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Nature, God, and Civilization in ‘Tintern Abbey’ and ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’

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*[W]e 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.
(46-50, Tintern Abbey)*

Nature is a fundamental element in both Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' (1798) and Washington Irving's 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' (1820). However, while both authors incorporate nature into their works to explore its relation to the supernatural and urban-industrial modernity, each construes this relation very differently. Thus, Wordsworth portrays the natural and supernatural as deeply continuous, but Irving construes nature as more superstition-provoking than supernaturally involved. Moreover, while Wordsworth depicts nature and modernity as fundamentally opposed and separate, Irving portrays their relation as far more overlapping and complicated. As such, using the theme of nature as a point of entry into these works will help us to illuminate some of the most distinctive social, economic, and spiritual preoccupations of the long 19th century, as well as how authors such as Wordsworth and Irving attempted to address, mediate, and reframe such urgent cultural concerns.

'Tintern Abbey' incorporates nature in order to examine its boundary with the supernatural, which is portrayed as completely permeable. Nature, then, is pervaded with God, and accordingly forms the devotional subject of the poem, its eulogy and its 'prayer' (Wordsworth 126). The speaker arrives at this insight in a manner reminiscent of Thomistic natural theology, whereby knowledge of God is achieved through the application of reason to nature (Velde 38). That said, in a way typical of Romanticism, Wordsworth also emphasises the importance of 'feelings' (31), 'the language of the sense' (112), and aesthetic experiences in this process, with nature at one point figured as a 'still sad music' (95). Thus, in contrast with the relative intellectual and emotional 'coarse[ness]' of his 'thoughtless youth' (76, 94), the speaker's mature engagement with the countryside, involving both 'elevated thoughts' and 'blessed mood[s]' (99, 42), allows him to apprehend a 'motion and a spirit' 'deeply interfused' throughout nature (104, 100)—an immanent God.

This 'spirit' dwells in aptly celestial 'setting suns' and 'living air' (101, 102), and 'impels | All thinking things, all objects of all thought, | And rolls through all things' (104-106). In other words, God pervades nature, and the fluid seamlessness by which He 'rolls through all things' is evoked by the lateral consonance of this passage, with the 'l' sound liquidly and near-omnipresently repeated. Nature is also repeatedly personified in 'Tintern Abbey': 'clad' in green (13), it is a 'wanderer' (59), or indeed, a teacher, ready to 'lead' or to 'inform' (129, 130). Such personification further emphasises the sense of a 'presence' (98) or agency within nature—namely, that of the immanent God. Moreover, this presence 'disturbs' the speaker with 'joy' (98), an oxymoron which alludes to the mingled emotions produced by an encounter with the divine. Accordingly, the speaker's spiritual life is awakened: he becomes a 'living soul' who 'see[s] into the life of things' (48, 51), apprehending a spiritual reality which relieves him of 'the burthen of the mystery' (39), that is, his cosmic puzzlement. Furthermore, nature, radiant and numinous, performs a morally edifying function: forming the 'anchor' of his 'purest thoughts' (113), pushing him towards 'kindness' and 'love' (36), and fortifying his 'moral being' (115) as well as his 'faith' (138) against 'evil' and 'selfish[ness]' (134). The distinctly Christian ethical inflection of this diction confirms that the God of 'Tintern Abbey' is indeed the Christian God, rather than the pagan 'White Goddess' or 'Mother of All Living' of Robert Graves (15), for instance. As such, the speaker declares himself as a 'worshipper of Nature', filled with 'deeper zeal' and 'holier love' than ever before (157, 159, 160).

