The Integrity of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey"
Author(s): John R. Nabholtz
Published by: University of Illinois Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/27707714
Accessed: 01-02-2016 12:31 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp
JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
THE INTEGRITY OF WORDSWORTH’S “TINTERN ABBEY”

John R. Nabholtz, Loyola University, Chicago

With the possible exceptions of The Prelude and the “Intimations Ode,” no work in the Wordsworthian canon has been considered more central to the understanding of the poet’s art and thought, or has been subjected to more interpretation and critical analysis than “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey.” The voluminous commentary on the poem has ranged from explications of particular passages through an elaborate psychoanalytic discussion of the relation between Wordsworth the author and Wordsworth the speaker.¹ One of the main reasons for the continued attention which the poem has received is the widespread belief that, despite the apparent clarity and confidence of its rhetoric, the work is thematically ambiguous and confusing. Jack Stillinger speaks for many commentators when he declares that “it is sometimes difficult, even after many readings, to decide what the poem is primarily about.”² The ambiguities and confusions have usually been pinpointed to an uncomfortable tension between the persona’s repeated affirmations of faith in nature and his doubts about the validity of that faith. This view of the poem as the “sometimes bewildering but always impressive vacillation between conviction and doubt” or the revelation of “perplexity on a background of absolute certainty”³ has to a large extent been the preferred reading for most literary critics.

¹ The grammatical ambiguities in ll. 88–102 noted by William Empson in 1931 were still being debated almost thirty years later. See Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity (New York, 1931), pp. 192–94; Roy Arthur Swanson, Explicator, 14 (1956), item 31; Frederick M. Combrellack, Explicator, 14 (1956), item 61; Frederick A. Pottle, Explicator, 16 (1958), item 36. Some of the many analyses of the opening landscape-description are noted in n. 9, below. The psychoanalytic discussion is found in Richard J. Onorato, The Character of the Poet: Wordsworth in “The Prelude” (Princeton, 1971), pp. 29–87.


extent controlled consideration of the art of the poem. Albert S. Gérard
has described the structure of the poem as a "pattern of ascent and
descent which is repeated twice: ascent toward the loftiest heights of
mystical speculation, descent toward the firm ground of ascertained
fact."4 Even Wordsworth's suggestion about the intended artistic form
of the poem—"I have not ventured to call this Poem an Ode; but it was
written with a hope that in the transitions, and the impassioned music
of its versification would be found the principal requisites of that species
of composition"5—has been accommodated to the prevailing view.
Geoffrey Hartman sees the "turns" and "counterturns" of the traditional
ode related to the poem's "vacillating calculus of gain and loss, of hope
and doubt."6

Among the particular consequences of this conception of "Tintern
Abbey" has been the feeling that there is something not quite right
about its final movement, the long address to Dorothy (ll. 111-59),
which occupies very nearly one-third of the total composition (48 out
of 159 lines) and contains its most "impassioned" verses. The majority
of readers have seen this section as a disturbingly long postscript of
"anticlimax" to the true climax of the poem, the famous affirmation
of unity and love of nature in lines 93-111, and have argued that this
section represents Wordsworth's attempt to convince himself (and his
readers) of a faith in nature which in fact he knows to be not true.7 The
"impassioned" tone of this last section has indicated to one critic "a
[desperate] insistence . . ., faith affirmed more vehemently even as it
ebbs."8

In evaluating this widespread view of the poem as containing both
thematic and artistic confusion, it might be well to bear in mind that
the author obviously did not see the poem as riddled with contradic-

4 Gérard, p. 105.
5 The statement occurs in a "Note to the Poem on Revisiting the Wye" in the
1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads.
7 See Meyer, p. 253; Gérard, p. 113; Ferry, pp. 110-11; Hartman, p. 156.
8 Harold Bloom, The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry
(Garden City, N.Y., 1961), p. 135. To my knowledge, only Robert Langbaum has
seriously argued for the artistic and thematic integrity of the final section of "Tintern
Abbey." Langbaum states specifically: "We should not suppose, however, that
these lines [108-11] are the climax of the poem, and the final passage in which the
poet turns to his sister a mere postscript." Instead, Langbaum argues, the final
section presents dramatically "the partial articulation of a deeper, more mysterious
perception which has now opened out from the first—a perception of a benevolent
working of things which, if we fit our life into it, roots our most sophisticated idea
in our most primitive impulse, uniting youth with age, the external with the internal,
sense with idea, and matter with spirit" (The Poetry of Experience [New York, 1957],
p. 44). My difference from this justification for the final section, which stems from
my different approach to the poem, will be clear later in this paper.
Integrity of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”

