

CBCS

Semester - II

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British Romantic Literature

Samuel Taylor Coleridge - This Lime-tree Bower my Prison

[Addressed to Charles Lamb, of the India House, London]

Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,
This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost
Beauties and feelings, such as would have been
Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
Had dimm'd mine eyes to blindness! They, meanwhile,
Friends, whom I never more may meet again,
On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,
To that still roaring dell, of which I told;
The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep,
And only speckled by the mid-day sun;
Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock
Flings arching like a bridge;—that branchless ash,
Unsun'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves
Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,
Fann'd by the water-fall! and there my friends

Behold the dark green file of long lank weeds,
That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)
Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge
Of the blue clay-stone.

Now, my friends emerge

Beneath the wide wide Heaven—and view again
The many-steeped tract magnificent
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
Of purple shadow! Yes! they wander on
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,
My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined
And hunger'd after Nature, many a year,
In the great City pent, winning thy way
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
And strange calamity! Ah! slowly sink
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue Ocean! So my friend

Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
Spirits perceive his presence.

A delight

Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
As I myself were there! Nor in this bower,
This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd
Much that has sooth'd me. Pale beneath the blaze
Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd
Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
The shadow of the leaf and stem above
Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree
Was richly ting'd, and a deep radiance lay
Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps
Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass
Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue
Through the late twilight: and though now the bat
Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,
Yet still the solitary humble-bee

Sings in the bean-flower! Henceforth I shall know
That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
No waste so vacant, but may well employ
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes
'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,
That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
With lively joy the joys we cannot share.
My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last rook
Beat its straight path along the dusky air
Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing
(Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,
While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all was still,
Flew creaking o'er thy head, and had a charm
For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

Background & Summary:

Romantic poets such as Coleridge often protested that the abstractions of earlier times (such as Virtues and Principles) lacked meaning for their age. Accordingly, when they attempted to describe and define great issues and forces, they took great pains to describe those forces in concrete situations, often in the actual situations and places in which the poets themselves learned about them. It is therefore very important in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” that Coleridge sets the scene literally in the backyard of the house he and his wife were renting in Nether Stowey, Somerset. One has no reason to doubt the outlines of the story; in June, 1797, the poet had something like the experience he describes in which his mind moved from irritation, to imagination, to sympathy, to vivid sensations of the backyard in which he was sitting.

Divided into three verse paragraphs, the poem *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison* by S.T. Coleridge is a seventy-six lines poem, wherein the speaker is none other than the poet himself. Addressed to Charles Lamb (one of Coleridge’s friends), the poem first shows poet’s happiness and excitement at the arrival of his friends, but as it progresses, we find his happiness turning into resentment and helplessness for not accompanying his friend, due to an accident that he met with in the evening of the same day when his friends were planning to go for a walk outside for a few hours.

Analysis :

“Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,
This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost
Beauties and feelings, such as would have been
Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
Had dimm’d mine eyes to blindness! They, meanwhile,
Friends, whom I never more may meet again,
On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,

To that still roaring dell, of which I told;
The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep,
And only speckled by the mid-day sun;
Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock
Flings arching like a bridge;—that branchless ash,
Unsun'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves
Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,
Fann'd by the water-fall! and there my friends
Behold the dark green file of long lank weeds,
That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)
Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge
Of the blue clay-stone.”

As we read the poem we may feel that this is a “conversation poem,” in actuality, it is a lyrically dramatic poem the poet composed when some of his long-expected friends visited his cottage. On the arrival of his friends, the poet was very excited, but accidentally he met with an accident, because of which he could not walk during all their stay. One evening, when he was left behind by his friends who went walking for a few hours, he wrote the following lines in the garden-bower. Through these lines the speaker or the poet not only tried to vent out his frustration of not accompanying his friends, but he also praised the beauties of Nature by keeping his feet into the shoes of his friend, Charles Lamb. At the start of the poem, the tone is bitter and frustrated, and the poet has very well depicted it when he says: “Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,/This lime-tree bower my prison!”

