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## God on Prairie, in the Mountain, and in All of Nature: How Learning Leads to the Sublime in the Work of William Wordsworth

For Wordsworth, it is the human imagination and potential to not just observe, but comprehend, nature that ascribes the sublime meaning. Without human cognizance, the objects and elements of the sublime are just physical tokens. Man's finite existence and the sublime's apparent totality appear in opposition to one another. However, for Wordsworth, it is man's interaction with the sublime in nature that represents a profound characteristic of the human experience. While man never be able to fully appreciate or understand the universe in its whole, its entirety can almost be parceled and understood through appreciating objects and elements of the sublime in nature. In this instance, in both "The Prelude," "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth uses the sublime to express the finite condition of man and the yearning desire for a full understanding of the universe through the sublime.

The sublime is omnipresent and powerful. For Wordsworth, as well as for his friend and fellow Romantic contemporary Coleridge, the sublime represents a yearning for a deeper understanding of a holistic universe. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge struggled with their finite existence and comprehensive of the metaphysical forces governing their existence. For both poets, this is characteristic of the human experience. James Heffernan writes that, "This profound yearning for transcendent unity, this passion for the 'one life'" (Heffernan 606) was a vital component of Wordsworth's poetry. In "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth describes "A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things" (101-103). It is this "spirit" and "motion" of the sublime that stimulates conscious human thought and contemplation. Here, Wordsworth connects human interaction with the sublime to innovation and intellectual, perhaps even scientific, progress. Wordsworth explicitly links this notion of development to his own intellectual progress. He states that sublime apprehension is "Of something far more deeply interfused" (98) than the more simple joy he gained from nature in his youth. In this sense, as one matures, one is better able to understand the human condition and connect with the sublime.

Wordsworth ascribes the power to identify the sublime as lying squarely within the human mind. In this sense, being human is critical to interpreting the sublime. According to Heffernan, in "The Prelude," Wordsworth draws a distinction between a bucolic shepherd's silhouetted against the sky and the masses of densely populated London (Heffernan 608). Wordsworth writes that the silhouetted shepherd represents the sublime. The shepherd seems to unite and embody within himself the "Grace and honor, power and worthiness" (389-407) of all human nature. However,

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for a human being incapable of exerting the power of his mind and understanding the shepherd's silhouette as the sublime, this spectacle may not be apparent. Heffernan writes that Wordsworth's "sources of sublimity" lay not in nature, but rather deep within the 'soul of Man'" (Heffernan 607). Nature is simply the means or apparatus through which a learned man can experience and comprehend the sublime. However, it is an excellent, and perhaps the eminent, conduit for doing so. In London, on the other hand, Wordsworth discovers the "sublime idea" of "the unity of man, / One spirit over ignorance and vice" (665-673). Even in the urban mass of England's capital, Wordsworth finds the universalized "one spirit" he is searching for in nature. On both occasions, in city and country, it is the intellectual and learned man who can appreciate of divergent elements and conditions of the sublime.

The capacity to distinguish the sublime is increased, for Wordsworth, with age and tutelage. Wordsworth's conceptualization reflects the education system, particularly his own. While nature is manifold, such as the various subjects taught at school, its diverse universality is awe-inspiring, and is essentially the sublime. In the education system, one is instructed seemingly tangential and divergent subjects in order to construct, ideally, a permanent bedrock of knowledge. According to Heffernan, "Wordsworth saw in nature not a dead uniformity but a vital current of relation, generated in and through an infinite variety" (Heffernan 610). In "The Prelude," as a schoolboy, Wordsworth could observe "affinities / In objects where no brotherhood exists / To common minds" (403-405). As a young schoolboy, with some pedagogical instruction under his belt, Wordsworth can already identify elements of the sublime without necessarily being able to articulate it. For those without his privileged education, the "common minds," these seemingly disparate contingents of the natural world would not appear universal. At Cambridge, Wordsworth develops as both a human being and a student, and can now feel and describe "the one Presence, and the Life / Of the great whole" (130-131). For Wordsworth, his maturity as a man and an intellectual has helped him better grasp the sublime in nature. At his intellectual peak, Wordsworth began, "looking for the shades of difference / As they lie hid in all exterior forms, / Near or remote, minute or vast" (155-160). This initiation of seeking out the sublime in nature, therefore, marks Wordsworth's maturation and ascendance into his intellectual manhood.

Wordsworth affirms the importance of distinguishing and apprehending the sublime as a hallmark of human intellectual development. However, the sublime affects man in a multitude of ways. For example, the Mount Snowdon episode of "The Prelude" illustrates nature's transforming power over man. According to Heffernan, this passage "exemplifies perfectly that unity of natural forces which can best be termed interfusion- the flowing of one object into another, the blending of elements in such a way that each, while retaining its distinctive character, becomes part of a sublime and pervasive whole" (Heffernan 613). In order for the observer to fully appreciate and comprehend this subtle yet complex distinction, he must be intellectually and emotionally mature. Otherwise, like in the Mount Snowdon episode, there

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could be negative repercussions or, at least, a lack of understanding. Heffernan adds that the sublime is “that unifying power in nature which emblemized, to his eyes, the imaginative power of higher minds” (Heffernan 613). It is therefore intellectualism that enables appreciate for the sublime to take place. The development of the man and the human being vis-à-vis a deeper appreciation for the sublime is critical to Wordsworth. This is best illustrated, perhaps, through majestic and terrifying elements of nature.

The Mount Snowdon episode illustrates the importance the natural world had on Wordsworth’s concept of the sublime and his maturation and self-conception as an individual. Professor Philip Shaw also explores the role of the sublime in Wordsworth’s development as an individual and the key role that intellectualism plays in this notion. Reflecting on the Mount Snowdon climb, Wordsworth writes, “A meditation rose on me that night / Upon the lonely mountain when the scene / Had passed away, and it appeared to me / The perfect image of a mind,” (66-69). For Wordsworth, understanding the majestic and sublime nature of his journey rests on the ability of his “mighty mind.” It is this mind that, “feeds upon infinity, / That is exalted by an under-presence, / The sense of God, or whatsoever is dim / Or vast in its own being” (70-73). According to Shaw, in this instance, for Wordsworth, mind and nature are united in their ability to “mold” and “abstract” the “outward face of things” into images that are “awful and sublime” (Shaw 1). This ability to transcend the physical parameters of vision and reality and ascribe a legitimate sublimity onto an object can only be accomplished by a learned individual, from Wordsworth’s perspective, whose mind is capable of such a profound experience.

Wordsworth uses the sublime, as he discovers it in nature, to better understand himself as a human. Wordsworth finds that it is his intellectual background that enables him to understand the sublime, whether it is in the countryside observing a shepherd or on a climb in the high mountains. According to Heffernan, “The capacity to distinguish, therefore, was for Wordsworth an indispensable part of the capacity to relate; for it was only in terms of multiplicity that the pervasive unity of nature emerged” (Heffernan 611). For Wordsworth, is the beauty of the immense capabilities of the mind to distinguish and interpret the sublime that grant is such a divine and awe-inspiring meaning. Heffernan summarizes that, “Wordsworth achieves a sublimity that is peculiarly his own: the sense of a unity which transcends multiplicity without destroying it, which embraces the variety of nature in a single, comprehensive vision” (612). In this subtle yet complex conception of the sublime, learnedness and intellectualism is absolute requisite.

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