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NATURE AND THE SUBLIME: ROMANTIC IMAGINATION IN WORDSWORTH'S *TINTERN ABBEY* AND SHELLEY'S *MONT BLANC*

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Abstract: This paper examines Romantic conceptions of nature and the sublime in the poetry of William Wordsworth and Percy Shelley as representatives of each poet's generation in the Romantic era. The poems "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" and "Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni" were chosen for their topic and immediate natural settings. By analyzing the sublime imagery and philosophical ideas in the poems, this paper shows how each poet engages with nature. Although both poems address the sublime and human feelings, the two poets offer different visions: Wordsworth's presentation of nature as a restorative, benevolent force is juxtaposed with Shelley's awe-inspiring and existentialist view of nature. The comparison sheds light on the Romantic fascination with the natural world and illustrates the poets' intention of composing long-lasting poetry.

Keywords: *Romanticism, poetry, sublime, landscape, philosophy, natural world*

Introduction

The Romantic Age had sweeping influence, initiating changes within the realms of philosophy, art, literature, religion and science. It is considered to have originated in Germany in the late eighteenth century, where the 'romantische Poesie' evolved into a distinct literary tradition (Seyhan, 2009, pp. 1-2). Romanticism was a counter-reaction to the Enlightenment and emerged out of societal turmoil (Drabble, 2000), when revolutions, by disrupting social order, transformed the landscape of Europe and ushered in a new way of thinking. As the Romantic movement brought in radical changes within philosophy and the arts in Europe and the US (Burwick, 2019), it challenged the age of reason and its principles with new notions of subjectivity of the individual, appreciation of the spontaneous emotional world, imagination in terms of transcendentalism and irrationality, as well as a recognition of sensitivity as inspiration rather than reason ("Romanticism", 2025). Furthermore, Romanticism was the time of inception of the Gothic with its supernatural and melodramatic tone embodied in the genre of the Gothic novel; the 'Romantic landscape,' which served as an object of contemplation and reflection of the human mind, connecting

the individual to nature; and the creation of "the Satanic and Byronic Hero," which incorporated themes of rebellion, heroism and the 'satanic' (Stillinger & Abrams, n.d.).

As Carter and McRae (2001) explain, the Romantic Age was a time of great social upheaval when the Industrial Revolution brought far-reaching changes: industrialism took the place of agriculture exchanging landowners with factory-owners and farm-hands with factory-hands. With the creation of industrial centers, the population started flocking to the larger towns and cities, "[altering] the landscape of the country" (p. 177). The encroachment of industrialism on nature was evident in the usurpation of open country, air pollution and inadequate dwellings. This is elaborated in William Blake's poetry, specifically his collection of poems *Songs of Innocence and Experience,* in which he observes the contradiction of the contemporary human existence. The poem "London", for instance, shows the poet's musings on the deterioration of the capital in light of industrial changes and the declining quality of life for its citizens (Carter and McRae, 2001).

Recognizing "the magnitude of general evil", Wordsworth (1800) comments on "the multitude of causes" (p. 3) which are detrimental to the human mind, such as the repetitive routines of daily life, the rising population in cities and the uniformity of human behavior. In such circumstances, with a dwindling capacity to linger, the timeless works of literature are forgotten. The rapid urbanization and intellectual decline were harbingers of a necessary change, namely the forthcoming Age of Romanticism.

