

What do Romantic poets find when they encounter the natural world and or/natural landscapes?

Lawrence Clark-Russam

This essay discusses Nature as the primary subject in two Odes from the Romantic period: *Dejection* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Coleridge, S. T. 1802), and *Intimations of Immortality*, by William Wordsworth (Wordsworth, W. 1807). For Wordsworth, 'the natural world' appears as 'God' (l. 65) – 'immortal' (l. 163), sublime, and absolute. In *Dejection* (Coleridge, 1802), Coleridge reverses the balance of dependency; Nature becomes dependent on humanity: 'in our life alone does nature live' (l. 48). The analysis is supplemented with a discussion of Friedrich Schelling's interpretation of 'the natural world': as a 'regulative' (Ferber, M. 2010, loc. 1581) and 'intelligent' 'organism', which experiences 'self-consciousness' through humanity. Firstly, this essay discusses the poems' similarities by positioning them in relation to Schelling's 'Absolute'. Secondly, it examines each poem individually. Finally it reflects on the enduring influence Romantic Poetry has on metaphysical enquiry into the natural world.

In both poems, the speakers encounter 'wholeness' and 'reciprocity' as fundamental characteristics of the natural world, binding humanity with 'the Sublime' (Shaw, 2006, p. 95); humanity merges with Nature's Sublime to become 'one' (Wordsworth, 1807, l. 51) – 'a single field' (l. 52) comprised of reciprocally integrated parts. Wordsworth and Coleridge are reverent of the natural world, but also of themselves as vital functioning bodies within its collective processes. Nature is portrayed by Wordsworth and Coleridge as an 'absolute organism' (Schelling, 2010, loc. 686), comprised of natural landscapes and humanity. Infinitudes, such as the philosopher's 'eternal mind' (Wordsworth, 1807, l. 113) and his 'shaping spirit of imagination' (Coleridge, 1802, l. 86), are considered manifestations of Nature's Sublime within humanity. Humanity's ability to 'create', evidences the presence of Nature's 'original infinity' (Schelling, 2004, loc. 546) within humanity, qualifying it as a constituent of Nature's Sublime. Through poetry, Wordsworth and Coleridge demonstrate the organic relationship between the human mind and the natural world. In doing so, they align themselves with 'Schelling's notion of the union of mind and nature' (Shaw, 2006, p. 97). Wordsworth sees 'man and Nature as essentially adapted to each other' (Wordsworth, 1802, p. 271), coexisting reciprocally as parts of a greater whole. By creating poems, humanity partakes in Nature's reciprocal intercourse: 'Poetry is the image of man and Nature' (p. 270).

The union of man and nature is Schelling's 'Absolute' – the collective organism that exists as an 'infinite process' of 'infinite becoming' (Schelling, 2010, loc. 542). Nature is not regarded as a 'product' in either humanity or the natural world, but as an unending 'process' of 'absolute activity', rooted in an 'original infinity' (Schelling, 2004, loc. 546). For Wordsworth, Schelling's 'Absolute' is intuited as 'a sense of the indomitableness of the spirit within' (Wordsworth, *from a dictation to Isabella Finwick*, 1843, p. 307). For Coleridge, 'Joy' is the root of all creation:

Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,
Which wedding Nature to us gives in
dower,

A new Earth and a new Heaven,

(Coleridge, 1802, ll. 67-69)

Coleridge presents 'Joy' as the unifying force that 'weds' Nature with humanity. Reinforcing Coleridge's assertions, Wordsworth declares 'pleasure' (Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802, p. 272) to be mankind's primary incentive to study his environment. It is not just the poet who is 'prompted by this feeling of pleasure' to 'converse' with the natural world, but also 'the man of science'.

In contemplating Nature, Wordsworth believes himself to be fulfilling a primal sense of 'purpose' (p. 265); to create poetry is to execute an organic function. In portraying mankind as an integral part of Nature's 'whole' (Schelling, 2004, loc. 549), Wordsworth seeks to sanctify mankind's 'organic receptivity' (loc. 1535); Wordsworth surrenders his poetry to 'emotion' (Wordsworth, 1802, p. 273), allowing his work to be guided 'blindly' (p. 265), by 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (p. 273). Both poets interact with Nature emotionally, prioritising human sensibility over scientific empiricism. Neither poet is expressly averse to empirical science, but like Schelling, both poets prioritise humanity's 'organic sensibility' (p. 265) as the primary means of interacting with Nature's Sublime. Wordsworth directly addresses the limitations of science, regarding it as a 'solitary' (p. 271) procedure that 'by no habitual and direct sympathy' connects mankind with its 'fellow beings'.