As has long been noted, the poem concerns itself with union and interaction between man and nature. The odic “transitions” of the verses are precisely the various switches from one to the other of these partners in relationship as the central force of sustaining strength for man. To diagram the poem crudely, the first movement or “turn” (ll. 1-57) describes the primacy of nature in this reciprocity; nature is initially represented as the sole source of man’s strength and comfort, and the persona declares his love for her on that basis in the first climax of the poem (ll. 51-57). The second movement or “counterturn” of perspective (ll. 57-111) defines the emergence and independence of the mind, but at this midpoint in the evolving pattern the mind fulfills itself by the recognition of its identity with the forces producing the landscape; and in the second climax (ll. 102-11), the persona declares his love for the landscape for fostering and representing that identity. The final movement or “turn” goes beyond grounds for a love of nature on the basis of dependence or identity; it describes the mind no longer fulfilling itself primarily in various degrees of relationship with nature, but in reciprocity with another human being, and doing what nature herself cannot do—defeating mortal limitations by the power of memory. In the third climax (ll. 151-59), the persona declares his love of nature for fostering that very movement beyond nature into humanity and the strengths of the human mind, man’s ultimate comfort and
resource. Like *The Prelude*, "Resolution and Independence," and most of Wordsworth's other major poems, "Tintern Abbey" is a poem of progress, from the mind's recognition of its dependence upon nature to a recognition of its superiority to nature. As the external landscape at the opening of the poem testifies, *nature is uniform and unchanging*; as the evolving movement of the poet's perception throughout the poem testifies, *the mind is progressive*. How the progressive mind may come to love uniform nature is the true subject of the poem, and the "turns" and "counterturns" of perspective are the vehicle for unfolding that subject.

The opening landscape has been so often and so well analyzed that it would be superfluous and repetitious to undertake a detailed treatment. Suffice it to say that the poem begins with an external landscape that is supremely unified in its physical and visual properties, with forms and colors, heights and depths, objects of nature and man, all merging; in addition, the *persona* is drawn into that unity and increases it by his very perception of the unity. This landscape is the catalyst for the meditations to follow, and its clue is precisely the unity within the scene and between the observer and the scene. It may be noted that there is already something prophetic about the future course of the poem in the opening landscape-description; however much the emphasis here is clearly on the external world (the primacy given at this point to "these beauteous forms"), the final impulse of the passage is a mental act of the *persona*, as he adds to the scene *human* details not physically present to sight:

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.¹⁰

(II. 17–22)

It is formulaic in Wordsworth's poetry to move from nature's power to the mind's power, and that formula is operating in the opening landscape-description.

---


Following this initial description, the poem moves toward its first declaration of attachment to the landscape:

how oft—
In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee! (ll. 50–57)

It is a declaration of attachment on the basis of what the persona "owes" to the scene, a loving acknowledgment of nature as the primary benevolent power. Thus, having started with the union of nature and man in the external scene, Wordsworth first takes up one side of that union, what nature has given him, and he loves her for that. This is the initial "turn" in the poetic structure; as we shall see, the "counter-turn" beginning in line 58 and climaxing in the second declaration of attachment (ll. 102–11) will concern itself with what the mind offers in equal and united partnership with nature.

