

William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798".

[Source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45527>]

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur.—Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
[...]

 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,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love. 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:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we 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.

 If this
Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft—
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! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!



"Tintern Abbey" by Edward Days (1794)

The philosophical argument of the poem concerns the supposed influence of natural scenes on the moral nature of the observer – specifically the sensitive poet who writes this clearly autobiographical poem. In enlarging the idea that Nature does effect us through its perceptual features and signs, Wordsworth offers a quasi-clinical account of the way in which the 'beauteous forms' seen on a given occasion in boyhood entered his mind and were revived in it in very different times when he was sequestered in 'lonely rooms amid the din / Of towns and cities.'

Wordsworth understood the circulation of the blood – a discovery made by William Harvey in 1628 (*De motu cordis*) – and adopted it as a metaphor for the way that the influence of Nature was likewise infused in the bodily organs of Man. When, in the phrase 'felt along the heart', he describes this process he seems to attribute to it a degree of motion which is remote from the usual 'romantic' sense of heart as a still organ which contains the passions, especially the passion of romantic love. It is thus a physiological account of some heretofore undiscovered form of circulation between Man and Nature which corresponds to, and actually co-exists with, the purely physical movement of oxygenated haemoglobin in red blood cells (as every doctor knows).

This marriage of natural spiritualism with clinical biology was less a doctrinal issue with Wordsworth than a way of asserting the reality of the process which he wishes to describe. That process is essentially a spiritual one, neatly comprised in the idea that we are 'laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul'. The last term in the argument is distinctly epistemological: that is to say, it is dressed up as a theory of cognition. Here were are told that the ordinary power of vision is closed down and the inner eye now sees into 'the life of things'. [BS]

What – and how much – that means requires a full comprehension of the metaphysical claims of the Romantic theory of poetry to understand but, as we meet it on the page, if certainly seems to claim ownership of the power of revelation no less than conventional religion - and in this sense Romantic Poetry *is* a new religion in competition with the old. No wonder, then, that Tintern Abbey is a ruined church.