

The Material Abbey: J. M. W. Turner and William Wordsworth.

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The paper examines representations of Tintern Abbey, as part of the Wye Valley, by J. M. W. Turner and William Wordsworth through visual and print mediums. The attempt is to demonstrate that artist and poet alike recognise the significance of the abbey as an iconic structure, which, in my opinion, functions also as host for living beings. In juxtaposition, the abbey and Wye River are material objects, constituting a place of value within its biome for both humans and nonhumans.

My aim in the paper is to discuss the significance of Tintern Abbey in fine art by Joseph Mallord William Turner and its presence in the title of the poem by William Wordsworth. While Turner's watercolours of the famed abbey have been contextualised in the picturesque tradition as part of landscape art and as a study in architectural structure, my paper is interested more in Turner's depictions of the structure as a representation of materiality in nature. By the term *materiality*, I am referring to the 'quality of being composed of matter, material existence, solidity'.¹ In fine art, on the one hand, materiality is often used in reference to the medium (e.g., watercolour, mezzotint, experimental oil, etc.). However, in the burgeoning field of ecocritical study, on the other hand, materiality is discussed as the tangible substance of inanimate and animate beings within ecosystems, biomes, and the biosphere - the basis for consideration of humanity's connections in the network of interrelationships. As a corollary to Turner's art, Wordsworth's lyrical poem 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798' depicts a panoramic view of the landscape nestled in the Wye Valley, Monmouthshire,

¹ 'materiality, n.', *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) <<http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2355/view/Entry/114928;jsessionid=E955509940DC38BFC128929B5C93919F?redirectedFrom=materiality#eid>> [accessed on 05 April 2018].

illustrating what I call *neo-material naturalism*; that is, matter-based representations of the environs within and around the abbey – such as the ‘mountain-springs’, ‘lofty cliffs’, ‘dark sycamore’, or ‘hedgerows’ that Wordsworth identifies.² My fascination with the loco-descriptive poem concerns the poet’s interest in the Wye River, adjacent to the ruin. Both are material objects that remain part of the landscape. Neo-materialism, reminiscent of Thomas Hobbes’s materialist thought in *The Leviathan, or the matter, form, and power of a common-wealth ecclesiastical and civil* (1651), buttresses my comparative study.

Two articles about Wordsworth and Turner have been published in *The Wordsworth Circle*. William Stephenson’s ‘Wordsworth and J. M. W. Turner: A Pairing for Teaching’ (1978) takes into consideration a pedagogical approach to the poet and artist by comparing their mannerism, light motifs, and attention to ruins.³ In addition, Deborah Kennedy’s ‘Wordsworth, Turner, and the Power of Tintern Abbey’ (2002) features commentary about the paintings by Turner and lyric by Wordsworth as part of the ‘contemplative genre of the ruined abbey poem and to a whole range of eighteenth-century works on medieval ruins of abbeys, including prints and watercolor paintings’.⁴ Kennedy’s article discusses the affective power that the iconic ruin evokes as depicted in literature and fine art.

Furthermore, Crystal Lake’s ‘The Life of Things at Tintern Abbey’ (2011) considers, in addition to Wordsworth’s, five other poems about the abbey and suggests that the ruin is a repository for politics and epistemology - a relic of historical information, ‘transmitting intense feelings’ to ‘fill the mind’ with its aura.⁵ My study acknowledges and seeks to add to the pedagogical, picturesque, and historical approaches by considering an ecocritical interpretation of Turner’s and Wordsworth’s works, predicated upon the significance of the abbey and river as material objects. Studies about the landscapes, depicted in paintings and poetry, have tended to emphasise the picturesque. In my opinion, they are overwrought and fraught with aporias, reminiscent of William Gilpin’s *Observations on the river Wye, and several parts of South Wales, & c.: relative chiefly to picturesque beauty* (1792), which features the author’s observations through notes and drawings about Welsh landscape. It seems to me that a static view of reality is favoured instead of a dynamic one with activity. Attention to the abbey, emblemized as a ruin, as part of the picturesque ignores the interrelations among species dwelling under its arches. As I hope to show, the abbey is part of its environs, both as a host to nonhuman species and as the object of human observation through representations.