Washington Irving's 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' also examines the boundary between the natural and the supernatural. Irving, however, portrays it as significantly less permeable, suggesting that nature's enchantments are more projections of human irrationality than products of divine interference. Sleepy Hollow, the 'little valley' near the Hudson River which forms the setting of Irving's story (333), is consistently associated with dreams,

somnolence, and somnambulism—states in which fantasy runs free and eclipses the real world beyond it. Suffused with a ‘drowsy dreamy influence’ (334), it entrances its inhabitants into a state of ‘continual reverie’ (334). It is a ‘region of shadows’ (335), ‘dusky and indistinct’ (358), where sensory gaps are much too eagerly filled by the imagination. As such, *Sleepy Hollow* provokes countless superstitions, tales of ‘ghosts’, ‘goblins’, and ‘witchcraft’ that ‘old Dutch wives’ share around the fireplace (340). The principal ghoul in local lore is the ‘Galloping Hessian’ (341), a supposedly headless, spectral horseman—wryly denominated ‘commander-in-chief’ of the ‘twilight superstitions’ by the narrator (334). The satirical crescendo of the story comes when Ichabod Crane, the protagonist, believes himself to be pursued by the phantom—except that it is only Brom Bones, his rival in love, who prankishly emulates the galloping ghost by carrying a pumpkin as though it were his decapitated head (360-364). Nature is thus portrayed as a reflection of our own irrationality, rather than of the supernatural. The ‘hour was as dismal as himself’ (358), Irving writes, underscoring how our own thoughts and anxieties are often projected onto the world.

In any case, nature is presented as already marvellous and fearful enough that the addition of a supernatural dimension is merely redundant. The ‘old Dutch wives’, for instance, are just as appalled ‘that the world did absolutely turn round, and that they were half the time topsy-turvy’, as they are at stories of ‘ghosts’ and ‘goblins’ (340). Similarly, Ichabod Crane, though undeniably shaken by his supposed encounter with the supernatural, is equally (if not more) rattled when he is rejected by his prospective bride, Katrina Van Tassel—‘a being that causes more perplexity to mortal man than ghosts, goblins, and the whole race of witches put together [...]—a woman’ (341). Irving’s portrayal of nature’s relation to the supernatural is therefore far more wry and sceptical than Wordsworth’s impassioned devotionism. In contrast to Wordsworth, Irving construes the enchantments of

Sleepy Hollow as more superstition-provoking than God-permeated—and indeed, already marvellous and terrifying enough that the supernatural is hardly necessary, anyway.

Irving and Wordsworth also incorporate nature into their texts to explore its relation to the accelerating industrialisation and urbanisation of their time. ‘Tintern Abbey’ (1798) and ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’ (1820) were both produced in an industrial age: traditional historiography locates the start of the Industrial Revolution in the 1760s, with the invention of the Watt steam engine, and although modern historians note that eighteenth-century industrialisation was less severe than what was to come, ‘proto-industrial “blooming”’ was still palpable (Belich 52-53).

‘Tintern Abbey’ responds to these developments, portraying nature as an idyllic refuge from industrial modernity, to which it is diametrically opposed. The diction and prosody of Wordsworth’s poem, for instance, are employed to elicit the unvarnished authenticity of nature as opposed to the stifling artificiality of the city. Loosely metrical blank verse and a long, diaristic title—‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798’—both contribute to this effect. So does Wordsworth’s choice to write in ‘the language of conversation’ rather than the ‘gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers’ (i-ii), as he puts it in the preamble of *Lyrical Ballads*, the collection in which ‘Tintern Abbey’ was first published.

Furthermore, Wordsworth’s poem contrasts vignettes of rustic harmony with glimpses of infernal modernity. On one hand, ‘cottage-plots’ and ‘orchard-tufts’ (11) suggest modes of living and production of a manifestly non-agroindustrial scale, evoking a sense of harmony, cohesion, and connectedness through the use of hyphenated compound words. These humble dwellings and allotments are ‘clad in one green hue, and lose themselves / [m]id groves and copses’ (13-14), conveying a deep-rooted, monochromatically green accordance with the

