

Romantic Poetry

It seems a day

(I speak of one from many singled out)

One of those heavenly days which cannot die,

When forth I sallied from out cottage-door,

5 And with a wallet o'er my shoulders slung,

A nutting-crook in hand, I turn'd my steps

Towards the distant woods, a Figure quaint,

Trick'd out in proud disguise of Beggar's weeds

Put on for the occasion, by advice

10 And exhortation of my frugal Dame.

Motley accoutrement! of power to smile

At thorns, and brakes, and brambles, and, in truth,

More ragged than need was. Among the woods,

And o'er pathless rocks, I fore'd my way

15 Until, at length, I came to one dear nook

Unvisited, where not a broken bough

Droop'd with its wither'd leaves, ungracious sign

Of devastation, but the hazels rose

Tall and erect, with milk-white clusters hung,

20 A virgin scene!—A little while I stood,

Breathing with such suppression of the heart

As joy delights in; and with wise restraint

Voluptuous, fearless of a rival, eyed

The banquet, or beneath the trees I sate

25 Among the flowers, and with the flowers I play'd;

A temper known to those, who, after long

And weary expectation, have been bless'd

With sudden happiness beyond all hope.—

—Perhaps it was a bower beneath whose leaves

30 The violets of five seasons re-appear

And fade, unseen by any human eye,

Where fairy water-breaks do murmur on

For ever, and I saw the sparkling foam,
And with my cheek on one of those green stones
35 That, fleec'd with moss, beneath the shady trees,
Lay round me scatter'd like a flock of sheep,
I heard the murmur and the murmuring sound,
In that sweet mood when pleasure loves to pay
Tribute to ease, and, of its joy secure
40 The heart luxuriates with indifferent things,
Wasting its kindness on stocks and stones,
And on the vacant air. Then up I rose,
And dragg'd to earth both branch and bough, with crash
And merciless ravage; and the shady nook
45 Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower
Deform'd and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being: and unless I now
Confound my present feelings with the past,
Even then, when from the bower I turn'd away,
50 Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings,
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees and the intruding sky.—

Then, dearest Maiden! move along these shades
In gentleness of heart with gentle hand
55 Touch, —for there is a Spirit in the woods.

William WORDSWORTH, "Nutting", *Lyrical Ballads* (1798)

Full Commentary



John CONSTABLE, *The Cornfield* (1826)

Romantic painters sometimes chose to portray the English countryside as a pastoral Arcadia in which the innocence of youth was left untouched. For instance, in John Constable's *The Cornfield* (1826), nature is depicted as a nourishing and protective sanctuary, thanks not only to the presence of the pond from which the child drinks, but also to the arches of the trees.

Surprisingly enough for a Romantic writer, in 'Nutting', one of the most famous poems included in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), William Wordsworth relates the story of the destruction of such a pastoral paradise. Written in blank verse¹, 'Nutting' is a narrative poem in which the lyrical persona reminisces about a day he spent in the woods as a young boy.

Leaving his abode, Wordsworth's persona, then a young boy, reaches a secluded place, characterized by its virginity and its purity: this forest appears as a pastoral sanctuary, as yet unsullied by human presence. His growing communion with nature becomes increasingly sensual—physical, even—leading, paradoxically enough, to the violent destruction of this shrine, which, being personified, becomes the metaphorical victim of a rape, of a desecration. As a result, the young boy's attempt to possess nature so as to reach

¹ **Blank verse:** unrhymed iambic pentameters.

transcendence results in utter failure. This sudden shift is symbolic of the lyrical persona's transition from innocence to experience which is encapsulated in the poem. The act of writing poetry, of remembering the past, thus becomes a way to preserve what has been destroyed, to try to recapture the fleeting innocence of youth and the possibility of a communion with the natural world.

That is why the following question can be raised: To what extent is the young boy's desecration of the natural sanctuary representative of the loss of youthful innocence, which the poet, through his persona, attempts (perhaps in vain) to immortalize in the poem itself?