Notwithstanding his critique, Wordsworth pledges to engage with scientists on a reciprocal footing: to 'follow the steps of the man of science... carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of science itself' (pp. 271-2). For Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Schelling, affinity with Nature is sought in 'sensation', obtained through 'intuition', and expressed emotionally, through the 'sublime notion of poetry' (p. 272) – 'the real language of nature'.

Coleridge and Wordsworth's infatuation with Nature's Sublime ultimately leads to their idealisation of the natural world, as an 'absolute organism' (Schelling, 2004, loc. 686) – Schelling's Absolute. Both poems embody careful metaphysical enquiry into Nature's processes. In defining Nature's Sublime, 'ineffable', rather than 'unknowable', should be the preferred word for characterising the poets' perceptions; in some ways, the 'Sublime' is 'knowable', but only through 'intuition' (Wordsworth, 1802, p. 272) 'impulse' (p. 265), and 'sensation' (p. 271).

Each Ode will now be examined individually.

Wordsworth's depiction of Nature is multifaceted and contradictory. For Wordsworth's speaker, the natural world is both 'home' (Wordsworth, 1807, l. 65) and 'prison-house' (67); tyrant and 'God' (65); it is defined by conflict and reciprocity; benevolence and cruelty; processes of 'infinite becoming' (Schelling, 2010, loc. 542), but also, 'vanishings' (Wordsworth, 1807, l. 143).

Wordsworth presents Nature as divine – as 'God, who is our home' (65) revering Nature from a subordinate position; the poet is 'Nature's Priest' (72); the natural world his deity, which rules

over him like 'master o'er a slave' (119). Nature is omnipotent, omnipresent, and 'immortal' (163), encompassing all living things to which it provides 'perpetual benediction' (134). In addition to Nature's sanctity, Wordsworth accounts for its duplicity. Nature is as generous as it is cruel, providing mankind with its 'childhood' (137) and its 'rainbow' (10), but also with the 'darkness of the grave' (117). Wordsworth is in awe of Nature, but terrorised by its 'immensity'. This Ode is Wordsworth's attempt to reconcile his 'high instincts' (146) – 'instincts of immortality' – with his 'mortal' destiny. In doing so, Wordsworth provides his reader with an image of Nature that is full of contradictions. In the natural world, Wordsworth is present at both 'wedding' (93) and 'funeral' (94); 'mourning' and 'festival' (93); he is enlightened and bewildered; joyous and fearful; at 'home' (65), but also 'lost' (117). As 'Nature's Priest', Wordsworth is faithful, but also 'guilty' (147).

Honouring his self-acclaimed credentials as 'a more comprehensive soul' (Wordsworth, 1802, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 269), 'endued with more lively sensibility' than other men, Wordsworth pursues the evocative, emotive qualities of the natural world, more so than its aesthetic qualities. The 'glory' (Wordsworth, 1807, l. 178) Wordsworth sees in Earth's 'meanest flower' (202) is not in its beauty, but in its ability to stimulate 'thoughts' (203) – 'obstinate questionings' (141) – the beginnings of wonder and contemplation. Abstract emotional concepts such as 'hope' (138), 'bliss' (42) and 'glory' (64) are integral to Wordsworth's depiction of Nature. Nature's divinity is attributed to its 'jollity' (31). Like Coleridge, Wordsworth's faith in the natural world rests on 'Joy'. Wordsworth regards himself as a 'Child of Joy' (34) – 'jollity' (31) is Nature's 'immortal sea' (163), its Absolute – the originating force 'which brought us hither' (164). Wordsworth asserts his faith explicitly:

Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness, nor mad
endeavour, Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy!

(ll. 155-160)

Wordsworth presents 'Joy' as one of Nature's 'indestructible' (1802, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 267) and unifying qualities. 'Joy' is the divine incentive for reciprocity in Nature, giving Earth its 'fullness' (1807, l. 41). Nature is presented as a single entity; an 'absolute organism' (Schelling, 2004, loc. 686); a Goddess, which 'fills her lap with pleasures of her own' (Wordsworth, 1807, l. 77). The natural world appears as a living and sentient entity, possessed of feelings, 'pleasures', and 'yearnings' (78). Wordsworth idealises Nature with a 'colouring of imagination' (Wordsworth, 1802, p. 264); he anthropomorphises the natural world to see it as a living organism; Earth is depicted as a feminine Goddess, with a 'mother's mind' (Wordsworth, 1807, l. 79), treating her creations like a 'homely nurse' (81). Notwithstanding its contradictions, Wordsworth's world is a multifaceted whole, depending on joy for its sustenance. The natural world's wholeness is achieved through the joy-driven reciprocity of its constituents. Earth's creations 'call / ... to each other' (ll. 36-7) in 'jubilee' (38).

