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“Or in the Incestuous Pleasure of His Bed”: An Eco-Feminist Approach to Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*

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Abstract

In his autobiographical account of “the growth of a poet’s mind”, *The Prelude*, Wordsworth portrays Nature as a mother and a nurse, both giving birth to and feeding his soul with best nourishments. But then, by the end of the poem, we witness the poet praising his Imagination for its power to govern the relations of things in Nature and to far transcend Nature’s capacity to create. This is a story that almost overlaps with that of Gaia and Uranus, where the son rapes the Earth-Mother and establishes his own rule over her. “The Stolen Boat” and the “Snowdon” episodes are often interpreted along this line, pointing to the virile desire directed at Mother Nature. The child poet who fails in his first attempt succeeds in the end. But there is another passage that seems somehow to have escaped the attention of the critics: the episode about crossing the Alps, where the poet, -now a young man- though he fails again, comes very close to realizing his dream. Apart from contributing to the readings of the much discussed two passages, the present article introduces this intermediary episode as an eco-erotic passage that connects the two assaults and gives coherence to Wordsworth’s story of growing out of dependence to self-sufficiency.

Keywords: Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Eco-Feminism, Nature, Imagination

“Onun Günah Yatağında Hazlar İçinde”: Wordsworth’ün *Prelüd*’üne Eko-Feminist Bir Yaklaşım

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Özet

Bir şairin zihinsel gelişimini konu alan otobiyografik eseri Prelüd’de Wordsworth Tabiat’ı hem kendisini doğuran bir anne hem de en besleyici gıdalarla doyuran dadı olarak resmeder. Ancak, şiirin sonunda İmgelemine Tabiattaki varlıkların ilişkilerini belirleme gücünden dolayı göklere çıkarır, hatta bunun Tabiat’ın yaratma kapasitesinden de üstün bir güç olduğunu iddia eder. Bu hikâye oğulun Toprak-Ana’yı iğfal ederek ona hükmettiği Gaia ve Üranüs efsanesine benzer. “Çalınan Kayık” ve “Snowdon” bölümleri çoğunluk bu doğrultuda yorumlanır, bu dizelerdeki Tabiat Ana’ya yönelmiş eril arzuya işaret edilir. İlk denemesinde başarısızlığa uğrayan çocuk şair sonuncusunda amacına ulaşmaktadır. Ama eleştirmenlerin nasılsa gözünden kaçmış bir bölüm daha var ki, burada, -artık genç bir erkek olan- şair yine hayal kırıklığına uğrasa da, rüyasını gerçekleştirmeye epeyce yaklaşır. Çok tartışılan söz konusu iki bölümün okumalarına aynı yönde yapacağı katkılarının dışında, bu makale, iki saldırıyı birleştirerek Wordsworth’ün bağımlılıktan kendine yeterliliğe varışına dair hikâyesini bütünleyen aradaki bu eko-erotik pasaja dikkat çekmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Wordsworth, *Prelüd*, Eko-Feminis, Tabiat, İmgelem

Wordsworth's view of oneness of man and Nature is, in many ways, revolutionary. However, there are also reasons to criticize him for falling into the same old trap of hierarchically organized value dualisms concerning culture and nature, mind and body or man and woman, in which the second of each pair can only serve as auxiliary to the first. Hence, according to Sharon R. Yang, remembering Wordsworth's plans in his "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads", "to bind together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society" Virginia Woolf suggests that he failed because of his too firm attachment to the patriarchal system.¹ In support of this view, Yang says,

The narrator [of *The Prelude*] holds up the mother of the illegitimate child of Book 7 for our admiration for not being contaminated by experience despite her 'fall'. He celebrates her for living her life like a pastoral innocent, while devoting herself entirely to her child. Thus Wordsworth seeks to redeem her by confining her within two traditional roles: inexperienced child/woman or motherly Angel in the House.²

This angel for Wordsworth is his sister Dorothy, the embodiment of Natural innocence who remained untainted thanks to her exclusion from the male world of education, power and art, which the poet sees as both her and his salvation. Making this point, Yang concludes that "Rather than kill the Angel in the House, as Woolf asserted in 'Professions for Women' that all women must do, Wordsworth presents her preservation as a boon to men."³ This valorizing of man over woman is not only a gender-related matter but has wider implications, and means that, by doing so, Wordsworth was at the same time holding up culture and mind against nature and body, as is best seen in his *The Prelude*, published posthumously.