Romanticism in England

The emergence of Romanticism in English literature was marked with the publication of the collection of poems *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, as a collaborative endeavor by poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge ("Romanticism", 2025). With this collection of experimental poems, Wordsworth and Coleridge, the first generation of Romantic poets, changed the landscape of English poetry. Because of the originality and unconventionality of the poems, Wordsworth deemed it necessary to add a preface to the collection elucidating the intention behind the poems, namely to usher in a new class of poetry, refine it from verbose articulations, turn its attention towards a simpler existence and common themes and bring verse expression closer to the masses. In essence, what Wordsworth set out to do was "to shift a literary perspective away from what he saw as gentility and false sophistication" (Sanders, 2000, p. 357). This view is supported by Carter and McRae (2001), who state that the preface "represents a poetic manifesto" (p. 179) and the poetry reflected the general tendencies of the time towards breaking with convention and establishing a new order. Wordsworth (1800) further explains his intention with the nascent class of poetry in terms of its object and style. He intends to refer poetry to "incidents and situations from common life" which would be expressed "in a selection of language

really used by men" (p. 2). Taking simpler settings such as the lives of the common man and adapting the language to expressing such ordinariness, as opposed to the contrived extant poetry, was a revolutionary step in verse writing.

Another treatise on poetry essential for the Romantic Age is Percy Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry,* an incomplete work which he begun in 1821 and initially intended as a response to Thomas Love Peacock's claim that poetry has become superfluous in an age of technological advancement, but ultimately was published posthumously in 1840 (Shelley, 2009). In his defence, Shelley does not so much set out to outline the composition of exemplary poetry, but rather focuses on its necessity, claiming that "a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth" (Shelley, 1994, p. 640). He highlights the persistence of poetry despite changing times and literary styles. Shelley believed that "poetry's function is to improve the human condition" (Woodcock, 2002, p. LI) and that "poetry… makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world" (Shelley, 1994, p. 657).

Through an overview of the history of poetry, from its early days in Ancient Greece until the poetry of his time, Shelley examines the role and influence of poets throughout the ages. He states, "A poet, as he is the author to others of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue and glory, so he ought personally to be the happiest, the best, the wises and the most illustrious of men" (Shelley, 1994, p. 658). This complements Wordsworth's description of the qualities of a poet: "a man, … , endowed with more lively 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". These qualities must inevitably be accompanied by "a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels" (Wordsworth, 1800, pp. 6-7).

The concluding remark to this defense of poetry in which Shelley designated poets as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Shelley, 1994, p. 660) is one of his most enduring quotes. Woodcock (2002) explicates the use of 'legislators' as justifying their purpose to "frame the ideal laws for human perfection and urge society towards them by the exercise of imagination and compassion" (p. LIII) and explains 'unacknowledged' as being unrecognized not only by society but by other poets as well. Being written during the Romantic Age, Shelley's defence of poetry reflects the changing notions and purpose of poetry, placing the poet as a prophet and legislator.

Nature in Romanticism

One of the elemental tenets of Romanticism is the notion of nature and of man's heightened sensitivity to and deeper appreciation of the natural world and its power. In fact, Schneider (2000) notes the pervasiveness of nature in literature and art through the inclusion of "pristine landscapes and scenes of blissful simplicity" and "overall harmony with the world of man" (p. 92). He further explains that in the

age of Romanticism, nature served as a medium through which people, freed from religious and societal constraints, were able to experience "the unfathomable depth of the soul" (p. 92). Nature, therefore, in the Romantic sense, was a safe haven from the rapid industrialization and usurpation of the individual. In his poetic manifesto, Wordsworth (1800) notes the relationship between man and nature as their being "essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature" (p. 8). According to Drabble (2000), the Romantics rejected the notion that the mind should be treated as merely an object for scientific inquiry. They regarded it as inherently creative and considered nature as a reflection of the human soul. Thus, for the Romantics, nature became a possibility not only to retreat into and reflect in, but also as a medium for imagination and identification. In nature, especially in the pristine and wilder parts, the Romantics were able to conjure the feeling of the sublime.