Notwithstanding its similarities with Wordsworth's Ode – such as its emphasis on reciprocity, femininity, and emotion – Coleridge's depiction of Nature contains a fundamental difference:

In *Dejection* (Coleridge, 1802), the natural world is dependent on mankind. While Wordsworth sees Nature as his Goddess – his Gaea – Coleridge sees Nature as his ‘lady’ (l. 47).

In *Dejection*, there is reciprocity between mankind and the natural world, but humanity assumes the dominant role. Nature is ‘beautiful’ (38), but ‘inanimate’ (51); without human happiness, the natural world is ‘cold’, ‘drear’ (21) and ‘void’. The natural world only becomes animate when it is subject to human ‘passion’ (46). In *Dejection*, humanity’s ‘soul’ (18) is of ‘higher worth, than that cold inanimate world’ (ll. 50-51).

Notwithstanding its elevated status, humanity exists as a ‘part’ (l. 92) within a greater ‘whole’. Nature’s features are ‘wedded’ (68) to become a single entity. When the poet is ‘gazing on the western sky’ (28), he is gazing upon himself. The ‘bedimmed’ (34) stars are the ‘outward’ (45) representation of the poet’s ‘heartless mood’ (25). Culminating in the epiphany of the fifth stanza, Coleridge gradually establishes the idea of Earth as a single entity; as he looks upon the natural world, Coleridge sees his own reflection, but he also sees his ‘lady’. Coleridge’s ‘lady’ – the subject of the poem – is the Earth. She is powerful but not dominant; a ‘simple spirit’ (137), interacting with mankind on reciprocal terms. Nature depends on humanity for her ‘joy’ (134), to ‘lift her spirit’ and ‘attune her voice’; in return, she gives ‘birth’ (85) to mankind’s ‘imagination’ (86). As in Wordsworth’s Ode, she is a collective organism, comprised of both the ‘little child’ (121) and the ‘lonesome wild’ (122) – each form inhabits the other. Together, Earth’s creations are the ‘eddy of her living soul’ (136).

In both poems, the natural world is presented as a collective organism, resemblant of Schelling’s ‘Absolute’ (Schelling, 2010, loc. 899). In closing, this essay turns to the enduring influence of Schelling’s ideas on British perceptions of the natural world.

In studying the natural world, Coleridge and Wordsworth sought to uncover truths about Nature’s processes. In doing so, both poets engaged with Schelling’s ‘philosophy of nature’ (Schelling, 2004, loc. 489). Natural philosophy and science were less distinguishable in Wordsworth’s contemporary than in our own, but the collaborative bond between science and Romantic poetry endures.

Romantic poetry continues to exercise influence over humanity’s perceptions of Nature. Schelling’s concept of Earth as a ‘regulative’ (Ferber, 2010, loc. 1581) and ‘intelligent’ ‘organism’, is visible today in James Lovelock’s ‘Gaia Hypothesis’ (Lovelock, J, 1979, loc. 99). Lovelock regards Earth as a ‘self-regulating entity’ (loc. 76), ‘in which all life and all the material parts of the Earth’s surface make up a single system, a kind of mega-organism’ (loc. 99). Lovelock’s ‘Gaia Hypothesis’ is unequivocally resembling of Schelling’s ideas, which were reimagined in the poetic works of Wordsworth and Coleridge (Kusick, 2010, p. 122). As are his views about the importance of intuition: ‘We are where we are and we see only what can be seen. But, with intuition, we can know far more than we can see. (Lovelock, 2019, p. 22)’.

In both Odes the natural world is sentient, whole, and in the perpetual process of ‘infinite becoming’ (Schelling, 2010, loc. 542). Both Odes embody a collaborative merging of philosophy, science and poetry in favour of metaphysical enquiry into Nature’s processes. Wordsworth and Coleridge’s fusion of *Knowledge and Imagination* (Bronowski, 1979) enabled their production of an image of Nature that continues to resonate within contemporary understandings of the natural world.

This essay closes with a verse from William Blake’s *Auguries of innocence*, quoted from Jacob Bronowski’s *Ascent of Man* (Bronowski, 1973). Its presence in Bronowski’s esteemed work of

scientific literature stands in further testament to the continuing influence Romantic poetry holds over our perceptions of the natural world:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

(Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*, as quoted in Bronowski's *Ascent of Man*, 1973, p. 351)

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