In this autobiographical account, Wordsworth, who lost his mother at an early age, expresses his gratefulness to Nature, which he portrays as a mother and a nurse, both giving birth to him and feeding his soul with best nourishments. But towards the end of the poem, we witness the poet praising Imagination (a faculty of the mind) for its power to govern the relations of things in Nature and to far transcend Nature's capacity to create.

Wordsworth's attempts to redeem nature –to integrate it with the rhythms of his own consciousness- finally led him to a vision of self-in-nature, which all but obscures the conventional imagery and existence of the natural world, turning that world rather into an almost abstract

¹ Sharon R. Yang. "Subversion of 'The Prelude' in *Jacob's Room* or the Woolf Who Cried Wordsworth" *Midwest Quarterly* Vol.45 (2004): 332.

² Ibid., 334.

³ Ibid., 335.

principle of otherness, of alternate resistance and support to the life of the mind, whose sensory qualities are important mainly for their functioning within this eternal give and take.⁴

In a poem about “the growth of a poet’s mind”, this change of attitude might be explained as a necessary step for the poet to reach maturity and claim self-sufficient existence. According to Onorato: “Wordsworth was unconsciously seeking to free himself from his obsession with the mother and from the very bondage to Nature he was celebrating”.⁵ However, to be able to achieve that, he first has to fight against the maternal grip, overcome that and even subdue the mother. Hence, Sitterton identifies the famous “Stolen Boat” episode in Book 1 (lines 357-388) and the “Snowdon” episode in Book 14 (lines 28-76) as “scenes themselves about mastery”,⁶ which doubtlessly involve sexual overpowering, as “although love of nature may not be the same as love for a woman, Wordsworth overinvests his libido upon the natural world as compensation for losing his mother”.⁷ The former attempt by the child poet is a complete failure but the latter one by mature Wordsworth ends with success. These two passages easily lend themselves to such a reading. However, there is another passage equally laden with incestuous desire that almost comes to fulfilment but that seems somehow to escape the notice of critics: the episode about crossing the Alps. This episode in Book 6 (lines 570-590), connecting the two attempts reveals that the poet’s struggle against maternal domination is a continuous effort and completes the story, which immediately calls to mind the myth of Gaia and Uranus. Gaia was the Mother Earth born out of Chaos, emptiness. Without any male intervention, she gave birth to Uranus, who later raped his mother and began to rule over her. With this parallel in mind, this paper aims to do a close reading of the eco-erotic passages (namely the Boat Stealing, Crossing the Alps and Snowdon episodes) and argue that, despite all his Nature worship and his generous eulogy for his sister Dorothy in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth fails to form with Nature a relationship that passes beyond the patriarchal pattern.

Boat Stealing

⁴ Frank D. McConnel, *The Confessional Imagination: A reading of WW’s Prelude*. (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), 5.

⁵ Richard J. Onorato, *The Character of the Poet*, quoted in Joseph C. Jr. Sitterton, “Oedipus in the Stolen Boat: Psychoanalysis and Subjectivity in ‘The Prelude’”. *Studies in Philology*, 86, no.1 (1989): 96.

⁶ Joseph C. Jr. Sitterton, “Oedipus in the Stolen Boat: Psychoanalysis and Subjectivity in ‘The Prelude’”. *Studies in Philology*, 86, no.1 (1989): 96.

⁷ Wilson, Douglas B. *The Romantic Dream: Wordsworth and the Poetics of the Unconscious*. (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 64.

