

Welcome to Entanglements, the new podcast from the Jesus College Intellectual Forum. In the previous episode, we explored the etymology and different ideas associated with our modern noun, nature. We concluded that nature is an ambiguous term, and while this ambiguity may sometimes be effective, it can also cause conflict, as there is no consensus on what exactly is meant by the word nature. Instead, there are a number of inherent tensions in the different ways that people define nature. These can be distilled to three questions that we should ask ourselves when thinking about nature. These are: is it a dynamic or a static state? Are we, human beings, parts of nature? And, if not, can we be? And, does nature include the whole of reality or just some of its constituent parts?

With these questions and the fundamental ambiguity of the word nature in mind, I set off to explore the different ways in which literature has viewed and conceptualised nature. To do this, I first looked at British Romanticism and the moral emphasis that the poets placed upon the natural world. So, I travelled down to the British Library to meet Dr Tess Somervell, a lecturer in English at Worcester College, Oxford. Because we were at the library, you may be able to hear some background noise of announcements and book trolleys passing through, and in a few instances, my audio isn't great, so apologies for this. But, I figured, where could be better to talk about literature?

I met with Tess to discuss Romanticism. So, to start, I asked her to outline the beginnings of this movement, and the social and political climate out of which it emerged.

Dr Tess Somervell: Romanticism refers to this movement in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in—particularly in Europe and North America. And at the end of the 18th century we've had the enlightenment in Europe, right, we've had a real emphasis on science, on reason, we're moving towards modern secular capitalism, essentially, and we're on the brink of the industrial revolution. So the world is changing, as I say, the world is moving towards what we might recognize as modernity. And as you can imagine, there's a reaction against this from a lot of writers, artists, thinkers, who are kind of unsettled and worried that the world is becoming disenchanting, I suppose. Wordsworth talks about the world of getting and spending. He's concerned, and lots of writers and thinkers are concerned, that the powers, the kind of magic and spiritual powers of nature, are being swallowed up in this new, urban, modern, rationalized world. So when we think of Romantic nature writing, for example, to kind of sum it up as simply as possible, I suppose you might say the Romantics are really interested in the psychic and emotional and aesthetic connections between the individual mind and the external natural world. They're saying nature doesn't just have to be a resource that we extract from for economic benefit, but it has moral benefits, it has spiritual and aesthetic and personal benefits too.

Noah Rouse: Yeah, I think that's something we'll come back to in a sec. So who are these Romantic figures? Are they the sort of chimney sweeps and the people working the land? Or not?

Dr Somervell: It's a very good point and when we talk about the romantics, a lot of the time we're talking about poets, a small group of male poets often who we're thinking of when we

talk about the Romantics, people like Wordsworth and Coleridge and Shelley. And it's certainly true that, you know, the vast majority of people are getting on with their day-to-day lives and, you know, a lot of people don't have time for asking these kinds of questions. It's fair to say that a lot of the Romantics, people who are participating in this intellectual and cultural movement, are highly educated, belong to a particular class. But that said, there are also labouring class romantic poets, people like John Clare, Robert Bloomfield. There are, of course, lots of great female romantic poets and writers and thinkers. So this is a cultural movement that did spread pretty widely. We can think of, for example, the French Revolution, which was hugely influenced by romantic ideals of personal freedom and equality and nature and so on. So this movement really did have a wide application throughout society, even if when we talk about the Romantics, it is often quite an exclusive group of very influential, educated people.

Noah: There you talk about the French Revolution and sort of interesting how it cycles and the French Revolution then starts more people in. But there are sort of deeper philosophical roots in thinking Rousseau and the push against the Enlightenment and obviously in ideas of nature. Do you mind just giving the insight into how, what role Rousseau played in all of this?

Dr Somervell: Absolutely, I mean to start with it's easy to buy into this idea that the Romantics kind of came out of nowhere because they, a lot of them kind of pushed that idea themselves, you know, they wanted to be revolutionary but of course they're influenced by earlier 18th century writers, poets, landscape artists, and Rousseau is a hugely important figure for the Romantics, particularly in this development of Romantic life writing, right? Rousseau's *Confessions*, a hugely important text in Romanticism, Rousseau's interest in walking in nature, being in nature, and what effect that has on your mind is of course hugely influential on people like Wordsworth and later British and European Romantics.