On the Sublime

Burke (1844) in his 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* discusses the aesthetic concept of the beautiful and the sublime. In its essence, the sublime and the great in nature cause a passion which at its most powerful appears in the form of astonishment. The causes, or sources, of the great and the sublime are plentiful: terror, obscurity, power, privation, vastness, sound and loudness as well as many other sensations which can overpower or disturb the senses of perception. Burke argues that poetry is superior in rousing the passions of man because, in comparison to paintings, which offer clearness of ideas, the former contains obscurity. As one of the sources of the sublime, obscurity allows for fear and danger, as anything which is fully perceived loses any possibility of inciting apprehension. Therefore, poetry contains much more potency to raise the passions than paintings. As Burke (1844) notes, although poetry is ambiguous and elusive, it exerts a stronger influence on human emotion than any other art form.

Thus, Romanticism's renewed connection to nature and the fascination with the sublime found their place in a new class of poetry which revived nature's relevance and humanity's attachment to it. Romantic poets often set their poems in nature, thereby allowing the immediate natural setting to heighten the sensory perception and lending the poems a transportative power over mind and soul.

Nature and the sublime in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and Shelley's "Mont Blanc"

Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798" and Percy Shelley's "Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni" are two exemplary poems from different generations of Romantic poets that represent the Romantic treatment of nature and man's engagement with it.

As the titles suggest, the poems have an immediate setting in nature, albeit contrasting: "Tintern Abbey" is on the banks of the English river Wye, whereas "Mont Blanc" in the Chamonix Valley. Observing their surroundings, Wordsworth and Shelley, equated with the poems' speakers, write of the feelings initiated by the natural world, offering a profound perspective into its healing power, but also frightening grandeur.

Tintern Abbey

The speaker in "Tintern Abbey" rejoices in the visitation of the River Wye, recounting the numerous "beauteous forms" (Wordsworth, n.d., line 23) he remembers well, even after a five-year-long absence: the waters, cliffs, dark sycamore, orchards and pastoral farms. This harmony of natural elements has left a lasting impression on the speaker out of which he has created an inner haven for "tranquil restoration" (line 31). Wordsworth notes the immense restorative and redemptive power of the natural world that even the memory of it, dating five years prior, has had a continuous positive influence on him, making him kinder and more loving. Additionally, it has endowed him with "that blessed mood" which makes easier "the burthen of the mystery" and "the heavy and the weary weight / of all this unintelligible world" (lines 38-41). This contemplative mood, in which "the breath of this corporeal frame / and even the motion of our human blood [is] almost suspended" (lines 44-46), recalls Burke's description of the astonishment at the sublime as suspending the motions of the soul. The sentiment instigated by the recollection of nature allows for a lighter existence and a transcending experience, as "[we] become a living soul" (line 47) and "we see into the life of things" (line 50). In this sense, nature not only possesses the power to bestow a greater understanding of existence, but also creates a memory which provides tranquility and calmness in the increasing hustle and bustle of growing industrial cities. When the oppression of the world becomes unbearable, the speaker returns to the river in his memory: "O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer thro' the word, / How often has my spirit turned to thee" (lines 58-59). Not only in the physical setting of the river Wye has the speaker returned, but he has done it in his mind's eye repeatedly and almost involuntarily, highlighting the longing for nature which is inherent in the spirit, but one from which humans have turned away.

In observing the natural landscape before him, Wordsworth recalls to mind earlier experiences. Likening himself to a roe, he presents the mountains, rivers and streams in which he fled as if he were running away from something. Through the imagery of the backdrop of his youthful restlessness, he describes the indelible comfort which the immediacy of nature offered him:

> …The sounding cataract
> Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
> The mountain, and the deep and gloomy word,
> Their colours and their forms, were then to me
> An appetite; a feeling and a love (lines 78-82)

Now, older and more mature, he has discovered the calming force of nature and has obtained a more philosophical appreciation of it.

The philosophical view of nature is reinforced by the natural imagery presented in the poem evoking the doctrine of pantheism as the unity of all forces in the universe. As Reese (2025) states, "the poetic sense of the divine within and around human beings" is "present in the Platonic Romanticism of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge" ("Immanence or transcendence," para. 1). Wordsworth paints an all-encompassing picture:

… – 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 the 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… (lines 95-104)

The natural forces are all around, permeating all things, including the mind of man. These stimuli allow humans to 'see into the life of things' and gain a greater consciousness, which is why the speaker names himself "a lover of the meadows and the woods / And mountains; and of all that we behold / from this green earth" (lines 105-107).