One summer evening (led by her) I found
 A little Boat tied to a Willow-tree
 Within a rocky cave, its usual home.
 Straight I unloosed her chain, and, stepping in,
 Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth
 And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice
 Of mountain-echoes did my Boat move on,
 Leaving behind her still, on either side,
 Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
 Until they melted all into one track
 Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,
 (Proud of his skill) to reach a chosen point
 With an unswerving line, I fixed my view
 Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,
 The horizon's utmost boundary; for above
 Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
 She was an elfin Pinnacle; lustily
 I dipped my oars into the silent Lake,
 And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
 Went heaving through the Water like a swan:
 When, from behind that craggy Steep, till then
 The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
 As if with voluntary power instinct
 Upreared its head. -- I struck, and struck again,
 And, growing still in stature, the grim Shape
 Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
 For so it seemed, with a purpose of its own

And measured motion like a living Thing,
 Strode after me.⁸

These lines are often interpreted as the expression of a crime and the feeling of guilt that follows, as in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". The boy is around 10 at that time, just at the threshold of sexual awakening, when

⁸ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, the four texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1995). (All the references are to the 1850 version unless stated otherwise.)

he begins to grow curious of adult pleasures. And in line with Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, by "an act of stealth," he tries to unite with the mother, here symbolized by the boat, whose shape is reminiscent of female genitals. He begins by stating that he was "led by her" that is by Nature, (In fact, in the 1805 version line 372, he says "surely I was led by her") just like a boy being taught the adult ways by an experienced woman. All the while, he is worriedly cognizant of the seriousness of his crime. And therefore, his eyes are fixed "Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,/The horizon's utmost boundary," expecting any time something to follow behind him. This fixed look in his eyes is also akin to the blank, mesmerized fixation that can be observed in someone completely concentrated on masturbational satisfaction. In psychoanalytic theory, water is female and the oars dipping into the lake unmistakably mimic sexual intercourse. The fact that the boat glides in water smoothly like a swan tells us that all is fine with the forbidden play of the youngster only until the third party of Freudian theory, the envious father bursts into the scene to catch the boy in the act. The huge black peak that uprears its head is the enraged father. The repeated "I struck and struck again" is expressive of the boy's hurry to finish as soon as possible. Deeply saturated in guilt and fear, the boy, in the end, takes the boat back to its place. In short, as Friedman also agrees, "The episode of stealing the boat...offers the clearest example of felt paternal retribution for childish egotistic desire, desire in part for the mother..."⁹

Another time-spot, a floating piece of epiphanic moment, seems to support such a reading based on the Oedipal conflict: In this part, (Book 12, Lines 289-311) Wordsworth describes a scene on a crag, where he is waiting for the horses their father will send to take him and his two brothers from school for Christmas. When the horses delay, he wishes for their earlier arrival. When his father dies a short time after, David E. Simpson comments, "The thirteen year old made the fallacious connection that children often make between family tragedy and their own behaviour: that some trivial disobedience on their part is the cause of the disaster," and then his wish "comes to seem as if it involved also a wish that the moment of bereavement should come sooner".¹⁰

Crossing the Alps

The only track now visible was one

⁹ Michael H. Friedman, *The Making of a Tory Humanist* quoted in David Ellis, *Wordsworth, Freud, and the Spots of Time: Interpretation in The Prelude*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 40.

¹⁰ David. E Simpson, "The Spots of Time: Spaces for Refiguring" *William Wordsworth's 'The Prelude*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 141.

That from the torrent's further brink held forth
 Conspicuous invitation to ascend
 A lofty mountain. After a brief delay
 Crossing the unbridged stream, that road we took,
 And clomb with eagerness, till anxious fears
 Intruded, for we failed to overtake
 Our comrades gone before. By fortunate chance,
 While every moment added doubt to doubt,
 A peasant met us, from whose mouth we learned
 That to the spot which had perplexed us first
 We must descend, and there should find the road,
 Which in the stony channel of the stream
 Lay a few steps, and then along its banks;
 And that our future course, all plain to sight,
 Was downwards, with the current of that stream.
 Loth to believe what we so grieved to hear,
 For still we had hopes that pointed to the clouds,
 We questioned him again, and yet again;
 But every word from the peasant's lips
 Came in reply, translated by our feelings,
 Ended in this, -that we had crossed the Alps.