Noah: Yeah, I think Rousseau's idea that the state of nature isn't necessarily nasty, brutish and short, that there is this noble savage trope which he draws on and later Romantics draw on, that there's this sort of inherent almost mystical beauty and space to learn within nature. And so bringing on to that, that sanctity of humankind's relationship to nature which the Romantics seem to have felt was being desecrated by what became modern industrial capitalism. What was their view of nature? Firstly, was nature itself a concrete aspect, a thing that they said, that is nature, this is not nature?

Dr Somervell: I mean it's very difficult to generalise, isn't it, about any huge movement like this and every, you know, every Romantic writer or thinker will have their own individual take on these questions. But since you're asking me to generalise, the stereotype, I think, of the Romantic idea of nature is that actually, it does see nature and humanity as very separate categories, right? That's the kind of critical view of the Romantic view of nature. I mean, sometimes Romantic is used as kind of a dirty word in environmentalism, isn't it? That it's sentimental and egocentric and woolly and unrealistic, idealised. But a legitimate critique is that it holds nature as kind of this separate sphere that humans sort of benefit from engaging with, but that is very separate from us, is very non-human. And the

Romantics did often privilege certain kinds of nature, certain kinds of landscape. The sublime, of course, is a really important Romantic aesthetic. They placed a lot of emphasis on mountains, grand vistas, particular kinds of nature, and some people would say they neglected the small, the dirty, the humble, you know, these other kinds of environment. I would always say that it's much more complicated than that, of course. Of course, a lot of romantic writers did engage with those aspects of nature and did contemplate possible kinds of more deep interaction, I suppose, between the human and the non-human, that actually the boundaries between these categories are much more blurred than we sometimes think of in Romanticism. And it's true that, you know, sometimes you have to go to female Romantic poets, people like Charlotte Smith or Anna Laetitia Barbauld, who offer a kind of alternative, they use the sublime but it's, they question that kind of masculine, egocentric, Romantic sublime that we might automatically think of.

Noah: This term "sublime" is talked about a lot in Romanticism. What is the sublime? If you can put it into a short soundbite, what is this experience which so many of the Romantics seem to have felt and have been inspired by?

Dr Somervell: Sure, so the sublime is an experience that you have when you're faced with a particular object which is generally something very large, potentially threatening, something which is on such a huge scale, whether that's a temporal or a spatial scale, that you get a sense of awe, but it's kind of a pleasurable awe. So when you look at a huge mountain, if you look at a storm or the ocean, you get a sense of the sublime. And I think we take this for granted as, of course you feel the sublime when you see these things, but it's a very historically constructed aesthetic. It's got roots in the classical period, but it became hugely fashionable really in the mid-18th century. Edmund Burke wrote his treatise on the sublime and the beautiful.

And from the kind of second half of the 18th century and into the early 19th century, Romantic writers and thinkers were really interested in this feeling of the sublime. What does it mean? What does it say about our relationship with nature that we get kind of overawed by it? And of course, we have inherited this and we use the sublime all the time to think about environmental crisis, natural disasters, things like this. And it's really important, I think, to interrogate what that means, the kind of repercussions or implications of engaging with nature through that sublime lens. And the Romantics are really useful for thinking that through.

Noah: It's really interesting the way you talk here and the reading. Often sublime is almost a constructed experience, which people go through. And I'm interested here in how, if we go back to what's often presented as an over-simplistic dualism between humankind and the natural world, this sublime is often presented as not simply an experience of nature, but it's an experience of humankind's own sense of nature or humankind's own creative power.