In this stanza, we also find the poet comparing the lime tree to the walls or bars of a prison, which is functioning as a hurdle, and stopping him to accompany his friends. Comparing the beautiful garden of lime-trees to a prison, the poet feels completely crippled for being unable to view all the beautiful things that he too could have enjoyed if he had not met with an accident that evening. Despite his inability to walk, the poet still made himself able to view the natural beauty by putting the shoes of his friends that is; by imagining himself in the company of his

friends, and enjoying the natural beauty encompassing him. Within the imagination, the poet described it in a very realistic way. But as we move close to the end of first stanza we find the tone of the poem getting more vivid towards the nature. So, the element of frustration and disappointment seems to be coming down at the end of the first stanza.

“Now, my friends emerge
Beneath the wide wide Heaven—and view again
The many-steepled tract magnificent
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
Of purple shadow! Yes! they wander on
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,
My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined
And hunger’d after Nature, many a year,
In the great City pent, winning thy way
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
And strange calamity! Ah! slowly sink
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue Ocean! So my friend
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes

Spirits perceive his presence.”

In the second stanza, we find the poet using a number of images of nature and similes. The poem here turns into an imaginative journey as the poet begins to use sensuous description and tactile imagery. The poet becomes so much excited in this stanza that he shouts “Yes!”, and begins to imagine as if he himself is with them. While imagining the natural beauty, the poet thinks that his friend, Charles would be happier to see these beautiful natural sights because the latter had been busy in the hustle-bustle of city life that these beautiful natural sights would really appeal his eyes, and please his heart. The poet therefore gives instructions to the nature to bring out and show her best sights so that his friend, Charles could also enjoy viewing the true spirit of God. For example; he requests the Sun to “slowly sink,” the flowers to “shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,” and the clouds to “richlier burn”. Though all these natural things act at their own, the poet here wants them to perform better than before because his friend, Charles had come to visit him. Here, the poet, in fact, becomes enamoured with the beauty around him, which is intensely an emotional reaction to nature, brought to light using the exclamation marks all through the poem. The poet now no longer views the bower as a prison. Similar to the first stanza, as we move closer to the end of the second stanza, we find the poet introducing the notion of God’s presence in the entire natural world, and exploring the notion of the wonder of God’s creation. The main idea poet wants to convey through the above verses is that there is presence of God in nature.

“A delight

Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad

As I myself were there! Nor in this bower,

This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark’d

Much that has sooth’d me. Pale beneath the blaze

Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch’d

Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov’d to see

The shadow of the leaf and stem above
Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree
Was richly ting'd, and a deep radiance lay
Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps
Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass
Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue
Through the late twilight: and though now the bat
Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,
Yet still the solitary humble-bee
Sings in the bean-flower! Henceforth I shall know
That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
No waste so vacant, but may well employ
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes
'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,
That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
With lively joy the joys we cannot share.
My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last rook
Beat its straight path along the dusky air
Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing
(Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,
While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all was still,
Flew creaking o'er thy head, and had a charm
For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
No sound is dissonant which tells of Life."

In this third and last extract of the poem, the poet's imaginations come back to the lime-tree bower and we find him emotionally reacting to the natural world surrounding him. In this section, we also find his transformed perception towards his surroundings and his deep appreciation for it. Here the poet is shown personifying nature as his friend. Now he doesn't view himself as a prisoner in the lime-tree bower that he regarded it as a prison earlier. Though, in actuality, there has been no change in his surroundings and his situation, rather it is just a change in his perspective that causes this transformation. Here we find the poet seeing and appreciating the actual nature of his surroundings, instead the ideal and imagined nature. He now brings to us the real and vivid "foliage," the wheeling "bat," the "walnut-tree," and "the solitary humble-bee".

However, we cannot give whole credit to the poet's imagination; the use of imagery by him also makes it clear that he has been deeply affected by nature. For example, the lines like "keep the heart / Awake to Love and Beauty!" and "No sound is dissonant which tells of Life", all suggest that the poet has great regards for nature and its qualities. And it's only due to his nature that he is prompted towards his imaginary journey. The poem comes to an end with the impression of an experience of freedom and spirituality that according to the poet can be achieved through nature. It cannot be achieved by being confined in the four walls of the city, just as the poet's friend, Charles experiences.