organic order of life. Here, one may ‘repose’ under the ‘quiet of the sky’ (9, 8), and open oneself to ‘the deep power of joy’ (50). Such bucolic placidity is contrasted with the ‘din / [o]f towns and cities’ (26-27)—realms of ‘joyless daylight’, ‘fretful stir / [u]nprofitable’, and ‘fever’ (55-56). Urban modernity, then, is depicted as frenetic, grim, and arduous: materially profitable, but spiritually and mentally ‘[u]nprofitable’. ‘[D]in’, particularly, picks up on what psychiatrist George Miller Beard would later call the ‘[u]nrhythmical, harsh, jarring sounds’ (107) of techno-industrial civilization, which, in his view, weakened the nerves of modern urbanites. As such, nature is incorporated into ‘Tintern Abbey’ not only to explore its relation to the supernatural, but also to the urban-industrial, which is portrayed as its ghastly antithesis, the accelerating reality from which the speaker seeks refuge.

‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’ similarly examines nature’s relation to industrial modernity. Like Wordsworth, Irving portrays nature as a sort of idyllic haven. Sleepy Hollow, is described as a ‘lap of land, among high hills’ (333), situated near ‘Greensburgh’ (333)—an aptly hued name, signalling closeness to the earth. It is figured as a maternal ‘bosom’ (333), nurturing its inhabitants with ‘hearty abundance’ and ‘rich fields of wheat’ (342, 343). A ‘retreat’ from the ‘distractions’ of the city (334), it is ‘little’, ‘quiet’, and slow-paced—its denizens do not rush, but ‘linger’ (333). As such, Sleepy Hollow is compared to one of ‘those little nooks of still water which border a rapid stream’, a refuge from ‘the great torrent of migration and improvement, which is making such incessant changes in other parts of this restless country’ (335).

That said, Irving’s tale is much less black-and-white than Wordsworth’s poem. Industrial modernity is indeed as wild and disruptive as a ‘great torrent’, yet it remains an extension of nature (and human nature)—something which the naturalistic quality of this analogy clearly suggests. Moreover, whilst nature may represent a ‘little [nook] of still water’ beside the ‘rapid stream’ of industrialisation, ‘still water’ also connotes stagnation,

suggesting that country rusticity lags behind the ‘improvement[s]’ of modern life.

Accordingly, Irving’s tale is replete with superstitious ‘country bumpkins’ ‘vegetating’ in ‘rudely constructed’ schoolhouses (339, 335, 336). Irving’s story therefore exhibits more nuance than ‘Tintern Abbey’, portraying the relation between nature and modernity as far more intersecting and morally complex.

‘Tintern Abbey’ and ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’, then, both include nature in order to explore its relation to the supernatural and the urban-industrial. In ‘Tintern Abbey’, nature forms the devotional subject of the poem. It is portrayed as deeply continuous with the supernatural and permeated with God, and as such performs distinctly moral and spiritual functions. Wordsworth’s poem may therefore be read as a characteristically Romantic attempt to reassert nature as a valuable devotional and contemplative subject, given that Christianity, at least from Nietzsche’s perspective, had traditionally devalued it in favour of the world beyond (Kaufmann, 345-346). On the other hand, ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’ portrays nature as more imbued with human irrationality than with divine presence, and in any case, already so marvellous and terrifying that the addition of the supernatural becomes merely redundant. The perspective of ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’ thus embodies a wry positivism which contrasts sharply with the enchanted visions of ‘Tintern Abbey’. Regarding socio-political themes, Wordsworth’s poem portrays nature as fundamentally opposed to modernity, forming the last redoubt of tranquility in a transforming world. Irving’s tale, in contrast, while it partially accords with Wordsworth’s nostalgia, also exhibits moral complexity, portraying the relation between nature and modernity as far more overlapping and morally complicated. ‘Tintern Abbey’ and ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’ thus represent two diverging mediations of the religious questions and historical crises of their age, offering an illuminating window into the spirituality and social challenges of the long nineteenth-century.

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