It seems that the union with nature, which could not be realized in the boat-stealing episode again evades the poet when he is a young man, and the lines above express a displacement of sexual disappointment in Freudian terms. First, he interprets the way leading to the lofty mountain as a "conspicuous invitation", as if by a woman who tries to tempt a man. The fact that the road lies behind an "unbridged" river is a warning that this road is not used very often and so the assumed woman is not tamed, which must increase the excitement of the love game. Hence the poet and his friend climb with "eagerness", which reminds us the boy in the boat episode who rows "lustily", both acts requiring muscular effort. But not long after, when they "still had hopes that pointed to the clouds," they learn from a peasant that they must actually go down the path rather than climb up. The clouds here with their color and potential wetness might be taken to represent the semen produced at the climax of sexual satisfaction the young poet hopes to have at the top of the mountain. But the arousal is left incomplete when they are diverted from their route. Though male, considering the possibility that spirits of the Earth might take any form they like, the peasant must be aligned with Nature. The fact that rather than saying "we met a peasant," Wordsworth says, "a peasant met us" seems to support such a reading that imagines this man as an active agent of Mother Earth, trying to defend herself. They don't want to believe what they

hear from the peasant's "mouth", but every word that falls from his "lips" disappoint them more. It is important that although he never uses these words in his 1805 version, Wordsworth focuses his attention in the 1850 version of "The Prelude" on the mouth and the lips of the peasant. Rather than accidental, this must be a conscious choice increasing the corporality of the experience. What the peasant further says induces grief in the young men as they find out that they had crossed the Alps without realizing it, because being aware of the experience is important to Wordsworth, as *The Prelude* is "an exemplary Romantic text which considers the fully self-knowing and fully imaginative subject an attractive phantasy of omnipotence".¹¹ Yet, according to *Borderers*, a play by Wordsworth, "genuine consciousness of self [...] is born of betrayal, is linked to the unwitting commission of a crime, a crime essentially against nature; and is a stage (however dangerous) in the growth of the mind [...] in its passage toward individuation, or from a morality based on 'nature' to one based on the autonomous self".¹²

Their feeling of dismay is understandable since love making is an act of the mind as much as the body, and it is the consciousness that increases the pleasure. When they were hoping to reach the peaks of pleasure overlooking the whole body of the mountain from her tops which they would have conquered, they were led to the plain through short cuts. In "we questioned him again and yet again", there is a parallel repetition to the rowing boy's "I struck, and struck again", which is also reflected in the grammar with the omission of the subject (in both) in the second part of the utterance so as to charge the line with more energy. However, the three verbal structures used consecutively in the lines that follow absorb all the life force of the sentence, which - as the youth come to the realization of what happened - terminates in a lethargic whimper: "But every word from the peasant's lips / Came in reply, translated by our feelings, / Ended in this, -that we had crossed the Alps". The word "ended" used for the peasant's reply also refers to the ending of the young men's vigor. Wordsworth defines this feeling as "the melancholy slackening that ensued/Upon the tidings by the peasant given" (lines 617-618), but in our sexual terminology, this is a premature orgasm that falls far too short of the sublime experience a perfect union might bring and that is the melancholy of aborted expectations.

Not surprisingly, just as a lover who feels he is lacking in bed seeks comfort in his intellectual merits, the poet recites a long eulogy to his Imagination

¹¹ Sitterton, "Oedipus in the Stolen Boat: Psychoanalysis and Subjectivity in 'The Prelude'", 98.

¹² Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry* (London: Harvard University Press, 1987), 128-129.

immediately after the above passage. "Imagination...That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss/Like unfathered vapour." The fact that this vapour is unfathered points to the parallel between Imagination and Uranus, who is also born of Gaia without the mediation of a father, a parallel which supports Warren Stevenson's comment that Wordsworth's "deepest desire was to become his own father and patriarch, the better to replace and paradoxically identify with the Orthodox God with whom he was, throughout much of his life, consciously or unconsciously in contention".¹³ Wordsworth addresses Imagination with the words "I was lost; / Halted without an effort to break through;/But to my conscious soul I now can say /'I recognize thy glory.'" Nature deceives, it does not lead to eternal heights. It is through the Imagination that man can reach infinity.

