

Nurtured by Nature: Imagination, Intuition, and Psychological Healing in Wordsworth's Poetry

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Abstract:

William Wordsworth's poetry articulates a vision of nature as both aesthetic subject and psychological resource, uniting imagination, intuition, and healing within a single organic philosophy of mind. This paper examines how Wordsworth's major works, including "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," "The Prelude," and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," construct nature as a formative and restorative presence capable of repairing psychological disturbance produced by urban alienation, political disillusionment, and the erosion of childhood wonder. Drawing on Romantic theories of imagination articulated by Abrams and Hartman, and on Wordsworth's own claim to a "wise passiveness" that privileges intuitive perception over analytic reason, the study argues that Wordsworth anticipates, in poetic form, insights later formalized within environmental psychology. The analysis traces three interlocking movements in Wordsworth's poetics: the creative power of imagination to transform sensory experience into moral feeling; the primacy of intuitive, pre-reflective knowledge over discursive intellect; and the therapeutic function of remembered natural experience during periods of grief, doubt, and estrangement. The paper concludes that Wordsworth's poetry offers not merely an aesthetic celebration of landscape but a coherent psychological vision in which memory, imagination, and intuitive communion with nature jointly sustain human wellbeing across the life course.

Keywords: William Wordsworth, Romantic imagination, intuition, psychological healing, nature, restorative environments, The Prelude, Tintern Abbey

Introduction

William Wordsworth occupies a singular place in the history of English poetry not merely as a chronicler of natural beauty but as a poet-psychologist who mapped, with unusual precision, the relationship between the external world and the interior life of feeling. Writing in the aftermath of the French Revolution's failed promise and amid the early tremors of industrial modernity, Wordsworth confronted a historical moment defined by disillusionment, social dislocation, and the erosion of inherited structures of meaning. His response was neither despair nor retreat into abstraction but the construction, across decades of poetic labor, of an elaborate vision in which nature functions simultaneously as the wellspring of imaginative power, the ground of intuitive knowledge, and the agent of psychological restoration. This paper argues that Wordsworth's poetry, read as a coherent and developing body of thought, articulates what might be called a Romantic psychology of healing: an account of mind in which imagination transforms raw sensory encounter into moral and emotional resource, in which intuition offers access to truths that discursive

reason cannot reach, and in which memory of natural experience becomes a durable therapeutic instrument sustaining the self through grief, doubt, and the pressures of adult life.

The argument proceeds along three interlocking lines of inquiry. First, it considers Wordsworth's theory of imagination as it emerges from his critical prose and is enacted in his verse, situating this theory within the broader Romantic reconception of mind articulated by Abrams (1953, 1971) and Hartman (1964). Second, it examines Wordsworth's privileging of intuitive, pre-reflective modes of knowing, captured in his invocation of a "wise passiveness," as an epistemology that stands opposed to Enlightenment rationalism and resonates with later psychological accounts of implicit, embodied cognition. Third, it turns to the therapeutic dimension of Wordsworth's poetics, tracing across "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," "The Prelude," and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" a consistent pattern in which recollected natural experience repairs psychological injury and sustains continuity of selfhood across the disruptions of time. The paper closes by situating Wordsworth's poetic psychology alongside empirical work in environmental psychology, particularly Kaplan's (1995) attention restoration theory and Ulrich's (1984) research on the salutary effects of natural views, suggesting that Wordsworth's intuitive claims about nature's healing power find an unexpected, if partial, corroboration in later scientific literature.

This reading departs from criticism that treats Wordsworth's nature poetry primarily as pastoral escapism or as an ideological softening of rural hardship, a tendency partially corrected by Bate's (1991) account of Wordsworth as a formative figure in the environmental tradition. Instead, the present study takes seriously Wordsworth's own insistence, voiced throughout his poetry and prose, that his subject was the mind of man and that nature interested him chiefly as the medium through which that mind discovers, tests, and renews itself. Read in this light, Wordsworth's poems are less a record of scenery than a sustained inquiry into how imagination, intuition, and memory cooperate to preserve psychological integrity under conditions of loss.

