann in *The Romantic Ideology*, is nowhere more pronounced than *Tintern Abbey*, at the end of which "we are left only with the initial scene's simplest natural forms" (80).

Marjorie Levinson further builds on McGann's ruling on Wordsworth's disregard of his empirical poetic self to elision and exclusion. In *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays*, she defines the consciousness of the poetic self the persona of *Tintern Abbey* by its "blindness which assumes autonomy of the psyche, its happy detachment from the social fact of being" (48). Like McGann, she scrutinizes the absences in *Tintern Abbey* with a spotlight on the elision of the indigence of the poor populations around the abbey. She takes the elision as sacrificing his sensitivity to communal and the collective for

*the sake of idealizing the landscape for adapting it into a "devotion" that is individual and private (29). Her adverse verdict goes one step ahead of McGann when she, according to Eric Yu, hauls up Wordsworth "for 'apostasy', betrayal of his earlier radical ideals and withdrawals into consoling selfhood" (132). Alan Liu echoes McGann and Levinson when he asserts that "what is there in a poem is precisely what is not there: all the history that has been displaced, erased, suppressed, elided, overlooked, overwritten, omitted, obscured, expunged, repudiated, excluded, annihilated, and denied" (556).*

**Keywords**— *Trauma, Guilt, Incest, Materialism, Plural Romanticism, Deforestation, Industrial Revolution*

## INTRODUCTION: OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

New historicist approach to *Tintern Abbey* plumbs the materialist depth of the poem but largely ignores the aesthetic aspect. Making a departure from McGann, Levinson and Liu, Thomas Pfau takes what has been called "pragmatic materialist approach" which "addresses the social dimensions of Wordsworthian poetry, while dwelling also on its formal and aesthetic dimensions" (Karen Hadley 693). Pfau's *Wordsworth's Profession: Form, Class, and the Logic of Early Romantic Cultural Production* critically investigates the connection of social contradictions to the rise of the aesthetic as a professional endeavour. Slightly diverging from new historicist study of the effacings of *Tintern Abbey*, for instance, Pfau pits the underlying materiality of the poetic self against an immaterial, imaginary realm with the result that the Wordsworthian "I" melts into the "eye" (gaze) directed towards the "distant promises" of the sublime horizon future predicated on *eros* after an unremitting bout of *thanatos* (231).

It is not that the new historicist readings of Wordsworth in general and *Tintern Abbey* in particular have not come under attack. Thomas McFarland, for example, in *William Wordsworth: Intensity and Achievement*, invokes the idea of Wordsworthian intensity which he attributes to the "importance" of the poet's "experience, certainty about the unique value of his vision" (59) in order to refute Levinson's new historicist downgrading of the Romantic

poet. Like McFarland, Helen Vendler too finds Levinson's accusation of Wordsworth's skirting of history is utterly untenable, unfortunately giving away that a new historicist like her "has never found anything to like in the poem" (178), which she takes as a deliberate disregard of the palpably lyrical element of the poem. The lyrical dimensions of *Tintern Abbey* have drawn the critical attention of a critic like Nicholas Roe who, in *The Politics of Nature: Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries*, rescues the poem from the charge of Romantic ideology, replacing politics with aestheticizing beauty that he attributes to the influence of William Gilpin's theory of the picturesque, which requires the elevation of the scenery, downplaying the deformities and moderating "the human details of landscape in a remote perspective" (Roe 119). Like Nicholas Roe, Steven Cole too takes on the new historicists whom she accuses of looking for the politics of romanticism in where it does not belong to: new historicism takes "retreat to what Levinson calls a 'transhistorical causality' [whereas] politics of romanticism is located somewhere else" (49).

As the review of literature above on *Tintern Abbey* shows, despite the defence of Wordsworth against new historicist onslaughts, the materiality of even the so-called transcendental poem like *Tintern Abbey* cannot be brushed aside. The materiality is most evident in the Romantic reaction in general and Wordsworthian response in particular to the crisis brought about the burgeoning modernity of the early nineteenth century. Wordsworth's poetry connects a concern for nature to a fear that the extinctions of natural creatures as were ongoing during his time due to industrialization, urbanization, and materialization would be dystopia.

This chapter study zeroes in on Wordsworth's fear of dystopia and links it to the trauma accruing from his personal problems and the continual exploding of his beliefs, including the integrity of nature. The ensuing analysis posits that the location in the poem of the so-called apostrophe to what is known as Romantic Imagination is actually an attempt to come to terms with the trauma. The foregrounding of imagination reconstitutes the traumatic situation in a textual imaging that at the same time undercuts the idealized transcendentalism even as it builds it for efficacious purpose, a performativity that repeats the trauma. It is in this light that the affect of certainty hinting at the healing of the trauma that the poet seeks to communicate to his listening sister, Dorothy and with which he tries to unburden himself of the trauma of the ravages of modernity should be understood.