The ascending movement of the first meditation has been often noted: from nature's gift of "sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart; / And passing even into my purer mind, / With tranquil restoration"; next, of "feelings too / Of unremembered pleasure" leading to "acts / Of kindness and of love" (ll. 27–35). Finally, the meditation moves beyond the realm and function of the beautiful to "another gift / Of aspect more sublime," which he says "I may have owed" to nature:

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. (ll. 37–49)

Exponents of the "vacillation" theory have hit hard on the so-called "descent" from this affirmation in the next lines: "If this / Be but a vain belief . . . ." Everything depends, of course, upon the antecedent of "this" in "If this be but a vain belief." Gérard and Meyer\(^\text{11}\) take "this" to refer to the statement: "We see into the life of things," and accord-

\(^{11}\) Gérard, p. 106; Meyer, p. 252.
ingly read “If this be but a vain belief” as betraying the poet’s doubt about whether he did achieve “sublime” insight. And in a sense they are following the closest grammatical tie. But in the marvelous security and orderly development of lines 37–49 I see nothing to suggest any doubt about the authenticity of the experience described. It is more consistent to refer “this” to the only earlier confession of uncertainty: “Nor less, I trust, / To them I may have owed another gift, / Of aspect more sublime.” The doubt is not whether he truly has seen “into the life of things,” but whether “these beauteous forms” were the instrumental force of the “sublime” escape beyond nature and the body. It should be noted, however, that even if the persona is not sure at this point that nature is the source for that escape and all its corresponding spiritual rewards, yet “How often has my spirit turned to thee!” in implicit faith that nature is the source. Finally, the “doubt” stated here and already implicitly answered will be explicitly answered in the next movement of the poem.

The first “turn” of the poem is now complete; nature is loved for what she gives. The second movement now develops, and we appropriately switch from past benefits to present realities, from the picture of the landscape to “the picture of the mind,” as Wordsworth now chronicles the second partner in the union of the opening landscape. A new image of unity is presented, and it is one that is produced by an act of the mind, balancing the image of unity produced by nature in the opening landscape description:

The picture of the mind [of the past] revives again:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years. (ll. 61–65)

It deserves to be said at this point that the middle section or second movement of the poem, far from constituting the climax, is what any artistic middle should be, a transitional impulse, Januslike in simultaneously looking back and in preparing for the end. Much of the second movement is concerned with deepening our understanding of the past, and in that sense does look backward; but the source of that deepening is an act of the mind and in that sense looks forward to the primacy of the mind in the final movement. Thus, in the lines just quoted, the past is recovered, but wedded by the present mind into unity with the present and the future.

Lines 61–65 are prefaced by verses usually read as troubling statements of doubt: “And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought, / With many recognitions dim and faint, / And somewhat of a sad per-
plexity. . . .” But as with other “doubts” expressed in the poem, these are to be triumphantly worked through to make the affirmation all the more convincing and meaningful. The “doubts” expressed here seem to me to refer to the persona’s temporary uncertainty in bringing alive “the picture of the mind” of the past. The succeeding lines, however, demonstrate that that revival has been accomplished; moreover, the “thought” is only “half-extinguished,” the “recognitions” are “many” even if “dim and faint,” and the “sad perplexity” is only “somewhat.”

In short, the statement of the mind’s recovery of the past mind and the triumphant bringing of that past mind into unity with the present and the future is preceded by an act of the mind which deepens the achievement and gives substance to the power of that present emergent mind. This process of acknowledging doubts in order to make probable the affirmation has been seen already in lines 49–57 and will be repeated later; it is one of the major rhetorical strategies of the composition. This poem is an act of a progressive mind. The progress necessarily involves change and loss, and the measure of the mind’s progress is in meeting the doubts about change and loss.

The picture of the mind of the past is now presented (ll. 67–83), held in focus by still another “doubt”: “And so I dare to hope, / Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first / I came among these hills.” This “doubt” that the present will support the future is the most genuine and disturbing uncertainty in the poem, and will not be satisfactorily answered until the final section.

