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Absence Makes the Argument Grow Stronger: WW and the Reality of Tintern Abbey

In *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth presents a view of the landscape around the abbey that is picturesque and romantic. However, it is generally agreed that the view which he presents is not entirely accurate (though some scholars such as Charles Rzepka argue against this interpretation). Wordsworth leaves small traces of reality within his poem but the overall description that he provides is unreliable. Marjorie Levinson argues that the reason Wordsworth fails to present an accurate portrayal of the landscape is that he consciously avoids addressing the political, social, and economic issues that the scene would have presented. Charles Rzepka, however, argues that Levinson's "historically accurate" description of the scene was itself inaccurate. I intend to expound upon William Richey's argument that Wordsworth's omissions and distortions were the result of strict censorship (Richey says that Wordsworth was under government surveillance and writing at a time when the government was monitoring what was written) and that he was attempting to make a political statement. The way in which Wordsworth distorts the scene while subtly hinting at the reality is meant to draw the reader's attention to what would have been absent within the poem, thus making a subtle social commentary on the problems of poverty and industrialization.

In “Insight and Oversight: Reading ‘Tintern Abbey’” Marjorie Levinson analyzes what Wordsworth omitted or distorted in presenting his view of Tintern Abbey. She argues that Wordsworth exercises a “selective blindness” in his presentation of the scenery and that by doing so he avoids presenting the issues of his society when he describes Tintern Abbey because he is too focused on his idealized image of the scene. Levinson attempts to present a more historically accurate “picture of the place” that reveals Wordsworth’s omissions, focusing on the presence of the industrialization.

I agree with Levinson’s basic analysis, but I do not agree that Wordsworth was unconsciously avoiding the issues. Wordsworth presents the issues in a very subtle way that is representative of how English society felt at the time with regards to social, economic, and political problems. The issues tended to be ignored, and Wordsworth captures this popular sentiment while still calling attention to the problems and making them subsequently harder to ignore or escape from. The poem is just as much about what is absent from the scene as it is about what is present.

In dialogue with Levinson are Charles Rzepka and William Richey. In the article “Pictures of the Mind: Iron and Charcoal, ‘Ouzy’ Tides and ‘Vagrant Dwellers’ at Tintern, 1798” Rzepka examines the sources that inform Levinson’s view of the abbey and finds flaw in her analysis. He argues that the presence of “industrial and commercial activity” would not have been as prominent as Levinson claims. Levinson uses the observations of William Gilpin, author of a guidebook that Wordsworth carried with him, to provide descriptions of the scenery and the effects of industrialization on the surrounding environment and the river, which was described as having “ouzy and discolored” water with “sludgy shores.” Rzepka shows that these were not likely the effects of pollution, but were most likely naturally occurring. He also argues against

some of the other ways in which she presents what would have been the ‘real’ scene, saying that many of her statements are exaggerated or misleading. However, the degree to which Wordsworth distorted the reality is not relevant. What is relevant is the fact that he *did* present an image of Tintern Abbey that was clearly different from the reality.

William Richey argues with Levinson that Wordsworth fails to present the scene at Tintern Abbey as it would have been. He agrees that “as Levinson and others have suggested, Wordsworth seems to go out of his way in this description of a similar landscape to avoid all such political commentary” (Richey 200). However, unlike Levinson, Richey argues that Wordsworth intentionally omitted the presence of industrialization. He argues that this was done in order to avoid censorship or a strong political backlash while at the same time calling attention to the problems within society. Richey says that it is remarkable that “the vagrant dwellers...have been converted into just another picturesque feature of the landscape” (Richey 200). He points out, and I agree, that it is interesting and significant that Wordsworth, who tends to focus on such political issues, chooses in this poem to overlook the presence of the “vagrant dwellers” in order to “enjoy a pastoral retreat into a harmonious green world” (Richey 201). This goes beyond analyzing what Wordsworth left out; this focuses the analysis on *why* Wordsworth left things out. Wordsworth was using their absence as a form of address.

At the very beginning of the poem, Wordsworth emphasizes how long it’s been since he last visited Tintern Abbey. He repeats the fact that it has been five years three different times, referring to the changing seasons of summer and winter. This places some emphasis on the possibility that the landscape and the environment has changed. This leads into his description of the landscape where he subtly inserts the presence of the vagrants and the effects of

industrialization into the poem. However, they are presented in such a way as to draw attention away from them, described only as:

wreathes of smoke
 Sent up, in silence, from among the trees
 And the low copses—coming from 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 (Wordsworth 18-24).

Levinson writes that lines 1-22, “to all appearances, a series of timeless, spiritually suggestive pastoral impressions – in fact represent a concretely motivated attempt to green an actualized political prospect and to hypostatize the resultant fiction, a product of memory and desire” (Levinson, 15). Levinson is arguing that Wordsworth’s poem presents a pastoral scene that avoids focusing on the political and social problems present in the true scene, problems such as pollution and poverty. This begs the question of whether Wordsworth was avoiding the larger issues at hand by distorting and omitting the reality of the scene or whether the hints at reality are meant to draw the reader’s attention to what would clearly have been absent within the poem.

The first portion of these lines places the smoke in the background, specifically stating that it is coming up “from among the trees”. The fact that the smoke comes from among the trees hints at the presence of the ironworks that used the trees to produce iron. This inserts the presence of smoke and the effects of industrialization into the poem and then allows them to fade into the background, just as its presence would become less noticeable to anyone observing the landscape or accustomed to its presence. Wordsworth also deemphasizes the presence of the vagrant dwellers, only mentioning them briefly in the above lines in order to create an idealized scene. In analyzing the presence of the smoke, Rzepka’s argument should be taken into account.

