Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey- A detailed Analysis

The subject of “Tintern Abbey” is memory—specifically, childhood memories of communion with natural beauty, a subject very important in Wordsworth’s work. The poem is a monologue, imaginatively spoken by a single speaker to himself, referencing the specific objects of its imaginary scene.The language of the poem is striking for its simplicity. This poem was written in July 1798. It was one of the nineteenth poems that Wordsworth contributed to Lyrical Ballads.

While the eighteenth century had been the advocate of reason and intellect,Romanticism emphasized on the feelings of the heart. Tintern Abbey possesses a special historical value as the first clear statement of the emotional change in poetry of which the Romantic Movement was the climax recognizing and defining the power of nature to quicken and sustain the imagination and creative faculty of man. Pantheism and Mysticism are almost interrelated factors in Nature poetry of the Romantic period. The basic feature of mysticism may be described as an attitude of mind founded upon an instinctive or experienced conviction of unity, of oneness, of likeness in all things. The instinctive conviction in the case of the Romantic poets came mostly out of their communion with Nature. Wordsworth’s poetry illustrates his philosophical beliefs which are: the immanence of the universal spirit of God in all Nature making it alive, intercommunion between God’s soul in Nature and God’s spirit in Man and the chastening effect of this communion in tranquilising and elevating the human spirit and putting it in tune with the infinite. Mysticism in Wordsworth is inseparable from his pantheism. The cardinal doctrine is that a spiritual power lives and breathes through all the works of Nature, and the emotional intensity of the contemplator can alone reveal the presence of the spiritual beneath the material, concrete and outward appearances of this phenomenal world. Along with the interest in nature and the belief in a spiritual power in Nature came the deepening interest in the common folk, the rustics and the peasants. The scene of Tintern Abbey is in the narrow gorge of the river, Wye, somewhere between Tintern and Monmouth. Wordsworth had visited it in the summer 1793. In July, 1798, he again visited it with his sister, after five years of absence. The poem opens with the speaker’s declaration that five years have passed since he last visited this location. He describes the objects he sees again and their effect upon him. The speaker then describes his memories while he was away in crowded towns and cities, and how they provided “tranquil restoration” to his mind. 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 as a boy. 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 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.” 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. First image is sound—“murmur” of water travelling from mountain to ocean. Then sight—“I behold” cliffs, which “impress” thoughts of seclusion. Impress, to print or stamp in the mind thoughts and feelings. The cliffs “connect” the landscape with the “quiet” of the sky, connect in his experiencing. Next section is reflection. He has “owed...sensations sweet” to the memories, flowing through body like liquid: blood to heart to mind (river Wye). The memories bring to the fore feelings of unremembered or forgotten pleasure. Next section brings doubts. Joyless daylight vs. “gleams of thought”: thoughts like firelight, dying light. In the state of nature, he didn’t think—he just felt. The sounding cataract haunted me...” The broken abbey as a presence in the background though not mentioned in the poem is a representation of the institution of church and the sacred in nature. In the final section, The Sister, the language is more religious. The “prayer” that “nature never did betray the heart that loved her.” Nature is a maternal figure, leading: she “informs” and “impresses” and is described as a “cheerful faith.” In the final lines there is a sense of mortality.

In the opening lines of the poem the speaker declares 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

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