Dr Somervell: Absolutely. So the sublime is a perfect example of this very common critique of Romanticism, which is that it basically uses nature to think about the individual. That a poet would go into nature, look at a sublime vista, and value it because of the feelings it

brings out in him, right? That's a very common critique of what the Romantics do with nature. And the sublime is a perfect example of that, because as you say, in one of the most influential theorizations of the sublime by Kant, he makes this point that, you know, when you experience the sublime, you are initially overpowered by something, you sense the power of the external world and of nature, but that that is then followed by a feeling of the triumph of your own mind, that you are able to comprehend something on such a scale or imagine something on such a scale. So the Kantian sublime is really not about the power of nature, but about the power of the human mind. And of course, that might be problematic if we're using it today to think about our relationship with the environment for various reasons. I would say though, that, you know, if you read, say, Wordsworth or Blake engaging with the sublime, it's not just straightforwardly Kantian, right? We can conflate the Kantian sublime and the Romantic sublime too often, I think. It's much more complicated and nuanced when, you know, great poets actually engage with it and they're very conscious actually of the potential ethical problems with the way they engage with the world. You know, Wordsworth, for example, has so many poems about his own kind of anxiety that he is imposing himself upon the natural world, that this is dangerous, that he's potentially being kind of destructive towards nature, even as he adores it and writes about it. So these poets are much more kind of self-reflexive about the problems that we might see in Romanticism already. They are aware of these problems and thinking them through.

Noah: And just building on what you said there, I think it's so interesting the language we use about this, like a triumph of the mind. I think it's always good to be aware that the nuance of us triumphing over nature is very different from us triumphing in understanding and connecting with nature. When you're talking about Wordsworth, it's almost eco-anxiety about imposing upon the natural world. Can you just talk about that a bit more? Who is imposing though? Is that Wordsworth's sense that this is a non-human space? Or is this Wordsworth's sense that I'm coming here and polluting this space because of my cultural baggage?

Dr Somervell: Wordsworth has a fantastic poem called "Nutting", where he recalls this experience as a child when he went nutting, gathering nuts, came to this beautiful grove in the woods and had a kind of visceral, almost animalistic response to it. He writes about it in almost a kind of lustful way and he says that as a child he destroyed this grove, he ripped down all the branches, left it completely desecrated. And then he left and he says he's not sure if he's imposing this feeling retrospectively or if he felt it at the time, but he says he felt guilt at what he had done. And it's an incredible, powerful, short, but incredibly kind of disturbing poem. And it's about the dangers of humans even engaging with nature, you know, as soon as you enter a non-human space, are you desecrating it? Is writing a poem a kind of desecration because you're imposing yourself and your perspective upon it? Is this something we can even escape as humans? Is there any way of living with nature that is not destructive? And of course he doesn't come up with a solution to these questions, but he's thinking these questions through, he's worrying about them.

And the poem ends, there is a spirit in the woods. So he has this sense of something that is entirely non-human, that he is at risk of damaging, destroying, violating, but he doesn't offer a way to engage with that that is not destructive. He is aware of this kind of inherent paradox that loving nature might also be a kind of exploitation of it.

Noah: How did he get over that paradox? How did the Romantic flavour of these poets in the wider society who were influenced by that time, how did that affect how people actually lived their daily life? Or was it all this watching out the window and walking on trees now and then? Or was it the power-pull connection which went through everyday life?

Dr Somervell: I don't think he ever got over it, or that anyone ever got over it. And you know, we have to admit that they weren't successful in holding back what they saw as the kind of destructive forces of the Industrial Revolution or enclosure, or you know, these movements that were destructive towards the environment. But there have been real-world positive impacts from Romanticism in the conservation movement, for example. One of the most sort of obvious and striking examples would be the National Park Movement in the 19th century, developed mainly in North America, and the architects of the National Park Movement, people like John Muir, were very open about the fact that they were influenced by Wordsworth and the British Romantic writers, as well as American Romantics like Thoreau.

