Reflective Essay

DESPERATE MAN AND SOOTHING NATURE: WORDSWORTH'S "TINTERN ABBEY" AND "THE RUINED COTTAGE"

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Abstract

This essay would like to examine a profound bond between Man and Nature. Human despair and mental conflicts are deeply rooted with Nature. Wordsworth’s treatment of Nature and melancholic mood are interrelated to each other. It draws a new light upon sorrows and spiritual development of human beings through lightening the burden of sufferings in an emotional catharsis to the tragic experience. The poem, “Tintern Abbey” highlights the genesis of the poet’s belief that Nature with its healing power and sympathetic attitude soothes human sorrows and sufferings. Investigating the poem, “The Ruined Cottage,” this critical study would like to show the glaring images of Nature’s sympathy with human beings in suffering and adversity: the insight of universal sympathy gained by the Wanderer; the tragic end of Margaret and parallel decline of her own shabby cottage and its surroundings, and the soothing effect of landscapes in the poet’s personal experiences. For this purpose, this essay would like to focus on Wordsworth's hypothesis of the interaction between suffering humanity and soothing Nature. Wordsworth's strong faith in Nature as a savior of man from sorrows and sufferings has been clearly presented in his two early poems, “Tintern Abbey” and “The Ruined Cottage.”

The function nature plays in the mind of man who suffers or comes to know other people’s suffering is one of Wordsworth's major explorations in his treatment of the Sublime and the Pathetic. In many of his poems the poet has expressed the belief that Nature responds to human joys and sorrows and passionately sympathizes with him in his suffering and despair. To him, every natural object seems to possess a moral or spiritual life, capable of a companionship with man, and is full of expression, of inexplicable affinities and delicacies of intercourse. One of Wordsworth’s early poems, “The Tintern Abbey,” is based on this view as the poet asserts, “Nature never did betray/The heart that loved her”. Although in the Wye scenery of “The Tintern Abbey”, the poet hears “the still, sad music of humanity” that he earlier had heard in the “Thorn” and the “Spear-glass” related to the sad stories of Martha Ray and Margaret, he maintains that Nature had “ample power/ To chasten and subdue” (II.122-123). Wordsworth sprucely bridges between suffering humanity and soothing Nature. Wordsworth's strong belief in Nature as a savior of man from sorrow and discontent has been amply expressed in his two poems, “Tintern Abbey” and “The Ruined Cottage.”

The context in which Wordsworth wrote “Tintern Abbey” calls for an explanation. Five years have passed in great mental agitation since Wordsworth’s last visit to the Wye landscape. Betrayed in all sides by the failure of the French Revolution, the misunderstanding of his country people and England’s war with France, Wordsworth has suffered from “an emotional collapse” or what may be called a “nervous breakdown”. The memories of the Wye River and its connected landscape that Wordsworth visited five years ago, have played a vital role in his mental and spiritual restoration. He has drunk at the deep and restorative springs that flow from that natural scene. Thus his second visit, the occasion of the poem, celebrates this newly found conviction. He says that he has found in times of crisis and weariness “sensation sweet” that he has felt in the
blood, and felt along the heart and that has even passed into his “purer mind/ With tranquil restoration.”(II. 27-30) It is nature, he asserts, that has given him the power and energy to combat the hard realities of life. He writes:

   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; (II. 36-41)

   This spiritual insight into life not only helps man overcome the vicissitudes of life, but helps him even go beyond them. In such a state of existence, all the outward forms dissolve, a new horizon opens up, and through appearance man can see into reality of good and evil:

   – 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.  

   This knowledge of “the weary weight” of this “unintelligible world” lightens the burden of man’s suffering in life and provides an emotional catharsis to his tragic experience. In another place of the poem, Wordsworth tells us that he has taken shelter to nature to find consolation in despair:

   ---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! (II. 52-57)

   Wordsworth's vision, in a rapture of mysterious insight, transcends the outward forms of Nature and he discovers a new spirit the “presence” of which

   --- 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. (II. 94-102)

These quiet forms of Nature, “the setting suns”, “the blue sky”, “the meadows”, “the woods”, and the “mountains” are

The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being. (II. 109-111)

This “guide” and “guardian” nature will help the poet overcome all his sorrows and sufferings, leading him “from joy to joy”:

---either 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 blessing? (II. 128-134)

If ever he is afflicted with, “solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief”, he will remember Nature and forget everything with the “healing thoughts” of “tender joy.” Thus the whole of “Tintern Abbey” is the genesis of Wordsworth's belief that Nature with her healing power and sympathetic treatment soothes the sorrow and suffering of human beings. When the suffering human beings stand before the lovely forms of nature, they are provided with a feeling of catharsis in their tragic experiences. This is the Wordsworthian myth of the place of mind in nature. We will now see more examples of human suffering and Nature’s sympathetic treatment in other poems of Wordsworth.