The past relationship of mind to landscape here described was one of total emotional (and in that sense “thoughtless,” l. 90) involvement and satisfaction. It was not a conscious giving of the observer to the scene; rather, he was virtually possessed by that scene, following “Wherever nature led,” “Haunted . . . like a passion” by “The sounding cataract.” Wordsworth’s first simile to describe himself five years before is “like a roe.” Note that he was not “a roe” five years before, as he had virtually been in the “glad animal movements” of his still earlier “boyish days”; rather, he was “like a roe” in so far as the demands of his human personality did not significantly challenge or interfere with the primary power of nature. The second of Wordsworth’s similes precisely makes the point: “more like a man / Flying from something that he dreads than one / Who sought the thing he loved.” A man, as against the roelike youth, could only experience such intense involvement with nature unwillingly and half-heartedy, because such possession would be destructive of his fully developed human personality. Such involvement and possession for the man could occur only as the result of some extraordinary pressure from a threatening force outside of his relation-
ship with nature. But for the roelike youth, there was no significant force beyond his relationship with nature; “Nature then / To me was all in all.”

The completeness of the “thoughtless” youth’s satisfaction in nature is recorded in the succeeding lines:

I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion; the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite; a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, nor any interest
Unborrowed from the eye. (ll. 75–83)

The loss of that state of emotional union and possession is then acknowledged: “That time is past, / And all its aching joys are now no more, / And all its dizzy raptures.” And it produces a genuine psychological fear, that also ending are the benefits of “sensations sweet,” “feelings too / Of unremembered pleasure” and “that serene and blessed mood,” which were able to remain as a comfort to the youth during the painful intervening five years precisely because he had been so at one with nature, because there had been nothing standing between him and the energies of the landscape.

Yet for this loss, he declares, “I would believe, / Abundant recompense.” The hesitation in this statement is a repetition of the earlier “doubt” of this midsection, whether the present mind with all its difference from the past mind can provide security for the future, a doubt to be answered completely only in the third section. The “recompense” described at this point comes from what he now offers nature, from what he brings to the landscape from the initiative and experience of his own mind: the knowledge of “The still, sad music of humanity, / Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power / To chasten and subdue” the easy satisfactions and assurances of “aching joys” and

12 There seems to me something rather unclear about the tone of some of the language in ll. 75—86. Despite the fact that Wordsworth is obviously recalling a period of important benefit to him, yet there is the suggestion of something excessive, almost unhealthy about that experience. I refer particularly to the concluding, summary phrases: “aching joys,” “dizzy raptures.” But the earlier statement: “The sounding cataract / Haunted me like a passion” should be noted as well. By those who see the poem as less certain in its affirmations after loss than I do, it could be argued that Wordsworth has subtly undercut and been less than fair to the previous state in order to make his new “maturity” seem all the more acceptable to himself and his readers. It could be argued as well that, from the more mature human perspective the persona now holds, the earlier state for all its value might seem excessive, that is, excessive for the mature man.
“dizzy raptures.” By looking at nature in terms of human suffering (and the very consciousness of humanity acknowledges the end of “Nature . . . all in all”), a richer reward comes and a deeper tie is made in the awareness of nature’s comfort for suffering man, thus, in some ways recapitulating the basis of the first declaration of love in lines 50–57, though now moving beyond himself to all men.

However, a still greater “gift” and deeper basis of love for nature comes from this emergence of a human consciousness which is better than “thoughtless” emotion in not being limited to physical forms. This “gift” is first defined as the feeling of “a presence” in and beyond the physical forms and also present in the observer, “a presence” that cuts across all lines of separation and all apparent antitheses in man’s internal life; it “disturbs” with “joy,” but the “joy / Of elevated thoughts.” This “presence” has thus far been defined as something residing in and active upon the mind; it is next defined as being, in fact, the highest activity of the mind itself: “a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused” than the emotionally charged tie of physical senses to physical forms enjoyed by the roelike youth. It is a new “sense” added to the previous physical senses, which contacts and identifies a principle or power whose activity and residence are found both in nature and in the mind; and that very contacting and identification are the operation of that principle or power. The “presence” is further and finally defined as “a motion and a spirit” that simultaneously is man’s active process of thought, shapes the objects about which he thinks, and “rolls through all things.”

In the first meditation the persona was uncertain about the source of seeing “into the life of things”; that uncertainty has now vanished. It was not the beauteous forms themselves which led to sublime insight, but the operation of a power within them that can be recognized only when the mind becomes conscious of its own identical power, one power always manifesting itself in unity, whether of the external scene or of times past-present-future.