And, you know, that's the first example of governments saying, we need to protect this place for its own sake, because it has a value that is not just economic. And of course, there are problems with that movement too, you know, it's based on a kind of false vision of an untouched, sublime wilderness and involved clearing out indigenous people and all sorts of, you know, huge problems. And it's harking back to Rousseau's idea of the noble savage, like you say, that there is such a thing as some kind of untouched, perfect, fundamental place where humans can be with nature. It's a fiction, it's a fantasy. So there are always pros and cons, I think, to this Romantic inheritance. But they have had a huge, real influence on the conservationist movement. That is a really a Romantic movement, I think, it's fair to say. So yes, in the sense that these ideas about nature did seep out and have a much wider application and, you know, people like Wordsworth and Clare campaigned for real change in their lifetimes and wrote to politicians and things like that and, you know, whether it had much effect is a different question.

Noah: It's got a big political weight when we think about the French Revolution. The American Transcendentalism movement obviously grows out of Romanticism quite strongly. Just to bring it back to the British focus, when we talk about the political activism of certain Romantic members, what was the romantic impetus for political action in your view, and especially thinking about the connection between humankind and nature?

Dr Somervell: As you say, it does vary quite drastically across individual romantics, you know, when we think of the most political Romantics we probably think of Percy Shelley for example. But as I say, Wordsworth is very politically engaged and his politics changed quite a lot over his lifetime. He became much more conservative as he got older and at the same

time more interested in conserving the nature of the Lake District, for example. So there was a real radical political energy behind Romanticism related, as you say, to actual political revolutions – the Haitian, the American, the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century – and, you know, Romantic poets certainly saw themselves as having a role in that. But of course, have poets ever really held much political influence? You know, has poetry ever actually passed a law? How much has poetry actually achieved in the political sphere?

I think its influence can only be detected in much more subtle, nuanced ways in that wider cultural creep, I suppose, of poetic ideas in gradually and almost imperceptibly changing perspectives of a much wider readership, rather than Wordsworth himself getting involved and actually having much effect on the local MP, for example.

Noah: I think there's so much to bring out there. And it's so interesting how much the Romantic view pervaded sort of general societies and nature. Come back to that in a sec, but you mentioned the Lake District there, and it seems like the Lake District's a very liminal space for these Romantic poets. But there's also internal conflict between the Romantic poets, and we think about poets of the Lakes and the poets of the North. Can you just touch upon the location of these poets, were they people who lived in the cities and idealised the lakes and the hills from the cities or were they people who lived by the land and all different throughout their lives?

Dr Somervell: Absolutely yeah and of course the answer is both. As you mentioned the Lake School, so Wordsworth, Coleridge, Salvey, De Quincey, people who are associated with the Lake District, Dorothy Wordsworth of course, but even within that group there's distinctions. So Wordsworth grew up there, Coleridge grew up in the city and felt at a disadvantage as a result of that. You know, Wordsworth was obsessed with this idea that you have to grow up in nature and immersed in a natural landscape in order to develop your humanity, really. And Coleridge really felt disadvantaged because he hadn't. And then, as you mentioned, there's the second generation Romantics, you know, Byron, Shelley, Keats, much more London-based. Byron was very dismissive about the “pond poets”, as he referred to the Lake School. So there is very much an urban Romanticism and, as you say, writing about the countryside from the city is always a different exercise, always comes with different kinds of nostalgia or longing or superiority or all kinds of other approaches that are involved in that sense of separation. But then of course there are forms of nature in the city, you know, there are weeds, there are parks, there are flowers, there are trees, there are animals, you know, there's weather. That distinction is not always as clear-cut as someone like Wordsworth, I think, would pretend it is.

Noah: Thinking about that second generation of city poets, did they recognise the weeds by their feet and the creeping vines and stuff? Was that to them as transcendent, as divine nature as the hills were to Wordsworth or the lakes were to Wordsworth?

Dr Somervell: It's much harder to find examples of that kind of nature writing in the city because the sublime account of nature is so dominant in this period, that is becoming the kind of dominant view of what nature is. It's the sublime landscapes, it's particular kinds of

nature. I mean, you know, even Wordsworth writes about seeing the sunrise from Westminster Bridge, you know, there is a sense of these tiny pockets. Keats writes so many of his odes from Hampstead Heath, for example, that there are these spaces within the urban centres where you can still achieve this kind of natural connection that they're searching for, becomes more precious, it becomes more precarious, I suppose, when it is concentrated in these pockets that are even more obviously under threat from the encroaching urban space.

