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

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 part

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

brings out in him, right? That's a very common critique of what the R

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

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.