The Wordsworthian negotiation with trauma in *Tintern Abbey* evokes two contrasting affects of doubt and certainty, thereby giving rise to a pronounced tension between the causal world of material objects and the balming effect of natural serenity. As Richard Eldridge rightly remarks, Wordsworth typifies a poet capable of "a stably and powerfully enough formed manner of thought, expression, and (writerly) action . . . in the face of the chaos of life, rather than simply reverting to metaphysical pantheism or any other epistemically well-founded doctrine or doxa" (75). Wordsworth's thought in *Tintern Abbey* and struggle alongside him to understand what value life has even through a spotlight on the materiality of his vision *or vice versa*, for the material and the pantheistic visions are integrally intertwined. It is this integrated vision—the reflective-discursive awareness—through which, as Eldridge asserts, "the poet . . . arrives at the aptness and fullness of response that must animate the life of a subject, if the subject is to find anything interesting at all" (77) by "mov[ing] through or in and out of such moments" (82). As *Tintern Abbey* shows, through a performative, fluctuating movement between materiality and abstractness, doubt and certainty Wordsworth successfully works through the trauma of the ravages of modernity telling upon his personal life and beliefs so as to come to terms with it by taking an attitudinally appropriate stance.

Before the critical investigation of the poem along the above suggested line, it will be worthwhile to understand the historical contexts underpinning the poetic texture. The contextualization will give a comprehensive picture the materiality of modernity bothering Wordsworth.

By 1798, when *Tintern Abbey* was published, Wordsworth (then twenty-six) was living with his sister in Somerset in the neighbourly proximity of Coleridge. Both the poets, at this time, had undergone a big change in their socio-political beliefs. Peter Kiston observes in this regard:

It is thought that around this time both Wordsworth and Coleridge began to lose their commitment to shared political beliefs and become more conservative in outlook. In 1801 they both were able to support the continuance of war the war against France and, in later years, they both became supporters of the government. Their poetry restored the restorative and beneficial powers of nature to heal and make well the divided mind. . . .

In 1798 the two poets published a collection of verse entitled *Lyrical Ballads*, which contained the poem . . . [*Tintern Abbey*']

which] was written on a walking tour of the Wye Valley made by Wordsworth during 10-13 July 1798. The site was a common tourist stopping-off place, made famous by William Gilpin's picturesque guidebooks of the region. This was not the first time that Wordsworth had visited the area around the abbey. Five years earlier, in 1793, he had arrived at the spot in a period of mental turmoil. He had just returned from revolutionary France and separated from his lover, Annette Vallon, by whom he fathered a daughter. Britain was then at war with revolutionary France and Wordsworth felt alienated from his country because of his sympathies for the Revolution, as well as depressed by the increasingly violent turn which the Revolution had taken. (372-73)

Some of the important exclusions in Kitson's contextualization of *Tintern Abbey* are the rumour that both Wordsworth and Coleridge were French spies, the fact that Wordsworth had thrown himself into *Lyrical Ballads* as much out of poverty as of artistic commitment, and his concern at the reality of the massive destruction of the natural ecology due to industrialization and urbanization:

In 1798, the Wye Valley, though still affording prospects of great natural beauty, presented less delightful scenes as well. The region showed prominent signs of industrial and commercial activity: coal mines, transport barges noisily plying the river, miners' hovels. The town of Tintern, a half mile from the Abbey, was an ironworking village of some note, and in 1798 with the war at full tilt, the works were usually active. The forests around Tintern—town and Abbey—were peopled with vagrants, the casualties of England's tottering economy and of wartime displacement. Many of these people lived by charcoal burning, obviously a marginal livelihood. The charcoal was used in the furnaces along the river banks. (Levinson 29)

The historicities underpinning the poetic texture of *Tintern Abbey*, this chapter seeks to argue, are not attempts at dematerializations in favour of the valorizations of nourishment and redemption as new historicists have alleged but as building up a performative tension between the trauma of modernity and the bliss of picturesque Nature.