He argues that the smoke could have also come from non-commercial sources such as individual fires. The smoke could be either non industrial or industrial. However, given that it is placed alongside other important and deemphasized social issues, it seems plausible that the smoke hints at the presence of industrialization.

Additionally, this poem must be placed within the context of Lyrical Ballads, in which it was originally published. Doing so emphasizes Wordsworth's omission of the reality of the landscape and the presence of the vagrants, showing how the fact that they were only subtly mentioned was meant to draw attention to their absence. The fact that Wordsworth overlooks their presence is significant because many of his other poems in Lyrical Ballads focused on and acknowledged the poor and the lower class. Going even further, I would argue that the placement of the poem within Lyrical Ballads is significant. Wordsworth intentionally made *Tintern Abbey* the final poem in the collection both in the original 1798 edition and in subsequent editions. The fact that this poem was consistently chosen as the final poem shows that its placement was intentional rather than arbitrary. This places more emphasis on this poem because it is a poem that acts as the closing to the whole series and yet it is here that Wordsworth suddenly chooses to overlook the presence of poverty and the vagrants. There is a noticeable difference in the subject matter and within the context of Lyrical Ballads readers would question why Wordsworth would make the "vagrant dwellers" a part of the landscape instead of allowing them to populate the poem. In this way, even though the vagrants only receive a brief mention in one line each, their lack of presence actually calls attention to them and they become a large part of the poem. and if there was going to be a political or social commentary or address to the reader, this is where the call to action would be. This is further emphasized by the fact that it was common knowledge that there were many vagrant dwellers at Tintern Abbey. Readers would have been aware that

Wordsworth was presenting an idealized image and would have paid attention to what was left out of the poem or not accurately represented.

Additionally, Wordsworth is revisiting this scene and there is a strong emphasis on how things have changed since the first time he viewed the scenery. While problems such as vagrancy and industrialization may have been present (and possibly even more prevalent) during his initial visit, the focus on change still works to emphasize the presence of such problems. In this case the dilemma isn't that such problems have suddenly appeared, but that they have come to his attention and his perception of the landscape has changed. This could be the reason why he is able to say that the memory of the landscape sustained him while he was "in lonely rooms, and mid the din/Of towns and cities" (WW lines 28-29). Nature and its purity gave him strength while he remained in the urban environment, but upon revisiting Tintern Abbey he finds that some of the socio-political problems of the country have spread outwards, tainting nature and its scenery. However, this is not the focus for Wordsworth because he (and to a larger degree his readers) has become so accustomed to the presence of such problems that they merely fade into the background, and their distinct lack of presence emphasizes their importance.

Immediately following his description of the natural scenery in which he briefly addressed the social and political problems present within the scene, Wordsworth says that the memory of nature and this scenery often sustained him while he was "in lonely rooms, and mid the din/Of towns and cities" (WW lines 28-29). Back in the urban setting, Wordsworth claims that the experience of nature and the positive influence and effect that it had upon him allowed him purity of the mind and a more tranquil existence and he owes nature a great debt.

Wordsworth mentions how often he has turned to the "sylvan Wye". And in doing this, he begins to classify the outside or urban world that he resides in as a draining and negative setting.

Wordsworth then proclaims that “now, with gleams of half-extinguish’d thought,/With many recognitions dim and faint,/And somewhat of a sad perplexity,/The picture of the mind 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” (WW lines 62-69).

Wordsworth’s “sad perplexity” is referring to the fact that he knows that he will leave and he will only have the new memory to sustain him, as he mentions in the following lines. As Levinson aptly describes it, “‘Tintern Abbey’ evinces the poet’s desire to house his experience, past and future, in a mental fortress” (Levinson 23).

However, I would argue that there is an additional meaning to this sadness because his old memory is fading and is now replaced by this new memory, but the scene presented to him this time around is not as perfect. Levinson describes this idea, claiming that Wordsworth’s “mental picture of the Abbey is not, in 1798, an ideal or strictly discursive construct...but an *idealized* representation of a remembered and presently observed scene” (Levinson, 24). The majority of the poem so far has been about how he was affected by the scene and the setting the first time around and how that changed him and sustained him when he left nature and returned to the more urban and populated settings. However, as Thomas Brennan says in his article “Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’”, everything is transient and things are subject to change. Brennan says that “Though [Wordsworth] would like to believe that nature has provided him with a framework for integrating his past youthful self with his present disappointed one, this hope proves false. He does not find the glory of his own previous relationship to nature in the ruin before him” (Brennan, 15). This time around Wordsworth is more aware of the presence of the socio-political problems of the country, stemming largely from industrialization, within the natural setting. This awareness taints the landscape for Wordsworth because it does not provide

picturesque landscape and the effect it has on the speaker. Wordsworth takes a different approach towards focusing on social issues such as industrialization, poverty, and vagrancy. He calls attention to these problems based on their absence within *Tintern Abbey*. In the context of Lyrical Ballads, the way in which this poem seemingly avoids focusing on the “vagrant dwellers” serves to call even more attention to their absence. As the conclusion to Lyrical Ballads, this poem serves to reemphasize Wordsworth’s tendency to focus on social issues (especially those relating to class) while presenting the same issues in a new way.

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