First, nature is depicted as a pastoral sanctuary in which the young boy can achieve a form of communion with nature, however fleeting. Second, the desecration of this shrine, tantamount to an attempt at possessing nature completely, ultimately leads the young boy to experience loss. Last, this transition from innocence to experience is dramatized in the whole poem, which becomes the only place where what has been lost can be brought back, at least partially.

The first part of the poem is characterized by the ambulatory perspective of the lyrical persona – a young boy at the time of the event –, who leaves the human world (his 'cottage', l. 4) to reach a place delimited by what resembles a protective barrier. In line 13, the use of the preposition 'among' is evocative of a sense of enclosure: the lyrical persona appears to be surrounded by trees. Likewise, the 'thorns, and brakes, and brambles' (l. 12) he encounters on the way are all but welcoming, as evidenced in particular by the alliteration in /b/ associated with the lingering presence of the voiced consonant /r/, both sounds evoking a form of defence against human intrusion. As for the ternary rhythm, it emphasizes the breadth of the wall created by these dangerous plants. Associated with the idea of remoteness both in time and space ('at length', l. 15 and 'distant', l. 7), this apparently impassable fence becomes the sign that the place the lyrical persona eventually reaches was protected. Hence its virginity, underlined by such phrases as 'virgin' (l. 20), 'unvisited' (l. 16) or 'unseen by any human eye' (l. 31): the young boy might well have been the first man ever to have 'fore'd [his] way' (l. 14) past the bulwark made of trees and plants and into this sanctuary-like space. All signs of civilization vanish as he penetrates into this shrine: the 'pathless rocks' (l. 14) have not been rearranged or organized to help travellers on their way.

There, the lyrical persona experiences a sense of awe—or, at least, fascination—leading him to experience what he calls 'suppression of the heart' (l. 21). The textual impact of this breathtaking sight upon the poetic voice is to be found the anacoluthon² located between lines 19 and 20 ('hung, | A virgin scene!—', l. 19-20). Faced with this spectacle, the lyrical persona is at a loss for words: although the previous sentences seemed to go on forever, mimicking the advance of the young boy into the woods, he is suddenly shaken and unsettled by such a sight. Being a noun phrase, and thus a short, incomplete sentence, the expression 'A virgin scene!—' mirrors his impossibility to put words on such an experience. At first, before he takes the time to observe his surroundings and describe them, only this very abstract formulation comes to him: he cannot describe its depth yet. The young boy's shock is clearly expressed in this passage: first noticeable thanks to the exclamation mark, it is also to be found in the lack of balance which characterizes line 20. The caesura, reinforced by the dash, separates the line into two uneven halves (the first part comprising two feet, against three in the other), thus echoing the strong emotions elicited by the discovery of the 'nook' (l. 15). At the same time, the trochaic inversion³ ('Breathing with **such**', l. 21) and the run-on line (l. 21-22) evoke, respectively, the breathlessness of the young boy and the extent of the delight he felt. This pleasure is made all the more apparent by the pleonastic phrase 'joy delights in' (l. 22, emphasis mine) and the lexical field of

² **Anacoluthon**: a syntactic break in a sentence.

³ **Trochaic inversion**: the use of a trochee at the beginning of an iambic line to form a choriamb (/ X X /).

pleasure ('sudden happiness', l. 28; 'pleasure', l. 38; 'joy', l. 39), which, through a gradation, mirror the mounting elation associated with the discovery of the place.

The pleasure felt by the lyrical persona actually derives from the discovery of a quintessentially pastoral place. The nook he chances upon indeed bears all the marks of pastoralism: nature is described as protective ('bower', l. 29) and provides both shelter and shade ('shady trees', l. 35; 'shades', l. 53). Likewise, it is metaphorically evocative of the mystical creatures ('fairy water-breaks', l. 32) of pastoral poetry while the lyrical voice becomes a metaphorical shepherd ('Lay round me scatter'd like a flock of sheep', l. 36), another archetypal figure of pastoral literature. In this pastoral paradise, the young boy achieves a gradual fusion with nature. First, he simply reaches the shrine-like nook (l. 1-20); when he discovers it, he is still watching from a distance ('A little while I stood...', l. 20 ff.), but his gaze penetrates his surroundings more and more deeply, as evidenced by the gradation: 'eyed' (l. 23), 'saw' (l. 33), 'beheld' (l. 51). Soon enough, he is literally surrounded by natural elements, an idea conveyed by the use of prepositions ('among the flowers', l. 25; 'Lay round me', l. 36; 'beneath the shady trees', l. 35). That is why he is ultimately able to achieve a communion of sorts with nature through physical contact ('my cheek on one of those green stones', l. 34), this very idea being confirmed by the chiasmus in lines 24-25: 'I sate | Among the flowers, and with the flowers I play'd', which creates a sense of balance and therefore evokes the possibility of a communion between the young boy and nature.