In “The Ruined Cottage,” as assimilated in the first book of “The Excursion”, we have three examples of Nature’s sympathy with man in his suffering and adversity: the vision of universal sympathy gained by the Wanderer who can now “afford to suffer/ With those whom he saw suffer”, the tragic end of Margaret and the parallel decline of her cottage and surroundings, and the soothing effect of landscape in the excitement of the Poet. Nature, the witness and sympathizer of Margaret’s suffering had conveys into the heart of the Wanderer a still “image of tranquility,” and in the progress of the poem a similar effect is brought about in the mind of the poet.
At the beginning of the poem, the poet as the Narrator and the Wanderer enter separately, with different mental states. The poet toils through the sun “with thirsty heat oppressed”. The “landscape indistinctly glare” at him “through a pale steam”. The Wanderer, on the other hand, sleeps contentedly “on soft cool moss” under “an ample shade” near an abandoned and dilapidated cottage. The Narrator describes how the Wanderer has come to be as he is an exemplary Wordsworthian man, aged, wisely passive, profoundly and serenely in touch with Nature. He has travelled far and wide, known human beings both in their joy and sorrow, and has eventually become accustomed to human suffering:

He could afford to suffer
With those whom he saw suffer.3

The Wanderer, in this poem, tells the Narrator the sad story of Margaret. He is a living witness of Margaret’s tragedy. He has known her personally, visited her home oftentimes and seen the sad decline of Margaret and her poor cottage. He has been agitated, grief and sadness have overpowered him, but it is the beautiful form of Nature around that house that has given him a power of endurance and a subsequent tranquil mind:

I well remember that those very plumes,
Those weeds, and the high spear-grass on that wall,
By mist and silent rain-drops silvered o’er,
As once I passed, into my heart conveyed
So still an image of tranquillity,
So calm and still, and looked so beautiful
Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,
That what we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
That passing shows of Being left behind,
Appeared an idle dream, that could maintain,
Nowhere, dominion o’er the enlightened spirit
Whose meditative sympathies epose
Upon the breast of Faith. I turned away,
And walked along my road in happiness. (II. 939-952)

For the Wanderer, the symbols of Margaret’s desolation, the weeds and overgrown grass are images of peace and tranquillity, with which Margaret is now identified. Before seeing the spear-grass, his mental state had been similar to the Narrator’s uneasy condition. These things of nature, he asserts, convey “so still an image of tranquillity” that he finds a strange peace “Amid the uneasy thought which filled my mind”. Purged of the burden of tragic weight, he walks along his road “in happiness.” This is the first example of Nature’s healing power that the Wanderer feels.

Endowed thus with the true knowledge of human existence, almost in an idealized form, the Wanderer now tells the story of Margaret and suggests that man in his sorrow and despair can find consolation in Nature. It is as though Wordsworth were able to achieve a reconciliation of the suffering of humanity with tranquillity of Nature only by separating the two aspects of his sympathies. The Wanderer has very beautifully and effectively described the sad decline of Margaret and the parallel decline of her own cottage and the very landscape around it. Thus in the beginning of his story he emphasizes the sympathetic response of Nature to human suffering as he connects on the ruined cottage and its bleak surroundings:

I see around me here ---
Things which you cannot: we die, my friend
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth
Dies with him, or is changed; and very soon
Even of the good is no memorial left.
--the poets, in their elegies and songs
Lamenting the departed, call the groves,
They call upon the hills and streams, to mourn,
And senseless rocks; nor idly; for they speak,
In these their invocations, with a voice
Obedient to the strong creative power
Of human passion. Sympathies there are
More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,
That steal upon the meditative mind,
And grow with thought. Beside yon spring I stood,
And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel
One sadness, they and I. For them a bond
Of brotherhood is broken: time has been
When, every day, the touch of human hand
Dislodged the natural sleep that binds them up
In mortal stillness; and they ministered
To human comfort. (II. 469-491)

The Wanderer then introduces Margaret by reference to a broken wooden bowl that she used for giving water to travellers, and now almost re-assimilated to Nature:

