

Absence of Maternal Presence in Nature: A Reading of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey"

Kyung-Soo Lee

1

"Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey", "a miniature of the long poem Wordsworth never quite wrote, the philosophical and autobiographical epic of which *The Prelude*, the *Recluse* fragment, and *The Excursion* would have been only parts"¹⁾, is famous for its alleged insistence upon the power of nature to 'soothe and nourish' the human mind. In other words, the poem has been read, mainly, as a powerful verbal expression of what nature can do for man; what nature can give him, etc. In this connection, nature has mostly been credited with a positive function.

This paper puts into question such 'positive' interpretations concerning the relationship between man and nature in "Tintern Abbey". Does nature give man real solace, real soothing, real comfort? In a word, does nature give him 'unillusory' sweetness or joy? That the poem, *seeming* to provide 'yes' for those questions, *in reality* denies such an answer, is the point of my argument in this paper. Or, in other words, in Derridean terms, the point might be put: "Tintern Abbey" shows powerfully, and painfully, the irrepressible human desire for 'Presence' ('too human a desire, as Nietzsche, a 'Derridean' thinker, put it), at the same time testifying to the absence of presence, thus rendering futile the search for presence. I will discuss the futility inherent in such desire or search, with special reference to the 'Maternal Presence' in nature, as Leslie Brisman terms it²⁾.

2

Writing of the 'Maternal Presence' in Wordsworth's poetry, Brisman says:

As the child loses his mother (either traumatically, as Wordsworth did his literal mother³⁾, or gradually, as Wordsworth defines the process of maturation), that original Maternal Presence

1) Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 131.

2) See Leslie Brisman, *Romantic Origins* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 282-300.

3) Wordsworth's 'literal' mother died when he was eight years old and his father when he was thirteen. Richard J. Onorato, *The Character of the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971). p. viii.

fades into Nature, and Nature fades into nature, In place of the earliest fixation the child learns an excursive power.....the ability to move from one to another sign of manifestation of a presence like the mother's.⁴⁾

In relation to "Tintern Abbey", "a *Bildungsgedicht* concerned with Wordsworth's changing responses to nature over a period of years",⁵⁾ we could take Brisman's words implying that Wordsworth, after losing his mother, learns an excursive power to move from sign to sign of his mother in nature. 'These beauteous forms' of the Wye valley in "Tintern Abbey" might be such a sign for him; thus, he might expect maternal care, solace, and love from those forms. In other words, those forms might be a specific manifestation of 'Nature as mother and lover' for him.

In the text of "Tintern Abbey", Wordsworth in fact generalizes on Nature thus:

Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy. (11, 122-125)

Or, he says he recognizes in Nature

the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being. (11, 109-111)

From these passages, we could surmise that Wordsworth conceives of Nature chiefly as 'mother', or expects from Nature the role of 'mother'.⁶⁾

In specific terms, from those 'beauteous forms' of the Wye, he asserts that he in fact gets maternal sustenance and reassurance:

These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
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,
(.....)

4) Brisman, p. 295.

5) Eugene L. Stelzig, *All Shades of Consciousness* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1975), p. 82.

6) Cf. Onorato, p. 34. "It is plain, I think, that this nurse, guide, guardian of the heart, soul of the moral being, is Nature as the *mother*, before whom brother and sister stand. Orphaned as children but grown up now, separated for years and only recently reunited, they stand here".

With tranquil restoration...feelings too
 Of unremembered pleasures;
 (.....)

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 lightened. (11, 22-41)

Amid urban weariness, the poet has felt 'sensations sweet', 'feelings of pleasure', and 'that blessed mood', which lighten the heavy and weary weight of the 'mystery' of human life. And such maternal consolation and reassurance has come as a special gift of the memories of those 'beauteous forms'.

Such memories, recollected and contemplated in tranquility, enable him at last to have 'that serene and blessed mood, in which he could 'see into the life of things'. Thus he asserts he has learned to feel in nature

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. (11.94-102)

This passage might be interpreted in various ways: the 'presence' as 'Divine Spirit', as 'Immanent Will' in Nature, or as 'Pantheistic Deity', and so forth. In relation to our argument in this paper, however, the 'presence' might also be interpreted as the 'maternal' spirit rolling through all things in nature (Indeed, a few lines later, the poet says he recognizes in nature 'the nurse, the guide, the guardian of my heart').

Then, we could say: the poet claims to have felt in nature the 'maternal Presence'. Now, we ask: How? In what ways has he 'felt' the maternal Presence? The poem shows it is only through the mediation of 'elevated thoughts', through the mediation of recollection and contemplation in tranquility,through his 'memory'.