Yet, despite this apparent communion, the run-on line can be read as an ominous sign of the destruction to come: the young boy's communion with nature is counterbalanced by a sense of urgency, of possible instability. Even the vocabulary used by the poet, with the choice of the verb 'play'd' (l. 25), hints that the relationship between the young boy and his environment might not be one of complete equality, but rather one of domination.

The nook is so attractive to the young boy because of its fertility and purity. The dominant hue is definitely the colour white ('milk-white clusters', l. 19; 'sparkling foam', l. 33; 'flock of sheep', l. 36), which shows how pure this place is. Likewise, not only is its fertility associated with the possibility for violets to 're-appear' (l. 30) or with the mention of a 'banquet' (l. 24), but it is also conveyed by the sexualization of the landscape, which combines masculine ('Tall and erect', l. 19) and feminine elements (with the presence of water, for instance, with the 'fairy water-breaks', l. 32 or adjectives such as 'voluptuous', l. 22). More than mere fertility, this sexualized scenery mirrors the young boy's growing wish to possess nature physically. The lexical field of courtship ('dear nook', l. 15; 'fearless of a rival', l. 23), as well as the association of the nook to someone who 'murmur[s]' (derivation of the word 'murmur' in lines 32 and 37) into the young boy's ear, metaphorically associates the nook with a young girl whom the young boy 'sullie[s]' (l. 46) because of his destructive act. It follows that the devastation of the 'virgin scene' (l. 20), mentioned in lines 42 to 46, is tantamount to a metaphorical rape. As a result, what was precious and perhaps most beautiful about the nook is destroyed and defiled. Paradoxically enough, this destructive act seems to have been sparked off by the young boy's diminishing pleasure, as underlined by the anticlimactic series: 'happiness' (l. 28), 'joy' (l. 39), 'pleasure' (l. 38), and 'kindliness' (l. 41).

What should have been a positive experience is thus associated with a sense of loss. However hard he tried to become one with the nook, he cannot possess it entirely: the modalizing adverb 'Perhaps' (l. 29) indeed shows that something in nature ultimately escapes him. Any experience is bound to be grasped partially by the lyrical persona because the place is animated by a sort of everlasting life, as borne out by the emphasis on the cycle of the flowers' growth ('The violets of five seasons re-appear | And fade, unseen by any human eye', l. 30-31) or the 'water-breaks [that] do murmur on | For ever' (l. 32-33). The run-on lines mirror the impossibility for the young man to capture the essence of a place outside human temporality (and

characterized by its fleeting nature: ‘sudden’, l. 28), which is why it can exist without him. Hence the association of his communion with a sense of emptiness: ‘The heart luxuriates with indifferent things, | Wasting its kindness [...] | on the vacant air’ (l. 40-42). Instead of fulfilling him, this experience leads him—paradoxically enough—to destroy the place savagely to thwart this gradual sense of loss, since destruction is the ultimate form of possession. If he destroys the place, he will have been the only one ever to have seen it.

