

Tintern Abbey: A Source of Gothic Inspiration

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In British Romantic literature, Tintern Abbey has been made famous by William Wordsworth's poem, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (1802, 1807). What can be perceived in this poem is the poet's moral, ethical and philosophical development of his inner world over these five years.

When he visited there five years before,
he felt blessed with nature.

more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads
than one
Who sought the thing he loved. For
nature then...
To me was all in all.

But now he is depressed, because

That time is past,
And all its aching joys are now no more,
And all its dizzy raptures.

After this despair, he succeeds in rediscovering the "soul/Of all my moral being", perceiving "A presence" of God and "a sense sublime" through nature. This poem was written, as he himself revealed, a few miles above the abbey so in fact he may not have visited the place. But the name "Tintern", neglected for centuries because it was just a ruin, began to be recognized as a symbol of the Romantic movement because of this poem.

Tintern Abbey, one of the oldest in Wales, is located on the west bank of the winding Wye River in Monmouthshire which roughly divides England and Wales. In both countries along this river, there are several mighty castles and romantic ruins: Cheptow Castle, Valle Crucis Abbey, Ranglan Castle, Stokesay Castle and so on. According to Brian Bailey (Heritage; 44), this area used to be "an axis for centuries of conflict between the English and the Celts," which brought about the building of many castles as symbols of their governing power and authority in either country. But it was the Dissolution of Monasteries by Henry VIII in 1536 and 1539 that caused the destruction of these historical and architectural sites, as is sentimentally noted in Shakespeare's sonnet 73.

That time of year thou mayst in me
behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do
hang
Upon those boughs which shake against
the cold,
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet
birds sang.

But as time went by after the Dissolution, these structures were left alone to fall into ruins.

It was not until the latter 18th century that this border and its mountainous area were discovered for the first time in British history

as a picturesque beauty spot, which inspired the Grand Tour. Although the Grand Tour had already begun in the early 17th century for the purpose of educating young British gentlemen and ladies and they actually learned and gained much from the Continent touring the Seine, the Roir and the Rhine Rivers, in the 18th century all the British in every generation, refraining from the Continental tour, began to search for beautiful scenery in their home country. The grand scale of nature on the huge Continent could not be compared with that of the small island of Britain. This was a Pictureque Tour through which they explored the sublime beauty of nature. Edmund Burke defines the distinction between the beauty and the sublime in A Philosophical Enquiry; the sublime is associated with infinity, darkness, solitude, terror and vacuity, while the beautiful consists in relative smallness, smoothness and brightness of colour.

The aesthetic philosophy on the sublime is further described in William Gilpin's Observations On the River Wye made in 1770 and published in 1782, which praised this border area for its sublime beauty and was accepted by the public as the Bible of the picturesque tour. The writer made a tour along the river by himself and the description based on his own tour was a real and heartfelt appeal to British patriotism for the 18th century reader. What is most important in his descriptions is:

From Monmouth we reached, by a late breakfast-hour, the noble ruin of Tintern Abbey, which belongs to the Duke of Beaufort; and is esteemed, with its appendages, the most beautiful and picturesque view on the river.

(Gilpin; 47)

“The broken arches of a Gothic ruin”, Tintern Abbey, is “a very enchanting piece” and “the most perfection” for the eyes. This is the Decorated Gothic style in the traditional architectural style in Britain as defined by Thomas Rickman in 1871. Horace Walpole (1717-97) who built the Strawberry Hill House (1750-63) for his Gothic novel, The Castle of Otlanto (1764), and William Beckford (1759-1844), the author of Vathec (1786), the constructor of Fonthill Abbey (1794), are both forerunners of this style of Gothic. These two are the most transcendent of all, but the other Gothic style, the artificial mock ruin, that is, the “folly” or the “sham ruin” was also sought after; Enville Summer House in Staffordshire, Painshill Park in Surrey, and Painswick Rococo Garden in Gloucestershire used to belong to private landowners hoping to create picturesque romantic landscape gardens.

The gardening style also changed from French or classical-formal-style-garden to British or landscape-garden style. After the Augustine Neo-classical age, sense and sensibility were highly thought of not only in literary movements but also in architecture and garden design from the view-point of Romanticism. The British individualistic view of nature, free from and independent of foreign influences, began to be valued more. Alexander Pope's Twickenham Villa, now gone, of which the grotto is left, was surely the first example of it in the 17th century. To him “all gardening is landscape painting, [which] embodied the complex relationship between Art and Nature.” Tom Turner further explains that “estate owners came to see their gardens as rural retreats...and looked back to an ancient tradition, derived from Christian theology and Greco-Roman philosophy.”

In Observations On the River Wye, Gilpin

also emphasized “ragged nature”, “many pleasing pastoral scenes” and “grandeur and tranquility”. All these remind contemporary British people of the landscape paintings by the Italians, Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa, who painted poetic, pastoral and ideal landscapes in the bright and refined atmosphere of Southern European settings which were highly regarded in cold Northern Europe. This is what had been praised, sought after and reproduced by the British landscape painters since the early Grand Tour days: Richard Wilson (1713-82), Thomas Girtin (1775-1802) and G.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) were the representatives of this genre. But this Grand Tour was changing into the Picturesque Tour, bringing into focus Wales and the River Wye areas full of many wild, ragged, and Mediaeval-looking landscapes and the melancholic, gloomy and dark wildness of nature. According to An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age, “picturesque theory valued variety, irregularity, mutability and contingency.” These pictures spontaneously inspire emotional, pathetic impressions. This gave birth to “topographical landscape paintings”, with Paul Sandby (1730-1809) at their center, depicting the actual English countryside. Turner also started as a topographical landscape painter and developed into a romantic, rather realistic painter, especially depicting man’s struggle with the power of nature in stormy scenes, which comment on our religious and sublime fears of the power of nature, which dwarfs human existence. The benevolence of nature, highly valued in the Italian classical paintings, attempted to show our divine, glorious and sacred desires, while malignant nature, pictured by the British romantic painters, signifies our human frailty, weakness and vulnerability. Romantic paintings of our fight with threatening nature must inspire our “elan

vital” provoked by the power of nature all the more for our nothingness. Whether benevolent or malignant, nature was the principal source of inspiration. This drive to live is well-embodied in Tintern Abbey.

Tintern Abbey was built in the Gothic architectural style. The term “Gothic” is derived from the savage Goths, one of the Germans tribes, who were devoted worshippers of nature, and has since been used to describe the tribe and their barbarous, brutal-life style. But in the Romantic Age, first of all, negative cultural meanings in all their wildness began to be accepted as affirmative symbols of nature. The power of nature is never depicted in straight formal lines, but by winding, curving and crawling lines. Raggedness, irregularity, and complexity became a Romancitic symbol as well as a cultural token. Further, the Gothic arch was originally meant to attain the salvation of the soul beyond nature and this world, so its vertical, not round or horizontal arch, symbolized the aspiring image of many trees growing thick in a natural wood, calling up the sublime in our minds.

Poetic imagination, a mysterious wonder of nature, a sympathy for Romantic painting and Gothic architecture are all concentrated in this small and nearly forgotten abbey in Wales beyond the boundaries of culture. It is usually thought that the Gothic Romance in British literature begins with H. Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto (1764) and ends with M. Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818); this influence was to last longer even into the 19th century with the works of A.W.N. Pugin, J. Ruskin and W. Morris who developed this Gothic spirit in their own fields under the name of the “Gothic Revival.”

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