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ABSTRACT

One way of making connections among various authors in a survey course is to emphasize recurring themes, images, and tropes; the instructor can point out how they are transformed by a constantly changing ethos and set of historical circumstances. A case in point is the second part of a British survey, typically going from William Blake or William Wordsworth through the writers of the first few decades of the 20th century. Wordsworth is so central to the evolution of poetry during these years that several of his major themes and images can provide reference points for students as the course progresses. These Wordsworthian features either recur or are implicitly rejected in much of the literature that follows him. Some examples are his concepts of the unity of nature and humankind, and of nature as an essentially benevolent teacher and nurturer. Students may be introduced to some of the Wordsworth's basic attitudes towards nature in a few of his more approachable poems from "Lyrical Ballads," such as "Lines Written in Early Spring," "Expostulations and Reply," and "The Tables Turned." He elaborates on his ideas in more difficult works, such as "Tintern Abbey," the "Immortality" ode, and "It is a Beauteous Evening." Once students become comfortable with Wordsworth, the course may go on to present contrasts through the poetry of Robert Browning ("Childe Roland") and Christina Rossetti ("Cobwebs") and through the fiction of Emily Bronte ("Wuthering Heights"), Thomas Hardy ("Return of the Native" and "Tess of the d'Urbervilles"), and Charles Dickens ("Hard Times"). (TB)

Transformations of Wordsworth's Nature in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century British Literature

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An important connection that we can easily fail to make when we are teaching literary survey courses is that between one author and another. If we are not careful, we end up treating authors and works as separate entities and not as participants in the evolving intellectual, aesthetic, and cultural dialogue that occurs as time passes.

There is more than one way to respond to this problem. One is to avoid it altogether by approaching the course material vertically rather than horizontally: include a very few major authors, perhaps by generic coverage, and treat these few authors in depth. But that strikes me as not being what a survey is supposed to be about.

Another way to respond is to emphasize only the sociopolitical dialectics that one can find (or impose upon) the works. The danger here is twofold: oversubtlety for students beginning their study of literature, and the temptation to treat the work as a mere document or case study, not as an aesthetic expression of the play of mind upon language which it seems to me is the essence of any work of the imagination that is worth

studying.

Another way of making connections in the survey course, and the one I adopt, is to emphasize recurring themes, images, and tropes, pointing out how they are transformed by a constantly changing ethos and set of historical circumstances. A case in point is the second part of the British survey, typically going from Blake or Wordsworth through the writers of the first few decades of the twentieth century. Wordsworth is so central to the evolution of poetry during these years that several of his major themes and images can provide reference points for students as the course progresses.

These Wordsworthian features either recur or are implicitly rejected in much of the literature that follows him. Some examples are his concepts of the unity of nature and humankind, and of nature as an essentially benevolent teacher and nurturer. Also, many years ago M. H. Abrams showed the importance of the metaphor of the aeolian lyre in romantic poetry as a correlative of the relation between nature and human creativity. The teacher can use echoes of such themes and images in works by later writers to help give coherence to the course.

I devote more time to Wordsworth when I teach the survey than to any other writer, so that students will have a thorough grounding in the Wordsworthian view of Nature and its significance in human terms. Examples abound. I usually begin

with three of his more accessible lyrics from Lryical Ballads, saving his more abstract statements for a little later. The essence of Wordsworth's Nature, both physically and spiritually, is sketched in "Lines Written in Early Spring," "Expostulation and Reply," and "The Tables Turned." In these three lyrics collectively we see Nature and humankind linked in an organic unity, in spite of "what man [sometimes] has made of man." His concept of Nature as an intellectually and morally nurturing teacher is stated explicitly; Nature is benevolent, its "plan" for humankind even termed "holy."

He elaborates on all this in his more philosophical poems such as the "Tintern Abbey" lines, the "Immortality" ode, and the sonnet "It is a Beauteous Evening," all three of which I assign next as a group. He especially emphasizes both the picturesque beauty and benevolence of Nature in "Tintern Abbey" when he says that "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her"; that in Nature he finds "the anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being"; and that, in the natural world, "all which we behold / Is full of blessings."

Some of the most memorable passages in all of Wordsworth are those recounting experiences during which Nature's role as moral teacher have been brought home to him. Thus the old leech-gatherer of "Resolution and Independence" emerges as

Nature's agent "from some far region sent,/ To give me human strength, by apt admonishment" for the gloomy, self-pitying thoughts of the early stanzas. In "Nutting," the "spirit in the woods" stirs his conscience after he has despoiled a virgin copse of trees in his zeal to gather nuts. Similarly, in Book I of The Prelude, a mountain seems to almost literally rise up and stalk him in glowering disapproval when he steals a skiff for a little joy-riding on a lake; and he hears "Low breathings coming after me" when he robs another person's bird snares.