² William Wordsworth, ‘Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798’, in *Lyrical Ballads 1798*, ed. by James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), vol. 16, p.117, ll. 3, 5, 10, 15.

³ William Stephenson, ‘Wordsworth and J. M. W. Turner: A Pairing for Teaching’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 9. 4 (1978), 338-342.

⁴ Deborah Kennedy, ‘Wordsworth, Turner, and the Power of Tintern Abbey’, *The Wordsworth Circle* 33.2 (2002), 79–84 (p.83).

⁵ Crystal B. Lake, ‘The Life of Things at Tintern Abbey’, *Review of English Studies* 63.260 (2011), 444–465 (p.447).

Turner's Tintern Abbey: From Sketch to Watercolour

Tate Britain holds Turner's graphite sketch (Tate Britain D00134, Turner Bequest XII E) and watercolour, titled *Tintern Abbey: The Crossing and Chancel, Looking towards the East Window* (Tate Britain D00374, Turner Bequest XXIII A) from *Watercolours and Studies Relating to the Welsh and Marches Tour* (1794). Though Turner's sketch is faint with an oil stain at the top centre, the contours and structure of the abbey are still perceptible, featuring his view of the East Window (on the right side of the sketch), as well as the two arches above the nave, which have been covered with foliage. In my opinion, Turner's sketch does not include embellishment. His sketch is a representation of his fieldwork, based on observation, a drawing created on site, in his attempt to depict the interior of the iconic abbey with its arches covered in foliage – an accident in nature and a natural phenomenon. If there is any slight distortion between the sketch and the subsequent watercolour, it appears in the proportion, as the height of the watercolour (35.9 x 25 cm) is 8.8 cm greater than that of the graphite sketch (27.1 x 25.3 cm). In effect, Turner adjusted the scale of the height to depict the magnitude of the abbey in watercolour, evoking a sense of the sublime in his attempt to show grandeur.⁶ The depictions of the foliage from the sketch to watercolour remain consistent. The outline of vegetation, clinging to the abbey's stone pillars and arches overhead, is clear in both images.

Another watercolour, presumably, sold to a patron (not part of the Turner Bequest) is held at the Victoria and Albert Museum (see Figure 1). The watercolour, titled the *Interior of Tintern Abbey*, was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1794, based on the sketch at Tate Britain, and displays the same view of the East Window. It appears to me that Turner had been standing in the nave to the right, at the crossing, near the south transept, with the East Window directly in front of him. The focal point of the painting is not, however, the East Window. Instead, the main pillar at the crossing stands prominent with the light coming from the right through the East Window, indicating that it is late morning. Foliage appears at the base of the main pillar, extending into the nave toward the East Window and upward onto the adjoining pillar and along the arch above. The painting is a study in perspective, demonstrating at once the depth of the abbey's interior (through the repetition of the smaller arches leading toward the East Window) and the sheer volume of the space (despite the removal of the roof), made evident by the diminutive figures in the lower left corner. Though Turner's depiction of Tintern Abbey is really an architectural study of a draughtsman, employed by Thomas Malton, focusing on an integral pillar, it is evident that Turner's painting did not only capture the magnitude of the abbey. In addition, Turner's watercolour of the abbey shows an intrinsic interrelationship between, on the one hand, the inanimate

⁶ Edmund Burke, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (London: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1757).

gothic structure as host to the foliage amidst its environs and, on the other, humanity, observing the grandeur of its arches. As Turner has revealed, the abbey is a host for nonhuman species.