Nature, as presented by Wordsworth, is not only an incentive for the transcendence of the soul, but also serves as a shared experience for the strengthening of human bonds. Wordsworth is accompanied by his sister, in whose eyes he can witness the same excitement of his past self. Furthermore, the moment shared on the banks of the Wye creates not only a memory of nature, but also a memory of her brother advising her on the effect of nature on the mind, inciting it with "lofty thoughts" (line 131) which she should return to if anything harmful should beset her.

Wordsworth uses nature as an impetus to reflect on his own existence and does what Burwick (2019) notes as "the insertion of personal history into the poetic landscape" (p. 131). In "Tintern Abbey" Wordsworth contrasts his younger self with the self which is experiencing the same sight at the moment of composition. The latter is cognizant of nature's healing qualities and long-term mental benefits, as well as possessing a philosophical insight into life and existence, as well as his own relation to the landscape. Notably, he asks his sister to remember his admiration for the place and what it has meant to him as "a worshipper of Nature" (line 155).

Mont Blanc

Shelley's "Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni" is set in a vale and refers to the ravine, the river Arve and the eponymous Mont Blanc. The opening lines of the poem create the mental image of "[t]he everlasting universe of things / flows through the mind" (Shelley, n.d. lines 1-2) in the form of waves and the human mind supplies its own 'waters', through which Shelley establishes a connection between the mind and the universe. This relation is alluded to continuously throughout the remainder of the poem. When Shelley is gazing upon the "Dizzy Ravine" (line 34), he writes that his mind is "holding an unremitting interchange / with the clear universe of things around" (lines 39-40). The sights, as they appear before him, provide an inspiration to converse with nature in an uninterrupted flow. The imposing ravine has such a profound influence that he admits that "[he] seem[s] as in a trance sublime and strange" (line 35). The wandering thoughts he experiences in this trance highlight the swaying power which nature holds over humans. The captivating images of natural grandeur are even capable of igniting the creative imagination for poetry:

> In the still cave of the witch Poesy,
> Seeking among the shadows that pass by
> Ghost of all things that are, some shade of thee,
> Some phantom, some faint image, till the breast
> From which they fled recalls them, thou art there! (lines 44-48)

These lines suggest that nature serves as inspiration, possibly responsible for the existence of the very poem itself, an almost Platonic cave of shadows and remnants of real nature.

The natural imagery presented in the poetical portrait of the Ravine of Arve and Mont Blanc reflects Burke's philosophy of the sublime in its description and effect. The qualities Burke suggests of dark colours such as black or brown, in combination with vastness and height are inherent of the Alpine landscape. The ravine is dark and deep, the vale "many-colour'd, many-voiced" (line 13), and when Mont Blanc appears, it is "still, snowy and serene" (line 61), but also "…how hideously / Its shapes are heap'd around! rude, bare and high, / Ghastly, and scarr'd, and riven" (lines 69-71).

In a succession of images, the natural world is presented: Shelley begins with the ravine, then the great, bursting river flowing through it, the old pines as "children of elder time" (line 21), the winds, until he ultimately introduces Mont Blanc "far, far above, piercing the infinite sky" (line 60). These individual images produce an "awful scene" (line 15) of the sublime, whereas their unity suggests "an old and solemn harmony" (line 24). The grand appearance of Mont Blanc and the Ravine of Arve as the sublime suggest a harmonious eternity which has existed before and will persist even after the human race perishes.