It is in The Prelude too that Wordsworth provides the class with its first example of an image that will recur in several key works later in the course: the "gentle breeze" that, as it "fans my cheek," awakens a "correspondent breeze" within his mind, "vexing" him into undertaking his poetical autobiography. Both Coleridge (in "The Aeolian Harp") and Shelley (in "Ode to the West Wind") amplify the image into an important metaphor for creative Nature as the impulse that stimulates human creativity.

As I point out to my students early on, every poetic age writes about Nature, but the concept of Nature changes with the times. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are no different. Nature reappears over and over in the poetry and fiction that follows Wordsworth and the other Romantics, but by the time of Wordsworth's death in 1850, a new Nature, or at least a new conception of Nature, reflecting the increasing stresses of

Victorian and modern life, begins to find expression. The general movement, of course, is away from Wordsworth's depiction of Nature as a benevolent spiritual force, and from his dictum in "Tintern Abbey" that "Nature never did betray/ The heart that loved her."

For one thing, Wordsworth's verdant countryside soon begins its long, downward evolution into T. S. Eliot's modern wasteland. Consider, for example, the landscape that Robert Browning's Childe Roland must endure on his ambiguous quest:

> penury, inertness and grimace,
> In some strange sort, were the land's portion. "See
> Or shut your eyes," said Nature peevishly. . . .
> As for the grass, it grew as scant as hair
> In leprosy; thin dry blades pricked the mud
> Which underneath looked kneaded up with blood. . . .
> A sudden little river crossed my path
> As unexpected as a serpent comes. . . .
> Low scrubby alders kneeled down over it;
> Drenched willows flung them headlong in a fit
> Of mute despair, a suicidal throng. . . . (ll. 61-118)

"I think I never saw," Childe Roland says, "such starved ignoble nature; nothing throve" (55-56).

Similar in its despairing tone, if less vividly nightmarish,

is the Nature in Christina Rossetti's sonnet "Cobwebs":

It is a land with neither night nor day,
. . .thro' the sluggish air a twilight grey
Broodeth; no moons or seasons wax and wane,. . .
No bud-time no leaf-falling, there for aye:--
No ripple on the sea, no shifting sand,
No beat of wings to stir the stagnant space,
No pulse of life thro' all the loveless land. . . .

For those instructors who like to include a novel or two in the course, Wordsworth's Nature is further and ironically undercut by the brooding heathlands of Wuthering Heights, the description of Egdon Heath that opens Hardy's Return of the Native, Flintcombe Ashe in Tess of the d'Urbervilles, or, in the urban environment, Coketown's pollution-belching factory chimneys in Dickens's Hard Times. The "woodland linnet" of Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned," whose sweet music conveys Nature's vast and nurturing wisdom, is transformed into Tess's kinship with the pheasants she strangles and Yeats's wild swans at Coole, the latter being images not of youthful spring, as in the Wordsworth poem, but of the autumn of inevitably advancing age. Another of Wordsworth's birds, by the way, the blithe throstle of "The Tables Turned," characterized as Nature's singing preacher, becomes at the end of Wordsworth's century Hardy's darkling thrush, singing bravely, and probably futilely, of "Some blessed

Hope, whereof he knew / And I was unaware." And I remind my students, too, that in the same poem--the last we read that uses the image of the aeolian harp--Hardy points out that its strings are now broken.

As early as the 1840's, as Tennyson was working his way through the numbing grief that resulted in In Memoriam, he felt obliged to deny Wordsworth's most basic and most often reiterated belief about Nature. In perhaps the most dramatic passage in all of In Memoriam, he speaks of "Nature, red in tooth and claw"--Nature is violent and predatory, not harmonious and benevolent--a Nature that wipes out whole species with apparent indifference:

> . . .From scarped cliff and quarried stone
> [Nature] cries, "A thousand types are gone;
> I care for nothing, all shall go.
> "Thou makest thine appeal to me:
> I bring to life, I bring to death;
> The spirit does but mean the breath:
> I know no more."

And Nature's potential for destructiveness, reluctantly admitted by Wordsworth in the "Elegaic Stanzas," takes considerably darker form in Hardy's "Convergence of the Twain," where Nature itself, as "The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything," prepares "a sinister mate" for the Titanic--the

Iceberg that sinks her "and jars two hemispheres."

But perhaps the most ironic of all the transformations of Wordsworthian Nature that we observe in my course can be found in Matthew Arnold--the Arnold who probably revered Wordsworth above all other English poets of his century and who so lamented the passing of the Wordsworthian world view. In a poem whose title--"In Harmony with Nature"--is itself quite ironic considering its content, the anguished poet exclaims, with the anger and frustration of one who has been betrayed,

> Nature is cruel. . .;
>
> Nature is stubborn. . .;
>
> Nature is fickle. . .;
>
> Nature forgives no debt. . .;
>
> Nature and man can never be fast friends.