

Chad Philip Johnson

Mr. Paul Calkins

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Perspectives of Nature for the Romantic Poets Wordsworth and Shelley

During the Romantic era, many writers found nature to be a source of inspiration when crafting poetry. It endowed clarity to those who ventured to form a connection with life as it exists in its simpler and more essential forms, allowing one to “strip off corrupting layers of culture, and then dwell, achieving environmental consciousness” (Hubbel). Two of the most effective writers of the time, William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, incorporated many interpretations of nature into their poems. Comparing these interpretations produces more similarities than differences, yet one important stylistic divergence exists which leads to a profound philosophical disagreement. Wordsworth writes of nature as being gentle and nurturing, forgivingly complementing man’s existence, whereas Shelley is less fanciful, instead portraying it as wholly unprejudiced and acting in strong independence of the wants and needs of living things.

In “Tintern Abbey”, one of William Wordsworth’s most celebrated poems, nature is made the focus. Wordsworth attributes to it qualities that heal and proffer renewal. In this story, the speaker is visiting nature after a five year absence, during which he forms a connection with “the landscape [and] with the quiet of the sky”, and finds repose “under dark sycamore” and among “pastoral farms” (390). The scene is one of verdant serenity, with nature lending the character clarity and spiritual centeredness: “And I have felt / A presence that disturbs me with the joy / Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused” (392).

The poem is concluded with the restoration of the speaker and an understanding that nature is the source from which this experience was granted.

In Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "Mont Blanc"—which was written in some part as a response to "Tintern Abbey" (776)—nature is again the focus. However, this version of it is quite different and composed of extremes, all of which are harsh and uncompromising. The raw powers of the mountain wrench fragile life: "Mont Blanc appears—still, snowy, and serene— / Its subject mountains their unearthly forms / Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between / Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps" (778). Meanwhile, nature's influence on man is distanced, but still fully pronounced: "My own, my human mind, which passively / Now renders and receives fast influencings, / Holding an unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around" (777). The speaker does not directly participate in the environs, but is instead caught in a trance-like awareness of the peak's qualities which he must behold. The poem is concluded with equal representations of life and death, the sense that one necessitates the other, and how both are at the mercy of a single awesome though strictly impartial force.

These two works serve as the greatest examples of each writer's understandings of nature, but the ideas recur in other efforts. In Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind", the poem's different themes are presented similarly to how they appeared in "Mont Blanc", but communicated instead through a powerful gale: "Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere / Black rain, and fire, and hail, will burst: Oh hear!" (795). The reader is battered by powerful words that represent the fierceness of the wind as it travels across the land. In Wordsworth's harrowing tale "The Thorn", a distraught and wickedly forsaken woman has buried her infant bastard child on a cruel mountainside. Yet even after such a terrible, unnerving loss, nature renews:

This heap of earth o'ergrown with moss  
 Which close beside the thorn you see,  
 So fresh in all its beauteous dyes,  
 Is like an infant's grave in size  
 As like as like can be:  
 But never, never any where,  
 An infant's grave was half so fair. (381)

It serves as the sole resource of color in an otherwise black story.

A common characteristic of both poets' styles is the frequent employment of special objects and words to embody their interpretations of nature. Wordsworth's manifestations are smaller, warmer, and proximal, while Shelley's are empty, cold, and distanced. These appear consistently throughout many of the works of each, where nature is summoned to effectively illustrate a scene or reinforce an idea. This is especially noticeable for Shelley: selected words like "chasm" and "vale" make powerful appearances in poems such as "Sonnet: Lift not the Painted Veil" (line 6) and "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (line 17), respectively, doing much to recall their same effects as in "Mont Blanc" (lines 63, 122, and 123). Wordsworth's objects are more varied, yet they represent ideas that become increasingly familiar to the reader each time they are encountered, such as "primrose-tufts" from "Lines Written in Early Spring" (line 9) and "glimmering lake" from "There Was a Boy" (line 6). "Tintern Abbey" alone has a number of delightful participants, among them being the "sylvan Wye" (line 57), a "hermit's cave" (line 22), and the "green landscape" (lines 15 and 159). Laid side by side, the unique references each author makes to nature contrast starkly with one another, yet somehow neither of the two are made to be any less convincing or impactful.

Of the many ideas William Wordsworth effectively impresses upon his readers, perhaps the greatest is when he is describing man's contact with nature, which he presents as a positive and necessary experience. An equal in his abilities, Percy Bysshe Shelley describes a different kind of nature that is no less magnificent or wondrous, only less heedful of man's concerns and wellbeing. While there are powerful truths to be found in both perspectives, determinations cannot be made about which is more accurate. It is certainly true that Wordsworth's "praise of nature" (Beer) paints a portrait that is more pleasing and acceptable to the regular person—and to this Shelley provides an important counterbalance through his honest, disquieting narratives.

Works Cited

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