Romantic Imagination: Theoretical Foundations

Wordsworth wrote at a moment when European thought was reconceiving the relationship between mind and world. Abrams (1953) described this shift as a movement from mimetic theories of art, which treated the poem as a mirror reflecting external reality, toward expressive theories, which treated the poem as a lamp projecting the poet's inner light onto the world. Wordsworth's own critical writing enacts this shift directly. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, he insists that poetry is not the passive transcription of external objects but "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," feelings that are themselves shaped by the imaginative faculty rather than by objects alone (Wordsworth, 1984). This claim relocates the source of poetic and psychological value from the object perceived to the perceiving mind, and it is this relocation that allows nature, in Wordsworth's hands, to become a genuinely therapeutic subject rather than a merely decorative one.

Central to this relocation is Wordsworth's distinction between imagination and fancy, a distinction he elaborates in the 1815 Preface and that Coleridge would develop further in *Biographia Literaria*. Fancy, for Wordsworth, operates by association, combining discrete images according to superficial resemblance; imagination, by contrast, is a "plastic" or shaping power capable of fusing disparate elements of experience into a new and coherent whole invested with feeling. This shaping power is nowhere more evident than in the famous formulation from "Tintern Abbey," where Wordsworth describes the mind and the external world as jointly authoring perception: nature is at once "half create[d]" by the perceiving eye and "half perceive[d]" as independently given (Wordsworth, 1984). Perception, in other words, is never merely

receptive; it is already an imaginative act, and this means that the encounter with landscape is from the outset an encounter with the resources of one's own mind.

Abrams (1971) extends this analysis in *Natural Supernaturalism*, arguing that Wordsworth and his contemporaries secularized traditional Christian narratives of fall and redemption, relocating the drama of loss and recovery from the theological plane to the interior life of the individual mind in communion with nature. On this account, the imagination performs a quasi-redemptive function: it does not deny loss, but it transforms loss into a resource for renewed meaning. Hartman (1964) similarly identifies in Wordsworth's poetry a persistent structure in which imagination arises out of a checked or interrupted relation to nature, so that moments of apparent failure or fear become, through imaginative processing, the very occasions of psychological growth. This theoretical groundwork matters for the present argument because it establishes that, for Wordsworth, imagination is not an escape from reality but a disciplined capacity for reworking difficult experience into sustaining feeling, precisely the operation that a psychology of healing would require.

Coleridge's later elaboration of this distinction in *Biographia Literaria*, distinguishing a "primary imagination," the ordinary perceptual power by which all human beings organize sensory experience, from a "secondary imagination," a more deliberate creative faculty exercised chiefly by poets, provides a useful gloss on Wordsworth's practice, even though Wordsworth's own prose never adopts Coleridge's precise vocabulary. What matters for the present argument is that both poets agree that imagination is constitutive rather than merely decorative: it does not simply add ornament to an already-complete perception of nature but actively participates in producing the experience of meaning that nature yields. This constitutive view of imagination explains why, for Wordsworth, a walk through the Lake District countryside could become, decades later, a resource capable of sustaining the mind through hardship. The landscape was never merely observed; it was, from the moment of encounter, already being shaped by an imagination attuned to significance, and it is this imaginatively saturated version of the landscape, rather than the landscape as a neutral physical fact, that memory preserves and later redeploys.

Nature and the Creative Imagination in Wordsworth's Poetry

Wordsworth's poetry repeatedly stages the imagination at work upon sensory material drawn from nature, transforming ordinary perception into what he calls, in Book Twelve of *The Prelude*, "spots of time," moments of heightened experience that retain a "renovating virtue" capable of nourishing and repairing the mind long after the original event has passed (Wordsworth, 1984). The boat-stealing episode and the skating scenes of Book First exemplify this process. In the former, the young Wordsworth rows out onto a lake at night and is startled when a mountain peak appears to rise and pursue him; the episode leaves him disturbed, yet he recounts that afterward "huge and mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men" moved through his mind, and that this disturbance was not simply negative but became, over time, a source of imaginative depth, teaching him to feel the presence of something vast and unnamable behind ordinary appearances. The fear itself is imaginatively metabolized into a durable sense of the sublime.