Accordingly, we could say: for Wordsworth, the maternal 'Presence' of nature exists only as a form of 'absence'..... in his memory; for memory, in its very nature, presupposes the separation between subject and object. We may illustrate this with the passage

in which the poet reviews his past. In the interval between his first visit to the Wye (in 1793) and his second visit (in 1798), the 'beauteous forms' of the Wye was a 'presence' in his memory (had their literal effect on him); at the same time, since he was physically separated from those forms in that period, their 'presence' for him was in reality an 'absence'. With such expression as 'presence as absence', or conversely, 'absence as presence', we might explain the relationship of the forms to him. While the poet has a 'feeling' for maternal presence in his physical separation from nature (in his memory), he does not feel that way when confronted with nature. Relating his second visit to the Wye (in 1798), he says little of his present response to the 'beauteous forms' of the Wye; rather, he relates mostly about his past responses to them, or his (or, his sister's) wished-for responses in the future. And when he does relate about the present landscape, he does not describe himself as fully responding to it. In the opening paragraph of the poem, what he sees is in the main 'the picture of the mind' formed in his memory in the past, rather than the immediate landscape. (Or, at best, it is a montage of the two). In short, he does not see a 'presence' ('maternal' or otherwise) in the immediate landscape. It is for him either an 'absence as presence', or a 'presence as absence', we might say. (The repetition of 'this', 'these', and 'here' in this paragraph... 'These waters'; 'these steep and lofty cliffs'; 'Here, under this dark sycamore'; 'These plots of cottage ground'; 'these orchard tufts'; 'these hedgerows'; 'these pastoral farms', emphasizing the full-presence of the immediate landscape, reveals, conversely, by the very obsessive repetition, that the landscape exists only as an absence in the poet's consciousness).

Five years ago, however, when he visited the Wye for the first time (in 1793), those 'beauteous forms' were a real 'presence' for him; but only as 'lover', not as 'mother' or 'mother and lover':

The sounding cataract

Haunted me like a passion; the tall rock,
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
 Their colors 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, nor any interest
 Unborrowed from the eye... That time is past,
 And all its aching joys are now no more,
 And all its dizzy raptures. (11.76-85)

As such words as 'passion', 'appetite', 'aching joys', and 'dizzy raptures' would suggest, nature at that time evoked in him sensual and erotic responses, himself being a romantic lover of nature. Feelings of violent romantic love toward nature also made him to bound

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. (11.68-72)

'A man/Flying from something that he dreads'..... that 'something' might be an erotic, 'lovely' presence, but not a 'maternal' presence.

We might recapitulate: five years ago, the poet found in nature a 'presence of lover', but not of 'mother'; and now 'that time is past', and even the erotic presence could not be found, either. 'For such loss, *I would believe*,/Abundant recompense' (11.87-88), the poet says, *unconfidently* (italics mine); or rather, forces himself to say so. Could we believe in his words?

In relation to this question, it would be suggestive to notice some of the ways the poem deconstructs itself: among its optimistic assertions concerning the consoling and healing power of nature, the poem inserts such 'unconfident' words as 'perhaps' (1.31), 'perchance' (1.111, 1.146), 'I would believe'(1.87), 'I trust' (1.87), etc., thus self-denying its explicit assertions; the poem progresses hesitantly, unconfidently 'supplementing' its optimistic assertions regarding the power of nature with ever new assertions based on ever new grounds 'If this/Be but a vain belief, yet...', 11.49-50; 'Nor perchance,/If I were not thus taught, should I the more/Suffer my genial spirits to decay: For...', 11.111-114), thus erasing in turn its 'older' assertions.

Accordingly, we might conclude: the poet's insistence on 'abundant recompense' 'for such loss' might be a 'vain belief' after all; his various assertions on the power of nature to soothe and nourish the human mind might likewise be a 'vain belief'; his desire for the maternal presence in nature might be a futile one; and the poet might have 'always already' known that he could not find his 'lost mother' in nature.

3

But the poem has not ended here; there remains the closing paragraph. In this paragraph, the poet 'abruptly' turns for his addressee from the Wye to Dorothy, his sister ('Thou' so far has been the Wye, 'O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer through the woods', 1.56; but now, it is his sister, 'thou my dearest Friend./My dear, dear Friend', 11.115-116). In what he says to her, in his 'prayer' for her 'after years', what we should pay attention to is his attitude towards his sister, rather than the explicit assertions concerning the power of nature (these assertions might also be considered a 'vain belief'). His attitude to his sister in 'these my exhortations' is characterized by the warmth, tenderness and carefulness of his love, and that kind of love might be called a motherly love. Now, we might say: the poet himself has now become a 'maternal presence'; a presence as 'mother and lover' to a human being, Dorothy; and Dorothy herself, in turn,

another 'real' presence for him.

The 'abrupt' shift of the poet's addressee from the Wye to Dorothy, accordingly, far from being abrupt, seems a natural consequence of the poem's progress so far. For the poet, deep down in his consciousness, has 'always already' been aware of the futility of the struggle for an 'illusion' of presence in nature. For the poet has 'always already' been aware of the significance, the 'dearness', of mutual care and love between living human beings. It is no wonder the poem should close as a 'love poem' to Dorothy. It is no wonder the poem should end with the words 'for thy [Dorothy's] sake'. For Dorothy, a living human being, is, excepting the poet himself, the only real presence in the poem. Thus, the poem remains a testament of the 'absence' of the 'maternal presence' in nature.