This existential awareness, when faced with the sight of thegreat Mont Blanc looming large over an individual, instigates a suspicion in the speaker pertaining to reality. Shelley writes:

…I look on high,
Has some unknown omnipotence unfurl'd
The veil of life and death? Or do I lie
In dream… (lines 52-55)

Furthermore, the mind is challenged when encountering the sublime, because it provokes a forceful realization of the insignificance of humans. In the fourth stanza after having introduced all the natural elements, Shelley refers to the transience of life, stating:

The works and ways of man, their death and birth,
And that of him and all that his may be;
All things that move and breathe with toil and sound
Are born and die; revolve, subside, and swell. (lines 92-95)

It seems as if nature conspires against the living world, with "Frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power / Have piled: dome, pyramid and pinnacle, / A city of death . . ." (lines 103-105). In such an environment, living things do not stand a chance, as "The dwelling-place / of insects, beasts, and birds" (line 114) is destroyed, along with their sustenance, even "The race / of man flies far in dread; his work and dwelling vanish" "and their place is not known" (lines 117-120). Nature, rather than Mont Blanc, which "yet gleams on high" (line 127), persists, though no living thing beside may remain.

Duality of nature in 'Tintern Abbey" and "Mont Blanc"

"Tintern Abbey" and "Mont Blanc" exemplify the poets' profound spiritual and philosophical engagement with the natural world through opposing visions. The landscape of "Tintern Abbey" is a benevolent force which creates for Wordsworth an inner locus of memories with a restorative and healing effect active even long after its first impression. Additionally, it offers not only a physical setting, but also a shared experience which will serve as a fond memory for his sister. Similarly, Shelley connects the human mind with the universe, uniting them in an unbreakable bond. Imposing, ever-lasting nature might be frightening to the human mind; however, nature only exists insofar as it can be perceived by consciousness. The continuum of mind and nature which is established in the poem ends with Shelley's rhetorical question:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy? (lines 142-144)

Woodcock (2002) notes the contrast between the presentation of nature and its power in Wordsworth's and Shelley's poems. Instead of Wordsworth's benevolent spirit of nature which allows for a deeper understanding of the universe and reassures man's place in it, Shelley's atheism comes to the forefront in the dark, ragged wilderness which leaves questions unanswered and man aware of his insignificance.

While Wordsworth evokes a postcard-like vision of bucolic nature on the banks of the wooded Wye where the human spirit is elevated to a lighter existence, Shelley conjures an almost apocalyptic sense of nature which indiscriminately endures and leaves man doubtful of his place in the world. In this sense, Wordsworth's nature serves more as an immediate and preserved source of delight, while Shelley observes it as an invincible force causing doubt and uncertainty. The sublime in both poems opens the gates to a greater insight into the mystical relation between nature and the human mind. Wordsworth perceives how we ". . . become a living soul" (Wordsworth, n.d., line 47) and "We see into the life of things" (line 50), while Shelley's vision of "The everlasting universe of things / flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves" (Shelley, n.d., lines 1-2).

Conclusion

Through the presentation of contrasting natural imagery, the poets demonstrate the dual power of nature which is so great that it has created both the terrifying prospect of the awe-inspiring Mont Blanc and the bursting Arve, but also the calm Wye flowing through the green woods. Accordingly, these visions of nature give rise to appreciation, comfort and pleasant contemplation, as well as reverence and awe. The Romantics captured this sentiment in their poems through the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth, 1800, p. 3).

By using nature as a physical setting and interpreting the sublime in accompaniment of the feelings and thoughts it provokes, recalling humans back to the natural world and triggering an awareness of their place in it, the Romantics succeeded in their intention: "a species of poetry would be produced, which is genuine poetry; in its nature well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and likewise important in the multiplicity and quality of its moral relations" (Wordsworth, 1800, p. 15). As Shelley likened a good poem to a fountain "with the waters of wisdom and delight" (Shelley, 1994, p. 653) available to all the succeeding ages, the Romantics left a plethora of great poetry which remains a permanent interest to humanity.

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