Green with the moss of years, and subject only
To the soft handling of the elements. (II. 494-495)

Nature’s “soft handling” has taken the place of Margaret’s and in the following lines unusual concentration of imagery links Nature with Margaret’s kindness and gentleness. The
images of water connotes charity and they whose hearts are only as summer dust burn to the socket. (II. 501-502)

Margaret’s own light of life has been prematurely extinguished, and her death is followed by the decay of the surroundings, of which she herself is now only a part:

--- she is dead
The light extinguished of her lonely hut,
The hut itself abandoned to decay,
And she forgot in the quiet grave. (II. 507-510)

After her husband’s desertion, the order of Margaret’s life gradually goes to pieces, and the decline is reflected in her garden:

The honeysuckle, crowding round the porch,
Hung down in heavier tufts; and that bright weed,
The yellow stone-crop, suffered to take root
Along the window’s edge, profusely grew,
Blinding the lower panes. (II. 715-717)

Margaret herself connects in thought the decline of her world of ordered nature with the source of her sorrow:

--- nothing that my eye was on the tree,
She said, ’I fear it will be dead and gone
Ere Robert come again. (II. 844-846)

The two themes---Margaret’s adversity sustained by a vain hope and its physical counterpart in the cottage’s decline into ruin---come together in the lines that conclude the Wanderer’s story:

Meanwhile her poor Hut
Sank to decay; for he was gone, whose hand,
At the first nipping of October frost,
Closed up each chink, and with fresh bands of straw
Chequered the green-grown thatch. And so she lived
Through the long winter, reckless and alone;
Until her house by frost, and thaw, and rain,
Was sapped; and while she slept, the nightly damps
Did chill her breast; and in the stormy day
Her tattered clothes were ruffled by the wind,
Even at the side of her own fire. Yet still
She loved this wretched spot, nor would for worlds
Have parted hence; and still that length of road,
And this rude bench, one torturing hope endeared,
Fast rooted at her heart: and her, my friend,
In sickness she remained; and here, she died;
Last human tenant of these ruined walls! (II. 900-916)

The poet turns to the cottage and traces in the wilderness the still surviving signs of human occupation:

Then towards the cottage I returned; and traced
Fondly though with an interest more mild,
That secret spirit of humanity
Which, 'mid the calm oblivious tendencies
Of nature, 'mid her plants, and weeds, and flowers,
And silent overgrowing, still survived. (II. 925-930)

The sympathy of Nature that the Wanderer once had felt now passes on to the Narrator. A transfiguration of the soul and the regeneration of nearby landscape replace the whole bleak prospect:

He ceased. Ere long the sun declining shot
A slant and mellow radiance, which began
To fall upon us, while, beneath the trees,
We sat on that low bench: and now we felt,
Admonished thus, the sweet hour coming on.
A linnet warbled from those lofty elms,
A thrush sang loud, and other melodies,
At distance heard, peopled the milder air.
The old Man rose, and, with a sprightly mien
Of hopeful preparation, grasped his staff;
Together casting then a farewell look
Upon those silent walls, we left the shade;
And, ere the stars were visible, had reached
A village-inn, on our evening resting-place. (II. 957-970)

At the beginning of the poem, the Poet and the Wanderer, as has been stated before, enter separately, with their separate attitudes, and at the end both equally are “admonished” by the “Slant and mellow radiance.” Nature responds to their transfiguration: songs of birds are heard both near and in distance. At the end of the poem, the Poet and the Wanderer are at peace with the world into which Margaret has been absorbed. The pattern is complete.

Thus, in our attempt to understand what “Nature” meant to Wordsworth, we discuss a healing power of the impersonal over a sick mind. It was when the “fretful stir/ Unprofitable, and
the fever of the world” had long “hung upon the beatings of my heart” that Wordsworth turned to Nature and found “For this uneasy heart of ours…/ A never-failing principle of joy” (*The Prelude*, Book.  II, 465-466). Wordsworth speaks, on the one hand, “of dim sadness and blind thoughts,” of “listlessness from vain perplexity,” and “the heavy weight of many a weary day,” while on the other hand, of “tranquil restoration,” and “renovation.” It is in this spiritual context that Nature acquires for him her great soothing and cheering power. He found amongst the “calm oblivious tendencies of nature” both stimulus and anodyne. Thus, the concept of Nature’s healing power for Wordsworth was a fact of experience, and the rapture of that experience glows through the best of his poetry.

**Notes**

All citations are used from these editions, and are given in brackets.

**Works Cited**