The poem takes very seriously the importance of friendship. Coleridge is unhappy about being left behind. He is hurt by the thought that he may never see his friends again, but his spirits revive when he thinks of Lamb. Just as important is the poem's insistence on the value of experiencing nature. Coleridge envies his friends' sensations; he remembers the places they will visit, then he looks at the heavens and at the trees in his own bower. Although these sensations are almost exclusively natural and are primarily visual, they are not simply beautiful descriptions of trees and flowers. We can see the unlovely "dark green file of long lank weeds" as well as "the smooth clear blue" of the sea. The images are of a mixed sort—arresting and detailed rather than conventionally beautiful.

Coleridge is interested in the effects of a person's real experiences of nature—not prettified and not sensationalized. In this poem, he illustrates how such experiences (and memories of them) can lead one to intuitions that are beyond nature as one usually thinks of it; the reader may think that Coleridge is vague about these matters. He says at the end of the second verse paragraph that when he gazed at a “wide landscape” it began to seem somewhat insubstantial (“Less gross than bodily”) and more and more like the outward manifestation (the “veil”) of “the Almighty Spirit.”

Critical Comment:

In this poem Coleridge recapitulates an intellectual development from an Enlightenment conception of nature as a set of objective qualities of beauty and truth through a transitional apprehension of nature as a purely visual object, a series of pictures and landscapes, to a symbolic apprehension of nature as an emotional and moral power. The poem can be seen as a paradigm of the historical movement in England from an objective to a subjective aesthetics at the end of the eighteenth century. Of course, this poem functions in other ways as well: as a meditative consolation for Charles Lamb, as a mimetic representation of the systolic rhythms of consciousness, as a biographical document.

Coleridge begins the poem by recording his profound conviction of loss: the loss of his friends and their loving companionship (“they are gone”), and equally painful, the loss of aesthetic pleasures, of “Beauties and feelings, such as would have been / Most sweet to my remembrance even when age / Had dimm'd my eyes to blindness!” Initially, Coleridge presents nature in Locke's quantitative terms, as the compendium of objective qualities (“beauties”) which cause sensations of pleasure (“feelings”). These sensations then become ideas that can be stored up in the memory for future gratification, even when the external object or beauty (an observed scene) is no longer available (because the seeing eyes are gone, blinded). This concept of nature as a store-house of sense data that can cause pleasurable sensations and thus give rise to ideas of beauty which are associated by the rational memory with other examples of beauty is the basis of eighteenth-century academic art theory. But Coleridge, even as he intensifies his sense of loss (these are friends “whom I never more may meet again”), turns abruptly away from this quantitative conception of nature. Exercising his sympathetic imagination, the power Lord

Shaftesbury had hailed as the basis of moral feeling, Coleridge mentally joins his friends on their walking tour through the Quantock hills along the coast of Somerset. He not only imagines their pleased responses to the scenery ("They . . . On springy heath, along the hill-top edge, / Wander in gladness"), but he also casts himself as their guide, present in their minds (if not physically beside them) as a directing force. For they now "wind down, perchance, / To that still roaring dell, of which I told". According to William Gilpin, a critic, these romantic spots are generally impervious. When they are a little more open, so as to allow a narrow footpath to stray among them, they are the most beloved haunts of solitude and meditations; and of all the parts of this delightful scenery, afford the most refreshing refuge from noon-tide heat.

Coleridge's confidence that he has provided his friends with such pleasures is located in his use of "behold": "and there my friends / Behold the dark green file of long, lank weeds, / That all at once (a most fantastic sight!) / Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge / Of the blue clay-stone." In this context, "behold" may function in the imperative as well as the indicative mode. This syntactic undercurrent, strengthened by the prominent position (and capitalization) given to 'Behold,' suggests an almost Biblical revelation of an intense aesthetic delight.