The task of building up the performative tension is undertaken by the speaker who accomplishes it through his self-dramatizations which “represent[. . .] a transitional self

of the poet . . . attempt[. . .] to act out and achieve a self-transformation. The lyrical mode is in this sense not only intertwined but given direction and enhancement by the dramatic” (Waldoff 50). While the presence of both the speaker and the listener help create the overall dramatic ambiance, what, however, adds to its effect is the use of the repetition of certain words and phrases—“Five years have passed; five summers, with the length/Of five long winters! (1-2), “a wild secluded scene impress/Thoughts of more deep seclusion” (6-7), “again I hear/These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs/With a sweet inland murmur. Once again” (2-4), “These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts” (11)—which, at the same time, represent the ebb and flow of the mood and consciousness of the speaker across a period of time in which the past, the present, and the future crisscross each other. The most striking attribute of the dramatic situation is obviously the presence of a silent listener—the “dear, dear Sister” (121) at whom the last third of the poem is directed.

Besides the above imperatives that make the nature of the poetic texture of *Tintern Abbey* dramatic, what also lends to the drama is “Wordsworth's structuring of the speaker's utterance”—the “triadic” structure “that best represents the self-dramatizing nature of the speaker's utterance” (Waldoff 59). The three distinctly different pillars of the triadic structure are: the speaker's describing the scene now (lines 1-22) and then (lines 23-111), and an address to Dorothy (lines 112-159). Of these three pillars, the second one—the narrative autobiography—is presented in two movements: the first (lines 23-49) demonstrating how the speaker's association with Nature has been continued in absence, the second (lines 49-111) unfolding the three stages of the association with Nature.

The opening structure offers us some recognizable Wordsworthian imagery helping to set the local matter of time and place: the speaker revisits the Wye after a lapse of five years:

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. (1-22)

Once again the speaker hears the mummur of the Wye, and sees the steep and lofty cliffs, the dark sycamore, the plots of cottage ground, the orchard with its unripe fruits, the hedge-rows, the pastoral farms, and columns of smoke rising from the trees with a distant glimpse of the gipsy tents in the woods or of some hermit's cave.

A careful scrutiny of the above opening lines points towards a tension between harmony and disharmony: while the landscape is harmonious—varied but without abrupt transitions with earth and sky wrapped in the same “quiet” and the verdure of the landscape looks invasive—, the disharmony is attributed to material human activities like the cottages, the pastoral farms, the orchards and wreaths of smoke. Whereas the harmony in Nature as etched in the speaker's consciousness is a matter of the past, the present reality is that of disharmony. Right at the beginning, Wordsworth sets up a tension between creative memory and the atrophic present: the poet's “memory is creative rather than nostalgic: still sensitive to a past that can modify and even reverse a present state of mind” (Geoffrey Hartman 11). Thus, what we also see in Wordsworth's construction of this tension is his hint towards its resolution: the present description of the natural landscape containing the synchronic structure of human mind and nature runs counter to the diachronic feature of the speaker's memory of an invasive Nature of five years ago. The temporality that the memory reveals makes it possible for us to read the poem in the light of trauma theory which insists on an ethical redemption from trauma. Here, right at the outset, the speaker hints at the healing power of Nature through his recollection of the past: by connecting the speaker's present self (the I) with his pastself (the other I) through the memory, Wordsworth foreshadows an ethical recovery from the trauma of the vagaries of modernity. Despite the beckoning towards regeneration, the overall tenor of the first pillar in the triadic structure of *Tintern Abbey* remains

towards stasis: the wilderness has been largely compromised by material activities like the cottage-ground, orchard and pastoral farms, the polluting smoke and the temporary shelters of vagrants and beggars.

In the second pillar of the triadic structure, the traumatic stasis of the present moment is contrasted with the liveliness five years before when “like a roe/I bounded o'er the mountains. . . (68-9). A long absence does not seem to have blotted the beautiful forms of the landscape around the Wye River near Tintern Abbey out of his memory. The memory, as the first movement of second pillar of the triadic structure, sets forth has been efficacious to him in combating the traumas of modernity:

These beautiful 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. (23-49)

The beautiful shapes of Nature have been a source of comfort to him, and have sustained him in exile amid the noise and bustle of towns and cities. He owes to them that exalted mood in which he can perceive the reality above and beyond material things. In these moments of illumination, when all is wrapped in a state of joy and harmony, he has an insight into the life of things. But if this were a vain belief, the speaker knows that whenever he has

been oppressed by the unprofitable and meaningless materiality of the world he has turned to the ever-sustaining memory of the wooded landscape of the Wye for comfort.