This same transformative logic governs Wordsworth's treatment of memory in "Tintern Abbey." Returning after five years to the banks of the Wye, the speaker recalls that the "beauteous forms" of the landscape did not merely please him at the time of first encounter but persisted afterward as an imaginative resource: in hours of weariness, amid "the din / Of towns and cities," these remembered forms produced "sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart," restoring a kind of tranquility that allowed him to see into "the life of things" (Wordsworth, 1984). The passage is instructive because it makes explicit the

mechanism by which nature heals in Wordsworth's poetry: not through unmediated contact with landscape alone, but through the imaginative retention and re-creation of that landscape in memory, available for recall precisely when the mind is most burdened.

A comparable dynamic informs the shorter lyric "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," in which the speaker's encounter with a field of daffodils becomes valuable chiefly in its afterlife: the poem's final stanza declares that the flowers "flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude," so that the imagined recollection of the scene, rather than the scene itself, supplies the enduring benefit, filling the heart with pleasure and making it "dance with the daffodils" long after the original walk has ended. Averill (1980) notes that this structure of delayed, imaginatively mediated benefit recurs throughout Wordsworth's treatment of suffering and consolation, suggesting that the poet consistently locates psychological repair not in the moment of sensation but in the imagination's capacity to hold, reshape, and redeploy that sensation across time. Nature, in this sense, functions less as a fixed external cure than as raw material that imagination must actively work upon to yield its restorative effect, a claim that positions Wordsworth's poetics closer to a theory of active coping than to a simple prescription of scenery as remedy.

Intuition and "Wise Passiveness": Ways of Knowing Beyond Reason

If imagination supplies the mechanism by which natural experience becomes psychologically durable, intuition supplies Wordsworth's preferred mode of access to the meaning that experience carries. Wordsworth was deeply suspicious of the "meddling intellect" that, in his view, distorted living experience by subjecting it to analysis. In "The Tables Turned," he urges his interlocutor to abandon books and reasoned argument in favor of direct, unforced encounter with the natural world, famously insisting that "we murder to dissect," and that "one impulse from a vernal wood / May teach you more of man, / Of moral evil and of good, / Than all the sages can" (Wordsworth, 1984). The companion poem, "Expostulation and Reply," introduces the phrase that has become emblematic of this epistemology: a "wise passiveness," a receptive, unforced attentiveness through which the mind absorbs knowledge that active, effortful reasoning cannot reach.

This privileging of intuitive over discursive knowledge is not, in Wordsworth's hands, an anti-intellectual gesture so much as an alternative account of how the mind comes to understand its deepest commitments. Hartman (1964) argues that Wordsworth's poetry consistently stages a movement away from what he calls "consciousness" toward a more immediate, half-articulate apprehension of significance, one that arrives unbidden rather than through deliberate inquiry. The Prelude repeatedly enacts this pattern: crucial moments of self-understanding come to the young Wordsworth not as conclusions he reasons his way toward but as sudden apprehensions, felt before they are understood, that only later yield their meaning under reflection. This structure, in which feeling precedes and exceeds conceptual understanding, anticipates in poetic form what cognitive psychology would later describe as implicit or embodied cognition, knowledge that the body and the emotions register before or independently of explicit verbal reasoning, though the analogy should be drawn cautiously given the very different methods and aims of Romantic poetry and empirical psychology.

For the purposes of this paper's argument, the significance of Wordsworthian intuition lies in its psychological function: it allows the poet to access, and later to draw upon, sources of stability that are not vulnerable to the corrosive effects of doubt and argument. Where the intellect can talk itself into despair, as it does for the Wordsworth of The Prelude's crisis years, intuitive feeling, rooted in early and repeated contact with the natural world, persists beneath argument and becomes available as a resource

precisely when reasoned conviction fails. Intuition, in this sense, functions as a kind of psychological ballast, and it is this ballast that Wordsworth repeatedly calls upon in his poems of recovery.

Wordsworth's suspicion of analytic intellect also carries an implicit pedagogy, one directed against Enlightenment models of education that prized early instruction in abstract reasoning. In Book Five of *The Prelude*, he criticizes the hothouse cultivation of precocious, book-fed children, arguing that a mind trained exclusively in argument and information, without sustained exposure to natural experience, is thereby deprived of the deeper, more durable form of understanding that intuitive contact with the world alone can supply. The implication, consistent with the poem's larger argument, is that intuitive knowledge is not a lesser or merely childish mode of cognition to be outgrown but a foundational psychological resource that formal education, at its best, should protect and extend rather than override. This conviction underlies Wordsworth's broader claim that the child is, in a phrase from the "Ode," "father of the Man": the intuitive, unreflective responsiveness to nature available in childhood does not simply vanish with maturity but persists as a substratum beneath adult reasoning, available for recovery precisely in the moments when adult reasoning proves inadequate to the demands placed upon it.