In addition, the Victoria and Albert Museum holds James Duffield Harding's watercolour *View of Tintern Abbey* (1815) based on a sketch made by the painter's father in 1810 (see Figure 2). Harding, in accord with Turner's practice, added watercolour in the studio to sketches made on the field, conceivably, to save time, since watercolour would require more effort and time to deploy than a pencil sketch. Turner had once indicated that he could produce fifteen or sixteen sketches in the time it took to finish one watercolour. In Harding's depiction of Tintern Abbey, however, I infer that the artist (i.e. Harding's father) is positioned at the crossing of the abbey. The East Window is still in the background, as in the depiction from Turner's work. Harding's watercolour illustrates more of the foliage than Turner's painting. In Harding's, light engulfs the entire abbey, suggesting that it was midday when Harding filled in the contours. The Harding painting confirms the existence of foliage on the abbey as part of the ruin, evoking the picturesque. By this time, approximately twenty years later, the foliage had grown to an enormous amount, which veiled the gothic pillars on the south side (on the right of the painting). Harding's painting of the abbey, though, does not depict the grandeur of the structure in comparison to Turner's watercolour. The Harding painting appears to be somewhat flat, lacking Turner's depth. However, in 1915, the Office of Works removed the foliage, especially ivy, concerned that its weight might damage the structure. Subsequently, the Office of Works restored and preserved the structure through a 'severe clearance and consolidation programme', involving buttressing the South Transept to the right of the nave with steel reinforced concrete beams, set within stonework to solidify the structural integrity.⁷

As a variant, the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford holds Turner's *Transept of Tintern Abbey, Monmouthshire* (1795) displayed at the Royal Academy, depicting the North Transept to the left of the nave. The cross-shaped church is highly symmetrical with two chapels on each side, making up the arms of the church. In this image, Turner's perspective is a view of the North Transept inside the abbey. There is light from the right side, indicating that it is late morning again. Turner has once more captured the foliage, growing on the pillars, arches, and pinnacles of the arches, indicating that the abbey has been a host not only to Cistercian monks and parishioners, but also to flora emanating from its gothic stones. The watercolour is a detailed representation of the architectural structure, signed in the lower right corner with simply *Turner*. To the left of the signature in the foreground is an open basket with a

⁷ Simon Thurley, *Men from the Ministry: How Britain Saved its Heritage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp.135–137.



Figure 1. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Interior of Tintern Abbey, Monmouthshire*, 1794, Watercolour, 32.1 x 25.1 cm © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 2. James Duffield Harding, *View of Tintern Abbey*, 1815, watercolour, 31.25 x 26.25 cm
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

rake, suggesting that a yeoman farmer is the husbandman, who tends to the foliage emanating from its stones. The farmer stands directly in front of the North Transept, looking outward toward the painter, his diminutive size once again accentuating the Abbey's immensity. The abbey-as- host supports life for flora and the livelihood of the husbandman, who maintains the abbey, suggesting interconnectedness among the abbey, flora and husbandman stewarding the grounds.

My own observations of Tintern Abbey reveal that practically all the foliage has been removed, except for some pinkish purple wildflowers (i.e. *Red Clover* or *Trifolium pratense*), growing on the sill of the East Window. The appearance of the wildflower indicates that seeds have been disseminated by the wind to germinate on the gothic stones. However, the flowers are not the only inhabitants of the abbey. I have observed that house martins have created and inhabited mud nests at the apex of the arches in the abbey (see Figure 3). Gilbert White once observed and recorded the behaviour of house martins in *The Natural History of Selborne* in Letter 16 to Daines Barrington dated 20 November 1773:

They [house martins] are often capricious in fixing on a nesting place, beginning many edifices, and leaving them unfinished; but when once a nest is completed in a sheltered place, it serves for several seasons. Those

which breed in a ready finished house get the start in hatching of those that build new by ten days or a fortnight. [. . .] It has been frequently observed that martins usually build to a north-east or north-west aspect, that the heat of the sun may not crack and destroy their nests.⁸

In the 1770s, White observed numerous times that martins build their mud nests in locations on an edifice in a ‘sheltered place’, shielded from direct sunlight to preserve the mud’s moistness. Today, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) explains, ‘By the nineteenth century, [house martins] started making use of buildings, allowing them to expand their range. [. . .] House martins build nests on outer walls under the eaves. Exceptionally they can be found inside roofs or in sheds’.⁹ As I observed, two mud nests existed in the arch of the abbey, indicating a double brood. Flying repeatedly in and out, they were a testament to the abbey’s continuing function as a host for avian species.



Figure 3. ‘A House Martin Flying from a Mud Nest in the Arch of Tintern Abbey’

Photo Credit Dewey W. Hall.