Snowdon

The Moon hung naked in a firmament
Of azure without cloud, and at my feet
Rested a silent sea of hoary mist.
A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
All over this still ocean; and beyond,
Far, far beyond, the solid vapours stretched,
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
Into the main Atlantic, that appeared
To dwindle, and give up his majesty,
Usurped upon far as the sight could reach.
Not so the ethereal vault; encroachment none
Was there, nor loss;

.....save that through a rift—
Not distant from the shore whereon we stood,
A fixed, abysmal, gloomy, breathing-place—
Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams
Innumerable, roaring with one voice!

Heard over earth and sea, and, in that hour,
For so it seemed, felt by the starry heavens.

.....

¹³ Warren Stevenson, *Romanticism and the Androgynous Sublime* (London: Associated University Press, 1996), 62

There I beheld the emblem of a mind
 That feeds upon infinity, that broods
 Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
 Its voices issuing forth to silent light
 In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
 By recognitions of transcendent power,
 In sense conducting to ideal form,
 In soul of more than mortal privilege.

One function, above all, of such a mind
 Had Nature shadowed there, by putting forth,
 'Mid circumstances awful and sublime,

That mutual domination which she loves
 To exert upon the face of outward things

In this episode, we see the poet eventually having reached the state to which all romantic poetry aspires, and that is the highest point of the earth from where you can connect to the skies opening up to infinity. In Hartman's words, "Man at Snowdon is not [...] a microcosm redeeming his alienated (macrocosmic) part. He is a mesocosm: at the boundary of all realms, and himself their boundary".¹⁴ There, Wordsworth sees the *naked* moon, the *vapours* again, the hills with their *backs upheaved*, *headlands* and *tongues* ..., all these intertwined bodily organs attributed to Nature turning the whole scene into an orgy. The rift, the abysmal, gloomy, breathing place with roaring waters is full of sexual connotations, like the sacred river Alph gushing forth in thick pants as in the poem "Kubla Khan" by Coleridge. Just as there is a dome over Kubla Khan's pleasure palace, here is the heavens covering all below, serene but still feeling all that passion down there. In this scene, the poet observes a "mutual domination". But how much does the text support this mutuality? Up on the summit, the poet sees "the emblem of a mind/that feeds upon infinity that broods/upon the dark abyss intent to hear/its voices." That is, he identifies the mind with the male skies rather than the female earth, where with the dwindling mists, there is loss of majesty. On the contrary, in the ethereal skies, such "encroachment none/was there, nor loss..." "The whole passage culminates in his vision of the God-like mind of the poet brooding over the abyss which opens up at his feet, like the mind of God moving on the face of the waters in the act of Creation in Genesis I".¹⁵ Interestingly, Wordsworth, whose poetry is famous

¹⁴ Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, 198

¹⁵ Alan G. Hill, "The Triumphs of Memory: Petrarch, Augustine, and Wordsworth's Ascent of Snowdon". *The Review of English Studies* 57, no. 229 (2006): 256.

for being free of abstractions, prefers here to see the whole natural scene not for what she really is but as a symbol of his own mind, and in fact, as “only one function” of it. This “function” is nothing but the capacity of the mind to remember, making memory an endless source for creativity. Hence, Hill says: “As he returns down the mountain side by the light of the full moon, and writes his letter in ‘a quiet corner’ or his inn, he is overpowered by the realization that, however wonderful external nature is, it is nothing compared to the wonders of the human mind and what can be achieved by the power of memory- a very Wordsworthian conclusion in fact”.¹⁶

The Prelude is the story of a mind growing from dependence to self-sufficiency through its imaginative power. And for the mind to mature from a helpless child to an autonomous adult, the yoke of the mother has to be overthrown. A close analysis of the three passages selected for this article reveals Wordsworth’s continuous efforts to overcome his mother-fixation by gaining mastery over Nature, which he seems to be celebrating as his surrogate mother. And when he finally did manage that, he must have begun to feel guilty for his cruel treatment of her. That might explain why he obsessively revised it and could never come to publish *The Prelude*.

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