Coleridge then guides his friends up the ladder of the hierarchically ordered aesthetic experiences of eighteenth-century academic art theory, from the picturesque through the beautiful to the sublime. The introduction of a third landscape into the revised version of "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," placed between the picturesque dell and the sublime sunset, strongly suggests that Coleridge was thinking of these academic classifications in his final meditation upon man's relation to nature. Significantly, Coleridge is also leading his friends further into the picture of nature. The narrow, deep dell which, once his friends had wound their way down into it, constituted the total landscape, now becomes, as his friends emerge from it, only the foreground of more extensive scene. Coleridge's friends now enter the middle-ground of a well-composed landscape:

Now, my friends emerge

Beneath the wide wide Heaven - and view again

The many – steeped tract magnificent
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
Of purple shadow!

Beyond this middle ground of rolling hills, open meadows, and coastal villages bounded by the sea lies the background or far distance of the horizon, behind which the setting sun sinks, filling the sky with color. The next two landscapes the friends view are excellent examples of what Edmund Burke had classified, respectively, as the beautiful and the sublime in his famous *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Burke had grounded his aesthetic theory on a psychology of pleasure and pain. Man's most pleasurable sensations, he argued, are derived from the affirmation and protection of life; hence those "qualities in things which induce in us a sense of affection and tenderness" and which arouse our sexual instinct toward procreation are beautiful. Burke went on to identify the qualities of the beautiful as smoothness, gradual variation and flowing lines, smallness, delicacy, and "clean and fair" colors in their "milder" shades. The beautiful, then, is characterized by smooth, undulating curves; bright, clear colors; balanced, even symmetrical, compositions; and regular, distinctly defined forms. Coleridge's "many-steeped tract magnificent" has many of the characteristics of the beautiful, as Burke enumerated them. The colors are bright and fair: sunlit green meadows, "clear blue" sea, bright white sail and purple shadows on the sea. The objects in this scene - the spires of the churches, the sails of the boat - are small, yet clearly defined. The lines of the landscape undulate sensuously, from the rolling hilltops and level meadows, to the curves of coast and offshore islands. The sea is "smooth." And Coleridge is careful to balance his composition: two Isles of purple shadow are symmetrically divided by a slip of clear blue sea.

Coleridge emphasizes that his friends respond to this beautiful scene with feelings of affection and tenderness: "Yes! they wander on / In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad, / My gentle-hearted Charles!" Lamb's emotional delight in

the landscape is intensified, Coleridge then suggests, by the contrast of this present pleasure with past pain: both the pain of living in a city cut off from nature (a projection of Coleridge's own hostility to urban environments and past unhappiness at Christ's Hospital onto Lamb) and the more powerful and particular pain of Lamb's "strange calamity," his sister's murder of his mother. The relationship of such "evil and pain and strange calamity" to the pleasure caused by the landscape can be perceived only as a contrast: aesthetic delight (provided by nature) is separate from the moral life ("in the great City pent, winning thy way/ With sad yet patient soul, through evil").

The allusion to Lamb's "strange calamity," which in prospect threatens his life, leads appropriately to the last landscape presented to Coleridge's friends, a sublime sunset. Edmund Burke had characterized the sublime as a response to a powerful idea of pain or possible threat to one's life, when one also knows that one is not in real danger. Burke had further defined the typical qualities of a sublime landscape as greatness of dimension (especially as contrasted with the finite limits of the human body) which gives rise to an idea of infinity; obscurity (which blurs the definition of boundaries); profound darkness or intense light ("Extreme light, by overcoming the organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness"; hence dark or intensely bright colors; and sudden, sharp angles. Confronted with such overwhelming objects as the Alps, huge dark caves, a blinding sunset, or a towering, gloomy ruin, the human mind first experiences terror or fear and then, as its instinct of self-preservation is gradually relaxed, astonishment ("that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended with some degree of horror"), admiration, reverence, and respect. From the aesthetic contemplation of the sublime, one is thus led, according to Burke, to a sensible impression of the Deity by whose power these magnificent scenes are created.

Coleridge traces the same mental progression from an aesthetic perception of the sublime (in this case, an object-illuminating and then obliterating sunset) to a religious perception of a divine power:

Ah! slowly sink

Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!

Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue Ocean! So my friend
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
Spirits perceive his presence

Coleridge here invokes a Burkean sublime landscape (it is "wide," infused with a "kindling" light, and glowing with ever-brightening, ever-richer shades of purple, yellow, and blue). But Coleridge also corrects Burke by redefining the psychological nature of sublime vision. Coleridge's experience of the infinite, as refracted through Charles Lamb ("So my friend . . . may stand, as I have stood"), is attended not by fear and anxiety but by "deep joy." And Coleridge's astonished ("struck") apprehension of a world "less gross than bodily" is a positive vision of a Berkeleian God, of a holy Spirit or mental power that creates and animates both the natural landscape and man. Both Charles Lamb and Coleridge apprehend the presence of a divine force in nature and in their own selves. This union of man and God is implied linguistically by Coleridge's repetition of the word "Spirit" to refer both to God ("Almighty Spirit") and to human beings "Spirits").

In contrast to such overtly Burkean "sublime" sunsets, Coleridge's "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" initiates a new and more positive conception of the sublime in both poetry and painting. For Coleridge, a sublime sunset is accompanied, not by fear and terror, but by a deep awe and a profound joy. Coleridge's concept of a positive sublime thus opens the way both to Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and "The Prelude" and to the visual effects of many of Turner's late oils and water-colours. The perception of a holy life-force flowing through

nature and man that causes the "deep joy" Coleridge has felt in the past as well as the sudden "delight" he now experiences in his lime-tree bower. And this joy-bringing perception rests on a denial of rational boundaries: between foregrounds, middle grounds, and distances, between here and there, between past and present and future, between self and other. In the last section of the poem, Coleridge is emotionally united with Charles Lamb ("and I am glad / As I myself were there!"), just as he has previously been spatially identified with him ("So my friend . . . may stand, as I have stood"). The distance between the alienated self (Coleridge alone in his lime-tree "prison," feeling deprived and depressed) and the other (Lamb and the Wordsworths engaging in a delightful walking tour) has been annihilated by Coleridge's imaginative capacity to empathically become his friend. That Coleridge wished to emphasize this imaginative ability to live through another person is suggested by his revision of the poem. Whereas the original version of the poem sent to Robert Southey ended by invoking "my Sister & my Friends," the final version focuses uniquely upon the "gentle-hearted Charles." Coleridge has thus identified Charles alone as his surrogate self in the poem, feeling as Coleridge feels, responding as Coleridge responds. And this same imaginative capacity to half-perceive and half-create and thus to enter into the life of the world around one, to perform what Keats later called "a Greeting of the Spirit" (which is the foundation of a Romantic phenomenology), now enables Coleridge to apprehend his prison as an open space. The lime-tree bower, like all living things, participates in that same divine energy that animates both human beings and nature. The same sublime sunlight that made Lamb's (and Coleridge's past) senses swim, and that finally unveiled the presence of the Almighty Spirit, also radiates through the lime-tree bower.

The poem thus retraces the mind's passage from an aesthetic, distanced, and in Paul de Man's sense of the term, "allegorical" (Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*) perception of nature as a separate text or set of signs (the categories of the picturesque, the beautiful, the sublime) to an affirmation of the possibility of symbolic perception, of a translucence of the general in the particular and the eternal in the temporal. The specific symbol generated by Coleridge's empathic perception is the last black rook crossing the sky. As homely and mundane as the lime-tree bower and the humble-

bee, as solitary as the deserted poet, the creaking rook calls forth an intense and religious response:

when the last rook

Beat its straight path along the dusky air

Homewards , I *blest it!*

And the bridging flight of the rook spatially joins what Coleridge had already imaginatively united: himself and Charles Lamb; the lime-tree bower and the sublime sunset; the visible and the invisible (the black rook now vanishes "in light"); man and nature and the divine:

deeming its black wing

(Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)

Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,

While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all was still,

Flew creaking o'er thy head, and had a charm

For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom

No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

The poem's concluding assertion, "No sound is dissonant which tells of Life," both defines the passage that Coleridge - and perhaps his audience as well - has made (from an aesthetic to a moral response to nature) and also affirms the ultimate harmony of life itself. The poem thus functions both as a consolation for the deserted poet and for Charles Lamb (the evil and pain they have suffered are part of a grander holy life) and as a description of a consciousness that perceives - beyond the Enlightenment's categories of English landscape - an underlying and unifying divine power energizing nature and humanity alike.

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