⁸ Gilbert White, *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (London: Printed by T. Bensley, 1789), p.160.

⁹ ‘House Martin: Breeding’, *Royal Society for the Protection of Birds*, < <http://www.rspb.org.uk/discoverandenjoynature/discoverandlearn/birdguide/name/h/housemartin/nesting.aspx> > [accessed 11 Jan 2018].

Did Wordsworth and Turner Ever Meet?

There is limited evidence of Wordsworth's admiration of Turner's work, except for two instances, to my knowledge. One instance occurs in Wordsworth's *A Guide through the District of the Lakes in the North of England* (1835), in which he provides directions for tourists, approaching the Lake District from Yorkshire: 'Near Hawes, to Hardraw Scar, of which, with its waterfall, Turner has a fine drawing'.¹⁰ Turner's sketch of the waterfall, titled *Hardraw Force* (1816), from Yorkshire 5 Sketchbook (Tate Britain D11547, Turner Bequest CXLVIII 15, 28A) is held at Tate Britain. Alan Hill surmises that Wordsworth would have been familiar with Turner's work through his illustrations published in Samuels Rogers's *Italy: A Poem* (1830) (Tate Britain D 27518, Turner Bequest CCLXXX). The other instance is a letter from Wordsworth to William Boxall, dated 21 May 1846, in which the poet anticipates receiving the second volume of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1843) and mentions Turner:

I shall be well pleased to receive Mr. Ruskin's 2nd volume both for its own sake and as a token of your kind remembrance. [. . .] Turner is undoubtedly a man of extraordinary genius, but like many others he has not foreborne abusing his gift. It pleases me to learn that Mr. Ruskin has modified some of his extreme opinions [about] this artist.¹¹

Accordingly, Wordsworth expressed an ambivalence towards Turner. While acknowledging the latter's 'genius', Wordsworth seemed to censure Turner's flamboyance (presumably his avant-garde flair as a pre-impressionist), expressing misgivings about Turner's lack of self-restraint while 'abusing his gift'. The brief mention of Turner's work is the sole occurrence in Wordsworth's collected letters, chronicled rather late in Wordsworth's life.

The only instance documented of Wordsworth and Turner meeting happened thirty years earlier. They attended a breakfast party hosted by Samuel Rogers in May 1815. In a note from Wordsworth's letter to Boxall, previously referenced, 'Both [Turner and Wordsworth] appear in a painting of the gathering by Charles Mottram held at the Victoria and Albert Museum'.¹² Charles Mottram's portrait, *Samuel Rogers at his breakfast table* (1815), is a large panoramic image depicting literary and visual artists (see Figure 4). Turner stands to the right, admiring the embellished texture on

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p.156.

¹¹ William and Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years, 1840–1853*, ed. by Alan G. Hill, vol. 7 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp.780–781.

¹² Wordsworth, *Letters: The Later Years*, p.780, note 2.



Figure 4. Charles Mottram, *Samuel Rogers at his breakfast table*, 1815, 58 x 86.6 cm
Engraving in mezzotint © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

a frame with several men around him, while Wordsworth is seated behind with a contemplative gaze, seemingly eavesdropping on Turner's conversation. The mezzotint includes dark hues, hinting the stately decorum of the occasion, at which distinguished guests admire Rogers's astute collection. At the time, Turner had been working on *Dido Building Carthage* (1815); Wordsworth had been preoccupied with reactions to *The Excursion* (1814) and publication of *The White Doe of Rylstone* (1815), referencing Bolton Abbey as the place of sighting the rare doe.

The Missing Abbey in the Poem

As careful readers of Wordsworth realise, the irony of a different lyric, 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' (1798), is that the poet never mentions the abbey in the poem. The omission is conventionally explained by the notion, that Wordsworth sat under a sycamore at a distance above Tintern Abbey, overlooking the Wye Valley, in which the main natural feature is the river, winding through the landscape. His famous claim during a self-imagined moment of transcendence is that as a 'living soul' with an 'eye made quiet' through harmony with the environs, 'we [can] see into the life

of things'. What might these 'things' be? The penultimate *thing*, mentioned in the poem, is the 'sylvan Wye', the main motif, meandering through the woods surrounding the abbey. For, it does not seem to be the abbey that Wordsworth turns to during times of distress. After his return from France in 1793, while disillusioned with the Revolution since the onset of Robespierre's Reign of Terror, the poet sought refuge near the river: 'How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee / O sylvan Wye'.¹³