Noah: I think it's really interesting that we think about seeing the sunset as seeing the sublime, but I think seeing that inner city does draw on this tension between the observed and the observer. I'm just thinking of London when I was there, it's this strange tension between quite a solitary individualistic perhaps movement which is a solitary experience in nature. How does that connect with someone who's living in the city, someone who's maybe in touch with other Romantics who are also in the city? How did that self-identity foster itself in these sort of urban spaces?

Dr Somervell: That's a great question. I mean, I think it's important to remember that the idea of the solitary Romantic is really a fiction, you know, even Wordsworth has his dog with him most of the time when he's walking around supposedly on his own and he's always surrounded by friends and other poets and so on.

In the city, I suppose I'm thinking of Keats particularly, because compared to say Shelley or Byron or lots of the kind of other best known urban Romantics, Charles Lamb, people like that, Keats is probably the one who writes the most about isolation and being on his own. And I suppose for Keats it becomes a kind of solipsism, I suppose, a kind of an anguish that you are surrounded by people and yet you are inaccessible to them. You know, of course Keats writes about his idea of negative capability, that he feels he can sort of enter into any character when he's with different people, that he can empathize with anyone, he can imagine any perspective, any emotion in a particular situation. And actually, that's very destructive to your sense of self, you know, because he's like, Who am I? I can feel and think all these different things. Who actually am I? And then he, you know, he goes walking on Hampstead and, you know, hears birdsong, writes these wonderful odes about autumn and nightingale and, you know, these nature poems, but in a way they're not nature poems in the sense we might think of, because they are very abstracted, they are really about his sense of losing himself, you know. And that's the worry, I think, for someone like Keats. When you go into nature, perhaps for Wordsworth, he might say his sense of himself is bolstered by being in nature. But the danger is that you can really lose yourself in nature. You know, Keats talks about, you know, listening to bird song. He gets a sense of himself just kind of flying away with that bird, you know, or sinking into a kind of death-like sleep, losing his sense of identity. And I think that's the fear, but it's also really exhilarating. It's also, you know, potentially environmentally radical that we could lose our very kind of Romantic individualism and egocentrism by attempting to gain some other kind of encounter with the non-human world.

Noah: That really draws out and sort of problematizes criticisms of Romanticism, this egocentric, bluff and buster thing. I'm just really interested there that in the series, the theme that's come out is, and which the science actually shows, is that deeper connection to nature actually increases connection to communities and connection to people. Do you think the Romantic idea of nature ever got in the way of actual connection to nature? I'm thinking of Keats, this sort of social anxiety tension. Do you think ever this idea of what nature is, nature is pure compared to the cities and stuff, got in the way of actual posturing of human connection or is that just me being a freak?

Dr Somervell: Well, I don't know. And when you said, you know, people have been talking about a closeness to nature can kind of foster inter-human connection. Well, Wordsworth said that. He has a whole book of the *Prelude*, which is about love of nature leading to love of humankind, is his theory. You learn to love nature, you will love other people, it will foster your sympathetic feelings. And my instinct is to say that that is true, that even when there's a retreat to nature to kind of turn your back on the city or pain, I'm thinking of, for example, Charlotte Smith's poem "Beachy Head", it's an amazing Romantic poem by a wonderful poet, Charlotte Smith, where she describes Beachy Head on the South Coast, and she's turning away from her mental health problems, her very painful home life, the kind of pains of living in the social world. But actually turning to this natural setting, looking at the sea, looking at the cliffs and the birds and so on, really brings her back, I think, to a sympathy with the other people over generations, over spatial and temporal distances, who have felt the same things.

So I think even though a lot of Romantics write about retreating from people, retreating from communities, societies into the non-human world, I think what you see most of all in Smith, in Keats, in Wordsworth, is a full circle, you know, of coming back around to forms of community, local communities, rural communities of course, but also sympathy with other people who are stuck in that world of getting and spending, as Wordsworth put it.