Result and Discussion:

The speaker's psychological stasis reversed by the memory is an ethical state accruing from the redemption from trauma which reveals self-conscious scrutiny of how he has taught himself to keep discovering new ways of understanding the revitalizing power of Nature amidst its destruction due to the onslaughts of modernity. One of these onslaughts that has been so traumatizing to Wordsworth has been the bloody aftermath of the French Revolution referred to in *Tintern Abbey* as "The still, sad music of humanity" (91).<sup>1</sup> The speaker's transition from a lesser to a greater consciousness of Nature's efficacy culminates, as it is suggested by the second movement of the second pillar of the triadic structure, in a climactic moment of new awareness:

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. (93-111)

The above passage, which encapsulates the nucleus of the plot of the poem—the very nub of the trajectory of the speaker's self-transformation—, has all along been leading to this moment of his discovery in Nature the existence of a living spirit which is a pervasive spirit that dwells in the

<sup>1</sup>William Richey, in "The Politicized Landscape of 'Tintern Abbey,'" reads this line as containing a political subtext: "In July of 1793, Wordsworth's political opinions had been rudely shaken by the course of the French Revolution as it lurched increasingly to the left and its death toll mounted" (202).

light of the setting sun and the round ocean, in the living air and the blue sky, and in the mind of man. This awareness has made him take Nature as his nurse, guide, and guardian of his heart and the soul of his moral being. To put it succinctly, Nature functions, for Wordsworth, as a bulwark against the trauma of the onslaughts of modernity.

The representation of the speaker's self-transformation from a traumatized self to a redeemed self is dramatized in a special way in his address to his sister with which the poem concludes. Wordsworth's dramatization of the invisible conversation between the speaker and his sister implies that the poet regards Dorothy as a communal member to whom he transmits this message of his own recovery from the trauma of modernity:

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! (129-146)

Wordsworth wants Dorothy who was with him on his previous trip to Tintern Abbey to imbibe this message of the efficacy of communion with Nature. In her eyes he can still see gleams of pleasure which he had enjoyed five years ago. The memory that has been metaphoric has helped him to deal with atrophy of the present experience of the ravages of modernity. The metaphoric memory of the landscape around Wye River near Tintern Abbey fills his mind with quietness and beauty so that evil tongues, unsympathetic judgments, the sneers of selfish men and dreary intercourse of material life cannot disturb the optimistic outlook. It is the affect of certainty and hope which he wants to evoke in his sister—an affect that may come to good stead in case in future years she is traumatized by the overwhelming pressures of modernity. Thus, Wordsworth's dramatic address to Dorothy, which is nothing but a pretext to his

message to the public at large, is “a rededication to humanitarian concerns” at the inroads made by modernity into the psychology of sensitive people like him (William Richey 212).

Conclusion:

To wrap up, through the performative dramatization of self-transformation in *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth’s metaphoric memory of natural bliss can help deal with the traumas of present life. Through these performative self-dramatizations, he repetitively self-scrutinizes his present maladies by pitting them against the balm, specular memory—a ritual-like performance which ultimately leads to self-stabilization despite serious threats of destabilization. The final affect of reassurance conveyed through his address to Dorothy not only confirms the resolution of tension between doubt and certainty but it also gives an unmistakable working-through of the trauma of modernity, which may be taken as a better, more human polis disposed towards a co-existence of modernity with Nature.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In order to complete this article, Prof. Dr Beerendra Pandey has helped me as well as in the publishing accessories Prof. Dr A.K.Jha helped as possible as he can.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Ashenden, Samantha & James Brown. “Romantic Guilt and Identity.” *Economy and Society* 43.1 (February 2014).83–102.
- [2] Bayerly, Alison. *Realism, Representation, and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- [3] Benis, Toby R. “Poverty and Crime.” *William Wordsworth in Context*. Ed. Andrew Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015.182-189.
- [4] Betz, John R. “Beyond the Sublime: The Aesthetics of the Analytic of Being (Part One).” *Modern Theology* 21.3 (July 2005). 367-411.
- [5] Beer, John. “Equally Seeking Lucy.” *Romanticism* 19.1 (2013).6-18.
- [6] Blank, G. Kim. *Wordsworth and Feeling: The Poetry of an Adult Child*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1995.
- [7] Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.
- [8] Bode, Cristoph. “Europe.” *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*. Ed. Nicholas Roe. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. 126-36.
- [9] Bove, Paul. *Mastering Discourse*. Durham: Duke UP, 1992.
- [10] Brennan, Thomas J. “Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*.” *Explicator* 63.1 (2004).13-15.
- [11] Brooks, Linda Marie. “Sublimity and Theatricality: Romantic ‘Pre-Postmodernism’ in Schiller and Coleridge.” *MLN* 105.5 (December 1990). 939-64.