Psychological Healing: Memory, Loss, and Restoration

The clearest articulation of nature's therapeutic function occurs in "Tintern Abbey," a poem explicitly structured around the contrast between an earlier, unreflective delight in landscape and a later, more troubled adulthood in which that delight has been transmuted into something more consciously restorative. The speaker acknowledges that he can no longer experience nature with the untroubled appetite of youth, when "the sounding cataract / Haunted me like a passion," but he insists that this loss has been compensated by an "abundant recompense": an ability to hear in nature "the still, sad music of humanity," and, crucially, to find in remembered natural scenes relief from what he calls "the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world," a phrase that names, with striking directness, a state resembling psychological burden or malaise (Wordsworth, 1984). Nature here does not eliminate suffering; it lightens it, providing what the poem calls "tranquil restoration" sufficient to sustain the mind through difficulty.

The Prelude extends this pattern across an entire autobiographical narrative, most explicitly in its account of the poet's crisis following the failure of the French Revolution. Having invested his hopes for human progress in revolutionary politics, Wordsworth records a period of profound disillusionment in which his "reason" turned against itself, breeding "Sick, wearied out with contrarieties" until he "yielded up moral questions in despair." The recovery from this crisis, as narrated in Books Eleven through Thirteen, is attributed not to a renewed political conviction or a new philosophical system but to a return to the sustaining presence of nature and to his sister Dorothy, whose companionship helps restore his capacity for feeling. Nature functions here as a kind of psychological anchor that survives the collapse of abstract conviction, allowing the poet to rebuild a stable sense of self out of resources that predate and outlast the crisis itself. Averill (1980) reads this narrative structure as central to Wordsworth's larger project, arguing that his poetry consistently locates the capacity to bear suffering not in the avoidance of pain but in the mind's trained ability to draw upon early, embodied experiences of natural beauty as a counterweight to later distress.

"Ode: Intimations of Immortality" offers the most philosophically developed version of this healing structure, precisely because it confronts directly the loss that all of Wordsworth's poetry of restoration must eventually address: the fading, with age, of the visionary intensity that once made "meadow, grove, and stream" appear "apparell'd in celestial light." The poem does not deny this loss, memorably describing

an adult world in which "the things which I have seen I now can see no more." Yet the ode's structure moves toward a qualified consolation, locating strength not in the recovery of childhood vision but in what survives its passing: "primal sympathy," a "philosophic mind" tempered by suffering, and a residual, intuitive memory of having once inhabited a more radiant world, which continues to inform present feeling even after its original intensity has gone. The final stanzas insist that "in the faith that looks through death," and in the ordinary beauty of "the meanest flower that blows," there remain "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears," an image that captures, with unusual psychological precision, a state of feeling that has moved beyond raw grief into a settled, durable form of acceptance. This movement, from acute loss through intuitive memory to a chastened but genuine equanimity, constitutes perhaps the fullest statement in Wordsworth's corpus of poetry functioning as psychological healing.

Wordsworth and Modern Psychology: A Resonance with Restorative Environment Theory

Wordsworth's intuitive claims about nature's restorative power find a suggestive, if historically distant, echo in later empirical psychology. Kaplan's (1995) attention restoration theory proposes that natural environments possess particular qualities, including a sense of being away from ordinary demands, a feeling of extent or immersion, effortless fascination, and compatibility with one's inclinations, that allow directed attention, depleted by sustained mental effort, to recover. Wordsworth's account, in "Tintern Abbey," of natural scenes offering relief from "the fever of the world" and enabling "that blessed mood" in which "the burthen of the mystery" grows "light" describes, in different terms, a strikingly similar process: an overtaxed mind finding, in remembered or actual contact with landscape, a state of restored capacity. Ulrich's (1984) well-known study demonstrating that hospital patients recovering from surgery healed measurably faster and required less pain medication when their windows overlooked trees rather than a brick wall offers further, independent support for the general proposition, intuited by Wordsworth more than a century and a half earlier, that exposure to natural scenery exerts a measurable effect on psychological and even physiological wellbeing.