Noah: That plays in there with the lithical aspect of Romanticism. Just moving forward a bit and think about the work you do at the moment, reflecting on climate change and eco-criticism, how do you think the Romantic precedent has affected later literature?

Dr Somervell: It's almost impossible to get a perspective on because everything is Romantic and post-Romantic. We've inherited so much this Romantic idea of nature and the suspicion of the Romantic idea of nature that it's very hard to step outside of these things. I think so much of what we take for granted about not just literature about nature, but wider cultural assumptions about nature and our relationship to it are Romantic in the negative sense, in the sense of, you know, nature and humanity being separate things, ideas about a kind of egocentric, emotional extraction from nature, you know, what nature can do for us emotionally, things like this, which might not be useful ways of thinking about nature.

At the same time, I think, you know, we have to read far more widely and deeply in Romantic literature to understand these things, not just to understand the ideas we've inherited, but to understand the problems with those ideas, you know, to understand that

these are not automatic, essential things we have to think about nature. They are historically and culturally constructed and there are alternatives and the Romantics have done so much of that thinking for us. You know, they're not going to give us answers and solutions but let's not throw away the thinking that they've already done for us. That would be my view.

Noah: Just a final question there. Has doing this changed, if you don't mind me asking, changed how you personally have seen nature and connected to nature?

Dr Somervell: I think it really has, you know, and I'm always suspicious of people who make big claims for how literature can change the way you behave towards nature. But I've noticed in my research and also in my teaching, if I spend, you know, a few hours with a class reading Romantic nature poetry, students do say, you know, slightly jokingly, that, you know, they leave and they look at a tree in a way they haven't before. I think that is a real effect that you get, you know, learning to look at things, being reminded to look at things and also to be reflective on how you're looking at something through what lens you're looking at something. I think I've certainly become much more self-reflective about my own assumptions about the environment and my relationship to it, more cynical about things certainly, but also perhaps I like to think kinder to myself and others even when I have encounters with nature that are not ideal, because there is no ideal way of relating to the external world, I don't think. There are potential problems with however you observe nature or write about it or think about it. There are always going to be slightly dubious ethical dimensions to how we do these things. And that's never going to go away. And in a way, accepting that itself isn't quite freeing.

Noah: I really enjoyed talking with Tess and found her insights fascinating. Our conversation really made me think about how we as a society, often influenced by Romantic ideas of the the sublime, have tended to put certain types of nature, or experiences with nature, on a pedestal, and how this perhaps has caused us to take more banal experiences with nature almost for granted. However, I hope that mine and Tessa's conversation showed that the Romantic view of nature is much more complicated than this. Some thinkers have attributed the emergence and popularity of Romanticism with increased individualism, the sort of individualism that arguably is the reason we are currently confronted with so many ecological crises. However, while there might be some truth in this, I also think that the Romantic view can lend itself to thinking in a more familial, collective way. The Romantics often saw nature as a psychological or moral refuge and I think that even if we want to expand our ideas about nature beyond this, recognising the importance of nature as a psychological space, perhaps even the place in which we can reset or rediscover our morality, can help us to see and respect not only the value of nature in itself, but our utter dependence upon it. We can simultaneously come to realize that while we revere magnificent vistas or are profoundly affected by experiences of the sublime, we are also deeply entangled within the more mundane cycles of life. And as such, Romanticism can be an impetus not only to recognize our place within the natural world but also crucially to preserve it.

Thank you for joining me for this episode and I look forward to seeing you in the next where I meet with Dr. Molly Becker and we discuss how the American consciousness has been formed in relation to nature and the natural landscape, and we talk about naturalism, a very different view of nature to the romantic one.

Thank you, and until then, I've been Noah and this has been Entanglements.

Credits: Written, produced, presented and edited by me, Noah Rouse, on behalf of the Jesus College Jesus College Intellectual Forum. Original music by Xanthe Evans.