It is relevant to note that, from the start, this sense of emptiness and loss was hinted at in the poem, even when the young boy first saw the nook (‘suppression of the heart’, l. 21). As the young boy discovers the pastoral shrine, a sense of foreboding indeed pervades the poem as he describes the contrary of what he sees through a series of negative forms or prefixes: ‘days which cannot die’ (l. 2), ‘unvisited’ (l. 16), ‘not a broken bough’ (l. 16), and ‘unseen by any human eye’ (l. 31). This emphasis on what the experience is not, at least on the surface, foreshadows the upcoming destruction and loss. From the start, the young boy’s behaviour is marked by a form of violence since he ‘fore’d [his] way’ (l. 14) into the woods. What might have seemed to be a sudden shift from communion to destruction was therefore implicitly dramatized from the start of the poem. Yet, as the shift actually happens the change of pace is obvious: the anteposition of the particle in the phrase ‘Then up I rose’ (l. 42), which is highlighted by the iambic rhythm as well as the perfective aspect, conveys the suddenness of the change which the lyrical persona experienced. In the following lines, the sounds associated with the destruction of this idyllic landscape can be identified thanks to the alliteration in /b/ (‘both branch and bough’, l. 42), just as the regular iambic rhythm gives way to a more irregular type of metre (e.g., ‘And **mer**-ci-less **ra**-vage; | | and the **sha**-dy **nook**’, l. 44), thus sounding the death knell for the sense of balance the lyrical persona originally felt. The loss of a stressed syllable in lines 44-46 mirrors the sense of emptiness the persona had felt despite his attempt at communing with nature: his destructive act is meant to possess—and, as it were, to take revenge on—the pastoral place whose essence he could never capture entirely.

Paradoxically enough, this experience should have been ended in his reaching a form of transcendence, since he was originally ‘Trick’d out in proud disguise of Beggar’s weeds’ (l. 8) and ended up becoming ‘rich beyond the wealth of kings’ (l. 50). Despite this metaphorical elevation from beggar to king, he only ‘felt a sense of pain’ (l. 51) in the end, while the ‘silent trees and the intruding sky’ seem to relegate him to oblivion, as evidenced by the use of a dash at the end of line 52 and the blank that separates the first stanza from the coda. Since the poem was written with the benefit of hindsight by an adult poet (‘unless I now | Confound my present feelings with the past’, l. 48), the poem itself seems to become a way to stave off silence, to try and capture what could not be captured.

It is clear from the start that this narrative poem is meant to relate a story which is part of the poet’s life story. The use of the past tense in most of the poem (e.g., ‘sallied’, l. 3) underlines the discrepancy between the time when the story happened and the time when the poem was written by introducing a temporal distance. More than any day in his life, he chose to focus on an exemplary experience, as evidenced by the opposition between unicity and multiplicity when the lyrical voice talks about the day in question: ‘(I speak of one from many singled out)’ (l. 2). Knowing that ‘Nutting’ was originally meant to be included in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s book-length autobiographical poem, it is undeniable that this apparently insignificant day (see the use of the indefinite article in line 1: ‘It seems a day’) is actually one of those Wordsworthian ‘spots of time’⁴ which are symbolic of a drastic change in the poet’s life. In this particular case, it seems that

⁴ See *The Prelude*, book XII:

There are in our existence **spots of time**,
That with distinct pre-eminence retain

the paradoxical impossibility to reach a form of transcendence is representative of the transition from innocence to experience. Indeed, through the metaphorical rape of the personified nook, the young boy symbolically achieves sexual majority. Yet, this is accompanied a fall: instead of rising lastingly ('I rose', l. 42), he instigates a downward movement ('dragg'd to earth', l. 43). Symbolically, it marks the transition from prelapsarian youth to postlapsarian adulthood as he destroys the nook. As a result, it can be argued that the young boy is as 'deform'd and sullied' (l. 46) as the nook itself; hence the 'sense of pain' (l. 51) he ultimately feels despite the 'wealth' (l. 50) he thought he had obtained. This loss of innocence, dramatized throughout the poem, becomes somewhat tragic when one considers how inescapable the poet makes it to be. Even the coda and the moral it contains partake of this feeling of tragedy: the voice of the adult poet emerges from the silence that follows the destruction to warn the 'dearest Maiden' (l. 53), who is probably still innocent (and might be Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy), not to repeat his mistakes (see the derivation of the word 'gentle' in line 54, opposed to the young boy's destructive gesture). Yet, everything has already been destroyed and what he had missed might not even be accessible to the young girl anymore.