It is worth noting, too, that Wordsworth's model differs from later restorative-environment research in one important respect: for Wordsworth, the healing power of nature depends not on immediate exposure alone but on the imaginative and intuitive processing of that exposure over time, so that a scene encountered in childhood may exert its restorative effect decades later, in a city, through memory rather than through renewed physical presence in the landscape. This emphasis on imaginatively mediated rather than strictly present-tense restoration distinguishes Wordsworth's account from a purely environmental model and aligns it more closely with later psychological work on autobiographical memory and its role in emotion regulation, in which the deliberate recollection of positive experience serves a self-soothing function independent of any current external stimulus. Wordsworth's poetry, in other words, describes not simply an environment that heals but a mind trained, through habitual attention to nature, to heal itself by drawing on an internalized store of natural imagery.

These parallels should be drawn with appropriate caution. Wordsworth was not a psychologist in any modern sense, and his claims about nature's healing power are embedded within a broader metaphysical and religious framework, concerned with imagination, memory, and a quasi-spiritual sense of communion with a living universe, that differs considerably from the controlled, quantitative methods of environmental psychology. McKusick (2009) cautions against reading Romantic nature poetry as a straightforward anticipation of later ecological or psychological science, noting that Wordsworth's primary commitments were aesthetic and moral rather than empirical. Nonetheless, the convergence is worth noting precisely

because it suggests that Wordsworth's poetry, arrived at through sustained introspective attention to his own experience rather than experimental method, achieved genuine and durable insight into a real feature of human psychological functioning: the capacity of natural environments, whether directly perceived or imaginatively recalled, to counteract the depleting effects of sustained cognitive and emotional strain.

Conclusion

Read together, Wordsworth's major poems of nature articulate a coherent, if unsystematic, psychology of healing, one built from three interlocking elements: an active imagination capable of transforming sensory encounter into durable emotional resource; an intuitive mode of knowing that grants access to stabilizing truths beneath the reach of corrosive reasoned doubt; and a practice of memory through which early experiences of natural beauty are retained and redeployed to sustain the self through later grief, disillusionment, and loss. "Tintern Abbey" demonstrates this process in miniature, showing how remembered landscape lightens the burden of adult weariness; The Prelude extends it across an entire life narrative, showing nature and intuitive feeling surviving the collapse of Wordsworth's revolutionary hopes; and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" pushes the argument to its philosophical limit, showing how even the loss of childhood's visionary intensity can be metabolized, through intuitive memory and a chastened philosophic mind, into a durable form of psychological equanimity.

This reading has implications beyond the immediate scope of Wordsworth studies. It suggests that Romantic nature poetry, often treated primarily as an aesthetic or ideological phenomenon, also constitutes a serious and psychologically astute body of reflection on how human beings sustain themselves under conditions of loss, one whose intuitions about the restorative power of natural environments find partial corroboration in later empirical psychology, even as its ultimate commitments remain moral and imaginative rather than clinical. In an era increasingly attentive to the psychological costs of urbanization, sustained digital attention, and ecological anxiety, Wordsworth's insistence that imagination, intuition, and remembered contact with the natural world jointly sustain the mind retains a claim on contemporary attention that exceeds mere literary-historical interest. His poetry does not offer a therapeutic technique in any modern clinical sense, but it does offer something arguably more durable: a sustained, carefully observed account of how the mind, properly attentive to its own relationship with the natural world, can find within that relationship the resources to endure.

Ultimately, what distinguishes Wordsworth's treatment of nature from the broader Romantic celebration of landscape is precisely this psychological specificity: his poems do not simply assert that nature is beautiful or morally instructive in the abstract, but trace, with unusual care, the mechanisms, imaginative transformation, intuitive apprehension, and habitual memory by which particular natural experiences come to function as lasting sources of strength. It is this attentiveness to mechanism, as much as the beauty of the verse itself, that justifies reading Wordsworth not only as a great poet of nature but as a serious theorist of psychological healing, whose insights, tested against the very different methods of later empirical psychology, have shown a persistence that few purely aesthetic claims can match.

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