

"Tintern Abbey"

By William Wordsworth

*Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and markup by Students
and Staff of The University of Virginia and Simon Fraser University*

LINES
WRITTEN A FEW MILES ABOVE
TINTERN ABBEY,
ON REVISITING THE BANKS OF THE
WYE
DURING
A TOUR,
July 13, 1798., [Introduction](#)

Five years have passed; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With sweet inland murmur, ^{murmur} —Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
Which on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect

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The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Among the woods and copses lose themselves,
Nor, with their green and simple hue, disturb
The wild green landscape. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild ; these pastoral farms
Green to the very door ; and 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.

Though absent long,
These forms of beauty have not been to me,

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As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration :—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure ; such, perhaps,
As may have had no trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life ;
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and love. Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,

In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lighten'd:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,

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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.

If this
Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft,
In darkness, and amid the many shapes
Of joyless day-light ; 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 through the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!

And now, with gleams of half-extinguish'd thought,

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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. And so I dare to hope
Though changed, no doubt, from what I was, when first
I came among these hills ; when like a roe
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led ; more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,
And their glad animal movements all gone by,)
To me was all in all.—I cannot paint

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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, or any interest
Unborrow'd from the eye. — That time is
past,
And all its aching joys are now no more,
And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur: other gifts
Have followed, for such loss, I would believe,
Abundant recompense. For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power

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To chasten and subdue. 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 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. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,^{half-create}

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And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

Nor, perchance,
If I were not thus taught, should I the more
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:
For thou art with me, here, upon the banks

Of this fair river ; though, my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend, and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once,
My dear, dear Sister! And this prayer I make,
Knowing that Nature never did betray

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The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy: for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith that all which we behold
Is full of blessings. 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

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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! Nor, perchance,
If I should be, where I no more can hear
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleam
Of past existence, wilt thou then forget
That on the banks of this delightful stream
We stood together; and that I, so long
A worshipper of Nature, hither came,
Unwearied in that service: rather say
With warmer love, oh! with far deeper zeal
Of holier love. 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.

END.

Footnotes

Introduction William Wordsworth's "Lines, Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798" is one of the most important and influential poems in the English language. Published in 1798 as the last work in *Lyrical Ballads*, the collection that Wordsworth put together with his friend and fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the poem describes a walking trip to the Wye Valley, on the border between England and Wales, that Wordsworth had made with his sister Dorothy that summer. It was a trip that covered much the same route as one that Wordsworth had made alone five years earlier. The image of a poet recollecting his experience in a beautiful setting became a paradigm for a new kind of poetry: subjective, reflective, emotional, written in the kind of plain speech, that Wordsworth, in his preface to a later edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, called "the real language of men." Wordsworth's poem is not quite like normal speech; it still has the rhythm of iambic pentameter verse, and is shaped in a way that ordinary speech is not. But Wordsworth deliberately avoids or downplays many of the features of the poetry written in the eighteenth century such as rhyme, word inversion, and figurative language to create verse that feels spontaneous, as though the poem is tracing the poet's thoughts as they occurred to him. That is not the case, of course; this is a carefully composed poem, one that builds to a climax when the speaker turns to a "dear, dear Friend," his sister Dorothy, and the reader realizes that she has been there all along. By turning the the memory of their walking tour, a memory that then reminds Wordsworth of another walking tour he had taken along the same route five years earlier, Wordsworth offers what he would later call "emotion recollected in tranquility," a model for composing poetry that felt original to contemporary readers and has endured.

The poem is almost always referred to as "Tintern Abbey," after the ruins of a monastery in the Wye Valley that was close to the route that the Wordsworths took on their tour. By the late 1790s, Tintern Abbey was well-known tourist destination, featured in a number of travel guides to the area, and the subject of paintings by several contemporary painters. But calling the poem "Tintern Abbey" is slightly odd because the Abbey itself does not appear in the poem, and it is clear that the place where William and Dorothy are standing is, as the full title indicates, a few miles upriver than the Abbey itself. It is easier to see significance in the first word of the title: "Lines." Literally, "Lines" refers to the lines of poetry that make the up the poem, the lines printed on the page that the reader holds in their hands. But within the poem, "lines" is also the word that the poet uses to refer to the lines of hedgerows in the landscape, the lines marking the boundaries between the different farm fields and pastures. The vista spread out before the Wordsworths is a cultural scene as much as it is a natural one, a human landscape, with farms, orchards, cottages, domesticated animals, and smoke rising from forges. The lines on the type-set page stand in, then, for the lines of the landscape, suggesting how poetry can be a surrogate experience for a reader who many never get to visit that remote part of the British Isles, but who can, by meditating with the poet on his experience, share its emotional impact. The layered memories of the walking tours through this area are clearly, for Wordsworth, restorative, a resource that he has drawn upon when he was living far away, "in lonely rooms, and mid the din/Of towns and cities." His experience, processed and put in the form of this poem, can in turn become a resource for readers.

The date included in the title--July 13, 1798--is also significant. Wordsworth notes that he had been at this spot exactly five years before. In the summer of 1793, Wordsworth was in a state of

personal crisis. He had gone in late 1791 to France after his graduation from Cambridge. Like many young Englishmen, he was excited by the French Revolution, which seemed at that point to promise a bright future, one where representative government might break through the deadening effect of the aristocratic rule that dominated France and Britain. While in France, Wordsworth met and fell in love with Marie-Anne Vallon (she was usually known as Annette); she had a daughter, Caroline, in December 1792. But by that point, Wordsworth was on his way back to England; he was out of money, and had no way to make any in France. War between England and France broke out in early 1793; William and Annette probably did not see each other for several years. When he visited the Wye Valley in the summer of 1793, then, Wordsworth was a bit of a wreck; broke, without good prospects for employment, separated from his lover and their daughter, still holding to revolutionary ideals and hoping to see them realized in Britain and deeply unhappy that his country was at war with France. But he was also becoming aware of the violent turn that the Revolution had taken, having been in Paris during what were known as the September Massacres in September 1792, when hundreds of people—we still do not know how many—were killed for being suspected counter-revolutionaries. July 13 is the day before Bastille Day, the day when the Revolution initially began in 1789. It is not exactly clear what Wordsworth is thinking of in recording the date, and he never offered an explanation, but it is hard not to think that Wordsworth is drawing attention to the near-coincidence between the date of his tour nine years later and the anniversary of the Revolution's start. Perhaps ironically or ruefully, aware of how the passage of time has made the Revolution, his previous visit to that location, and his situation now all feel very different from one another. By 1798 Wordsworth had become thoroughly disillusioned by the French Revolution, and turned to poetry, perhaps hoping to create a revolution in hearts and minds rather than in politics. This poem, and *Lyrical Ballads*, are landmarks of that revolution, a revolution that we now call Romanticism.

Image: J. M. W. Turner. *Tintern Abbey*, 1792. Tate Britain, London.

murmur The river is not affected by the tides a few miles above Tintern. [Wordsworth's note.]

half- This line has a close resemblance to an admirable line of Young, the exact expression of which I
create cannot recollect. [Wordsworth's note]