According to Crystal Lake, another reason for the abbey's omission is because Wordsworth sought to evade the trappings of political history, often associated with Tintern Abbey. Lake mentions the dissolution of the monasteries during the reign of Henry VIII, the rise of the eighteenth-century iron industry, and evidence of enclosure, signified through hedgerows.¹⁴ Yet, it is the apolitical Wye, rather than the politicized abbey, that has drawn the poet's attention. The Wye, as distinct from the abbey, has value as a repository for 'mountain-springs' (line 3), as a 'wanderer' (line 57), nurturing the woods, and as a marker for a spot of time, where William and Dorothy once stood together 'upon the banks / Of this fair river' (ll. 115–16). For Wordsworth now, the river exerts what Nicholas Roe has called the 'restorative power of memory'.¹⁵ Wordsworth writes in his journal: 'The Wye is a stately and majestic river from its width and depth, but never slow and sluggish; you can always hear its murmur. It travels through a woody country, now varied with cottages and green meadows, and now with huge and fantastic rocks'.¹⁶ The 'sweet inland murmur' of the Wye beside the silent abbey speaks to the poet.¹⁷

In effect, the missing abbey has more to do with Wordsworth's sense of the environs than the historical. Presumably, hewn from stones indigenous to the region, Tintern Abbey is an organic figure, part of the landscape, playing host to lichen, ivy and house martins. The poet's purpose is more to revisit the banks of the Wye than the ruin itself. Interestingly, both appear as hosts, emblems of materiality, for nonhuman beings. Here, Wordsworth writes:

We left Alfoxden on Monday morning, the 26th of June, stayed with Coleridge till the Monday following, then set forth on foot towards Bristol. We were at Cottle's for a week, and thence we went toward the *banks of the Wye*. We crossed the Severn Ferry, and walked ten miles further to Tintern Abbey, a very beautiful ruin on the Wye. The next morning we walked along the river through Monmouth to Goderich Castle, there slept, and returned the next day to Tintern, thence to Chepstow, and from Chepstow back again in a boat to Tintern, where we slept, and thence back in a small vessel to Bristol.¹⁸

¹³ William Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', p.117, ll. 56–57.

¹⁴ Lake, 'The Life of Things', p.446. Lake also argues that the Tintern Abbey is an object, as opposed to a thing, that leaves traces on the mind (462). David Miall, 'Locating Wordsworth: "Tintern Abbey" and the Community with Nature', *Romanticism on the Net* (Nov 2000), p.7, <<https://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2000/v/n20/005949ar.html>> [accessed 18 Jan 2018].

¹⁵ Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.268.

¹⁶ Henry Reed, ed., *Memoirs of William Wordsworth* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1851), vol. 1, p.119.

¹⁷ Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey', p.115, line 4.

¹⁸ Reed, *Memoirs of William Wordsworth*, vol. 1, pp.118–119, emphasis mine.

Accordingly, for the Wordsworths, Goodrich Castle was the main destination from Bristol to Monmouth. Tintern and Chepstow seemed to be stops along the way as access points on the Wye River tour.

While sojourners in the past, since 1131, have sought Tintern Abbey for religious purposes, to contemplate the Madonna and Christ child, Wordsworth and Turner had distinct reasons for traveling to the Wye. As part of an architectural study, Turner's watercolours of the abbey evoked the sublime; for Wordsworth, the abbey became part of his panoramic observations of the landscape. Turner's paintings feature the abbey as the main figure, rather than the Wye; Wordsworth's poem focuses on the Wye with the abbey as a marker for his memory. Turner's watercolours represent the abbey-as-host; Wordsworth's lyric discusses the Wye-as-repository. The presence of the abbey in one instance marks the trace of the abbey's absence in the other. In either work, Tintern Abbey stands as part of an intricate ecosystem in the environs of the Wye Valley, very much a part of materiality in nature.

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