The poem itself therefore becomes an attempt at immortalizing what has been destroyed, at fighting against the silence that followed in the wake of the destruction of the nook. In that respect, is it relevant that the poem should open on an incomplete line of only two feet ('It seems a day', l. 1): it gives the reader the impression that both the poem and the lyrical voice emerge out of the void, out of the oblivion which is to be found at the end of the first stanza. (The same goes for the coda.) What the poem is all about, it seems, is the attempt at capturing what he could not see the first time around, namely the 'Spirit in the woods' (l. 5). The presence of the invisible is indeed conjured up in a very subtle way on various occasions in the poem: for instance, the phrase 'I heard the murmur and the murmuring sound' (l. 37) seems somewhat pleonastic because of the derivation of the word 'murmur'. Yet, a difference is to be made between the two expressions: 'murmuring sound' is much more abstract than 'murmur', which is definitely concrete. Knowing that the same apparently pleonastic structure is used in line 54 ('In gentleness of heart with gentle hand'), it seems that the difference between 'murmuring sound' and 'murmur' is that the 'murmur' is perceptible by the senses while the 'murmuring sound' is only to be perceived by the heart. When he first went through the experience, the young boy 'wast[ed] his kindliness' (l. 41): the remembrance is definitely marked by a form of bitterness since he could not perceive everything he should have perceived with his heart, because it was closed from the start ('suppression of the heart', l. 21).

The problem might indeed lie in the young boy's lack of openness on that very day: he was 'disguise[d]' (l. 8) and was even wearing, as it were, a smile on his face, as shown by the unusual use of the preposition OF in line 11: 'Motley accoutrement! of power to smile'. His physical appearance is characterized by a sense of excess (with the comparative structure in line 13: 'more ragged than need was') and pride ('proud', l. 8). A sort of trickster (see the use of the verb 'Trick'd out', l. 8), he seems to have been dishonest from the start. This is perhaps why he could not have a complete experience of the nook he discovered, of the invisible 'Spirit in the woods' (l. 55): his was not an open heart—heart being a key word in the poem since it occurs three times (in lines 21, 40, and 54). With the benefit of hindsight, the poet is able to recollect his emotions

A renovating virtue, whence—depressed
 By false opinion and contentious thought,
 Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,
 In trivial occupations, and the round
 Of ordinary intercourse—our minds
 Are nourished and invisibly repaired;
 A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
 That penetrates, enables us to mount,
 When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.

in tranquillity⁵ ('unless I now | Confound my present feelings with the past', l. 48) and use the power of speech to capture what could not be captured by destruction. The possibility of confusion mentioned in line 48 is relevant since writing the poem is the only way to ensure that this day actually never dies ('One of those heavenly days that cannot die', l. 3). The exultation he might have felt as he was writing the poem could have come from the belief that, through this performative act of writing, he would ultimately save the memory and the experience of that particular 'spot of time' and prevent it from falling into oblivion and silence.

Dramatizing the transition from innocence to experience, 'Nutting' is more than the mere story of a young boy destroying a beautiful nook: it captures the anguish and bitterness of a poet who tries to immortalize one of the most striking events in his life to preserve what little meaning is left.

Considering the Romantic poets' virulent opposition to the Industrial Revolution and its consequences – from William Blake who sneered at the 'dark Satanic Mills' which had mushroomed on 'England's pleasant pastures' to William Wordsworth himself, who included rural life in his poems as if to save it from extinction –, it is remarkable that 'Nutting' should focus on man's destructive capabilities. To some extent, it could even be read as a sort of metaphorical parable denouncing the destruction of nature entailed by industrialization. Therefore, it could be seen as a sort of counterpoint to the idea that the poet 'considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature.'⁶ Here, nature becomes the place where man's darkest energies are released, which is why the poem could ultimately be construed as a warning against man's attempts at mastering and exploiting nature to industrialize the nation.

⁵ See the preface of the *Lyrical Ballads*: **I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity:** the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind, and in whatever degree, from various causes, is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will, upon the whole, be in a state of enjoyment.⁷

⁶ The sentence is taken from the preface of the *Lyrical Ballads*.