A Note on Wordsworth's Sonnet, "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802"

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Abstract

Alluding to the sources of Wordsworth's sonnet in the *Book of Job* and Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, I establish how the so-called Wordsworthian sublime can be deduced. In the former, the sublime comes into play in private retrospections at an individual level, incurred after the ramifications of a tragedy sets in. In the latter, Wordsworth is interpreted as subserving Dorothy's observations on London. Her identifications with the city as 'beautiful' is carefully abstracted and idealized under the banner of his sublime, creating the possibility of interaction, subjugation and hierarchical creation.

Keywords: Wordsworth; London; ideology; beautiful; sublime.

William Wordsworth's "Westminster Bridge" sonnet has been critiqued by Cleanth Brooks in his chapter "The Language of Paradox" as being situated on the leeward side of natural beauty; what Nature established in the ideological environment of pre-human existence is rightly understood as attired "by natural right, but surely not grimy, feverish London" (6,7). Of course, Wordsworth's intentions are, critically speaking, hinted at the possibility of an interactive discourse between "natural right" and grandeur in imitation of nature through human creativity. It explains why Wordsworth invokes

> The beauty of the morning; silent bare, (ll. 5, pp. 240)

But it does not illumine why Wordsworth misreads the Sublime as "beauty", or the more frequently asked question: Why does Wordsworth invoke comatose London as opposed to the kinetic? The answer to the second question would be Brooks's participation in the Wordsworthian paradox: "to say that they are "asleep" is to say that they are alive, that they participate in the life of nature" (7). The paradox in Brooks involves the celebration of the potential by obfuscating the ramifications in the kineticism of London – the critical distance between the philosophical and the worldly is made translucent. It also enjoins several ideas to the "asleep" individual, like the attribution of transitory virtues in life and preternatural, hence permanent forms of intellectual existence.

I revert back to the first question about Wordsworth misreading the Sublimity in the line as "beauty", and I propose two implications of such an act. It is possible that Wordsworth does not consider man-made sublimities in and around London as sublimity or grandeur proper. His ambivalence on the question reflects when he scrutinizes the intentions of the human who created the moral and architectural imitations of natural sublimities by judging him outright:

> Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
> A sight so touching in its majesty: (ll. 2-3, ibid)[1]

The other less plausible implication is the chance of hinting not at the Sublimity of London *per se* or what continues to be preserved as 'Natural' once London is out of sight. It might be the purple zone between London coming to life and the gauche grandeur of everyday Nature that Wordsworth had become a denizen of and chose to de-recognize, the discursive gap between Cultured Nature and "cultured" Culture .What I mean is, Sublimity can be construed as existing in its full potential between the ingress of metropolitan existence and the egress of what in sedentary judgment would qualify as Sublime. I demonstrate in this note how implied Sublimity continues to govern the poem despite being conscious of its tragic absence and misread as "Beauty", and how the Wordsworthian Sublime subserves beauty from another source while morphing its essence.

The tragedy in the couplet quoted above can be interpreted this way: There is a soul, or there are souls who pass by the majestic sight which ought to touch, or which ought to generate feeling in an isolated individual (hence sublime) or in a bunch of individuals. He is dull of soul who is unaffected by this sublime subjective perception, and this dullness has an impact which is akin to tragedy on the author who, as the sonnet indicates, is participating in a hierarchy of reactions with early morning London as their

common frame of reference.[2] This hierarchy of arrangements is not unnatural with Wordsworth, and it is certainly not unnatural in the canonical literature that preceded him. It has in fact a ring of Biblical allusiveness to it. In *The Book of Job*, when Job curses the day of his birth, his words could be understood as a prelude to Wordsworth's own:

> Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child,
> Like an infant that never sees the light?
> There the wicked cease from troubling,
> And there the weary are at rest. (*The New Revised Catholic* Ed.,3:16, 3:17)

