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Reading Tintern Abbey with Marjorie Levinson

In her essay *Insight and Oversight: Reading Tintern Abbey*, Marjorie Levinson undertakes a novel reading of William Wordsworth's poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour." She argues that this poem cannot be fully understood without an understanding of what Wordsworth excluded from his comfortable pastoral scene. She marshals various historical sources to show the reader that when Wordsworth wrote his poem Tintern Abbey was the resting place of numerous vagrants, victims of England's rapid industrialization, the banks of the river Wye were given over to the smelting of iron, and that even the river itself was covered with a sheen of polluted scum. She argues that "Wordsworth's pastoral prospect is a fragile affair, artfully assembled by acts of exclusion." (32) Levinson artfully shows how "Tintern Abbey" eliminates any evidence of social reality from the area around the Wye in order to give Wordsworth the mental field he requires to spin his vision of an unconnected individual's return to a spot of tranquil contemplation. Wordsworth cannot be a visionary without first restricting his vision. In this reading, Wordsworth undertakes a sectioning-off of himself from the body politic, from the social realities and inequities that surround him. Levinson's position is compelling. However, in restricting the bulk of her analysis to lines 1-22, Levinson does not fully address the ways in which *Tintern Abbey's* description of the countryside is informed by its description of the city. This is

not an unimportant point. Wordsworth devotes time in *Tintern Abbey* to cataloguing the effects of city living on his personal consciousness, in ways that both enrich and undercut Levinson's argument. To better understand *Tintern Abbey* we must examine Wordsworth's relationship to the city.

The figure of the city first appears in *Tintern Abbey* after the narrator finishes his initial description of the environs around Tintern Abbey. The urban sphere is offered up primarily as a contrast to the pastoral. "But oft, in lonely rooms and mid the din/ Of towns and cities, I have owed to them/ In hours of weariness sensations sweet." (26-28) This initially seems to undercut Levinson's claim that "The brilliance of 'Tintern Abbey' is a function of its half-light." (45) Though he does not do so in the environs of Tintern Abbey, Wordsworth is clearly willing to portray an area negatively. While his criticisms of city living, the 'din' and 'weariness' are only mildly vituperative, they still stand as an alternative to the purely ecstatic, visionary mode that Levinson argues obscures Wordsworth's sight of the social realities of the area surrounding Tintern Abbey. But Levinson might have made her argument stronger if she had included Wordsworth's view of the city, because the same restrictive de-socializing viewpoint is present there, absent Wordsworth's ecstatic depictions of nature. The city as Wordsworth describes it is not social. Wordsworth's descriptions of the city center around its effect on his private experience, but to exalt his private experience he must empty it of human beings, whose messy complicated selves obscure the clean lines of his vision.

In his second and last reference to the city, Wordsworth writes, "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!”(51-56) This second reference is
notable for its exclusion of all human exchange. The city he describes, is empty,
both in daylight and in nighttime. The urban environment pains the speaker, but
the pains of the city are agentless. When his source of agitation is other human
beings, the speaker separates their effects from their selves. There is a “Fretful
stir” (Wordsworth, line 51) in the city, but the bodies making the stir are nowhere
to be found. When the speaker describes “shapes/of joyless daylight,” we have
no way of knowing whether he refers to physical structures or living bodies.
Referring to the environs of Tintern Abbey, Levinson writes “Wordsworth’s
visual/conceptual field cannot sight/think the *unlovely* forms—the *contents*,
shapes—of that landscape.” (45) But, when present with an urban landscape, the
speaker cannot give his unlovely forms content. Levinson writes that “the
visionary authenticity of of “Tintern Abbey” *is a function* of its literary
restrictions.” (45) If we accept this as true, then we must determine why the
speaker restricts his vision in the city. It cannot be to produce a Romantic
sublime. Levinson argues that the restriction of vision in the region surrounding
Tintern Abbey allows for the creation of an idealized pastoral setting, a suitable
backdrop against which the speaker can enact his transformative vision. But the
urban environment represents a counter-thesis to the pastoral. It is the place
where the speaker is not at peace, where he is unhappy, filled with disgust for his
environment. To create his vision of the environs of Tintern Abbey Wordsworth
must depopulate not only the countryside but also the city. The visionary
authenticity of the speaker in “Tintern Abbey” can only function in a world free of

other individuals.

Levinson argues that Wordsworth denudes the countryside of individuals as a way of eliminating social realities from the pastoral prospect. She writes that this allows the speaker of the poem to “Define...himself as an individual spirit, dependent only on nature and on his own responsiveness for his sense of meaning and attachment.” The benefits to removing people from the city are less obvious. Absent the presence of nature, the urban landscape sans human beings seems to present nothing to the narrator of the poem. It is a non-place, where the poet suffers from loneliness and unhappiness unattributable to any agent.

Without the leavening agent of nature the narrator’s descriptions of the city are bewilderingly abstract. Where, in the area around Tintern Abbey, hedgerow gives way to field which gives way to green growing up to the doors of cottages, the whole daytime panorama of the city is reduced to “shapes.” If we accept Levinson’s argument that Wordsworth was compelled by his artistic ends to alter the character of his pastoral prospect, he must also have had a compelling reason to impoverish his poetic language when describing cities. Levinson argues that the restriction of Wordsworth’s view is a result of his desire to treat “The social world...as the supportive medium of private life and not a special historical template for private experience.” (48) As regards the narrator’s experience in the city, the social world must be entirely absent in order for him to experience the revelatory effects of nature. The pain the poem’s narrator feels in the city must be a private pain. Not only must he avoid discussing pain caused by empathy for his fellow man, which cannot be affected by nature, but in order to hear the “still, sad music of humanity,” (91) he must be removed from it entirely. If the city,

which is the seat of his ills, is inhabited, than the presence of humanity is partially the cause of his psychic pain. His tour then becomes more explicitly an escape, which undercuts his claims of wisdom gained in the five-year hiatus since his last tour. Only if the speaker's hermitic isolation is unleavened by misanthropy can he lay claim to universality, to the voice of the prophet.

Bibliography

Wordsworth, William. *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour*

Levinson, Marjorie. *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.