A second declaration of love for the landscape is appropriate, based on a closer tie than obligation to physical forms, based now on an awareness of an identity between human consciousness and the power unifying the external scene. The landscape of the Wye valley has come to be seen as the meeting point and joint product of one principle of “motion and spirit” residing in the mind and in, but not limited to, the physical forms. The landscape is therefore not the beloved source of primary value in its external “beauteous forms” as it was in the first meditation; it serves now as an emblem of the mind’s power and the source of that power manifesting themselves jointly in the unity of
the scene and the recognition of that unity. “Therefore am I still / A lover of the meadows and the woods, / And mountains”—what is externally there, the physical forms themselves; “and of all that we behold / From this green earth”—what exists as known through the mediation of the senses; finally, “of all the mighty world / Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create, / And what perceive”—the climactic understanding of the meaning of the external world as the product of a unifying power operating in the external forms and in the mind. This section ends with an act of the mind, a “recognition,” rather than a statement of needly dependence, that “nature and the language of the sense” are “The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being”; that is, our total identity and our various human powers (“thoughts,” “heart,” “moral being”) are evolved through or revealed by the external scene and by what our senses tell us of our own creative power beyond the senses and of the sources of that power.

The final section opens with the lines usually interpreted as further evidence of perplexity and doubt: “Nor perchance, / If I were not thus taught, should I the more / Suffer my genial spirits to decay” (ll. 111–13). Only by special and unwarranted emphasis can these lines represent disturbing doubt; they certainly are less “doubtful,” in any case, than “If this / Be but a vain belief” or “somewhat of a sad perplexity” earlier. What the poet is doing here in the final “turn” or change in perspective is moving the argument from the previous position in which the mind recognized its creative power as one with the power sustaining the landscape and gave itself back in love to that landscape. The new position is rather how that nourishing union is made manifest where for the mature and fully human man it really matters—not in landscape but in human relations. Up until this point in the drama of the poem, the persona has been isolated from other human contacts and has exclusively been describing various degrees of relationship between himself and nature. But the nourishing union is now evidenced in reciprocity between human beings, in this case between himself and his sister Dorothy, who stands beside him at this moment embodying that past relationship with nature “in the shooting lights / Of thy wild eyes.” He first prays that she may “yet a little while” continue to reflect for him the origins of his growth to maturity. Thus initially Dorothy is seen as the provider of strength to the persona, as nature had been earlier. But he immediately goes on to say: “and this prayer I make, / Knowing that Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her”; that is, even as he asks Dorothy for help in reliving the past, he gives her the assurance of her still richer future which is
identical with his present maturity, thus uniting past-present-future once again but now in a totally human context of mutual giving.

The same achievement of mutual giving in shaping time to vital human purposes is the structural principle of the next sequence of this final meditation:

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! 
(ll. 134–46)

Dorothy's future identity, which he here prophetically offers her, will fulfill itself in preserving from the past his present identity, preserving it finally, it would seem, even against death:

Nor, perchance—
If I should be where I no more can hear
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams
Of past existence—wilt thou then forget
That on the banks of this delightful stream
We stood together... . .
(ll. 146–51)

The identity of her brother that she will preserve will be of him not primarily as a "worshipper of nature," even a worshipper "with far deeper zeal / Of holier love" for nature's benefits. Rather, in the very last lines of the poem, we learn that she will preserve his humanly tender ("more dear") attachment to nature for leading Dorothy's mind to the power of defeating human separation and loss in remembering him, and in remembering him as he prophesied this very moment of Dorothy's greatest power:

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!

The entire last section of "Tintern Abbey" is about acts of the mind, which fulfill themselves in reciprocity with and service to other minds, and in loving nature for initiating that progress toward benefits that
nature herself cannot give—the defeat of mortal limitations and the preserving of richly human experience. “No poem,” Harold Bloom has written, “unless it be The Old Cumberland Beggar, humanizes us more.” I would add that by the end of the poem not only have the persona, his sister, and the reader been humanized; so also has the landscape, which has been brought to its final value by acts of human consciousness, the “turns” and “counterturns” of perspective, without which nature would be left forever isolated in her beautiful uniformity.

13 Bloom, p. 136.