The very dullness in possessing a diseased, hypersensitive body that is too self-conscious raises the question of putrefaction of the soul – a question repeated by Wordsworth when he argues that he is dull, and he should be infantilized who possesses a physical form that is unreceptive of the sublime "light", or is unresponsive to the "majesty" – an imbrication between Wordsworth and Job, between the Bible and the poetical spirit. The "sight", in the absence of the Biblical "light", implies the presence of a "soul" that has in itself the potential to visualize but is outnumbered by the near-cosmic ignorance that humanity in general represents in the sonnet. Moreover, this overlap does not immaterialize – it does not suggest that the soul has to invoke natural forms of the Sublime and transpose it upon the sight that Wordsworth is referring to. Sensitiveness to the event does not abstract, nor does Job suggest in his curse that the "wicked" or the "weary" are spared of their vices in the grave. For Job, the grave has in itself the effects of comatose London, where virtues and vices are at a stalemate, where "at rest" symbolizes resurrection of worldly activity. Similarly, Wordsworth's London morphs itself into a grave that must be recognized in its potential for resurrectional activity by somebody who is n o t dull of soul. To be able to create a state of immutability doubling up with the inadequacy of imagination invokes the sublime. This sublime dismembers all mutable activity in order to cement its position, creating the illusion of centralized existence – something which is generally understood as arousing the infinite. This too, calls for an imitation which for all possible conveniences must be validated by nature in order for it to qualify both as 'Natural' and habitual. Job catches on to the proposition when he refutes Bildad soon after:

> My days are swifter than a runner;
> They flee away, they see no good.
> They go by like skiffs of reed,
> Like an eagle swooping on the prey. (ibid. 9:25, 9:26)

Let it be taken into consideration that Job complains about the mutability of both time and purpose – time, because all three metaphorical images encompass the absence of one central agency around whose axes something less mutable or immobile ought to be preserved for future reflection, or contemplation; purpose –unless something with similar resemblance is created, ethical or fundamental belief-systems shall cease to be. Linda M. Austin identified this *ubisunt* theme, concluding that "Language is less expressive…the words and phrases of lamentation often wind round in endless repetition or break off" (281). While this is true to a large extent in Job's lament, his language, far from being less expressive, moves from one metaphor to the other. These metaphors, at

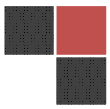
one level, conduct linguistic exercises and defer sorrow by associating his 'event' with natural events, i.e. events at once natural *by* nature (in synonimity across natural hierarchies) and *through* nature, meaning that the resultant of these metaphorical references can go beyond nature by acknowledging its source *in* natural forms. At another level, it does not seem to break off either; once it is established that Job's deterioration is complete, goodness collapses, rather sunders itself from its subject. Once this appropriation is halted, Job dehumanizes – his metaphors become animalistic and vegetative. This is because, lamentation does wind itself around in a self-conscious fashion for the purpose of re-humanizing in the face of tragedy. This, when rendered impossible, results in a deterioration of hierarchies, and the subject "breaks off", or breaks away from the project of humanizing – hence the use of plant and animal metaphors. Critically speaking, it shall cease from appearing for the fear of not establishing an ideological apparatus. The "good" is dependent upon a stiff and centralized agency that can regulate flaccid presences like mobility on the one hand, and linguistic movement on the other. The potential of the sublime in the face of a Biblical tragedy – its essential failure for unregulated mobility dominating its ambience creates the pith of Job's philosophical screed. The fundamental argument hereby follows that the tragedy of being unable to enforce goodness or greatness *en masse* results in privacy of preservation or heightening of an ideology in isolation upon an imaginary audience. The act is an imitation of the Sublime in nature. What Job imitates is Nature; he *who* Wordsworth strongly misreads in the Bible is Job. Compare this with his perception of mutability in the sonnet:

> Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
> Open unto the fields, and to the sky; (6-7)

The sight of all these aforementioned places – each of them man-made, is an experience of associations while burying in human conscience that it is an artificial construct in imitation of naturally occurring sublime forms. An abstraction persists; it is carefully crafted into the structure of the line where each object, separated by a comma, conveys in reality the abstraction of another subjective phenomena akin to the sublime. The fact that each of these monumental representations create relative isolation from each other through punctuations that separate them have an effect on the overall decorum of the poem. Each of them has to be shelved in one metrical movement, iterating that although the ideological proposition communicated implicitly through the sonnet is sublime, reality exhibits mutability and temporality. The tragedy can be stated in this manner: The sublime *is* – it cannot remain immutable as per the demands of the form that the author has imposed upon his poem. This does not mean that it ceases to be; the Sublime engages in a struggle, or what could be interpreted as a frictional discourse between beauty and formlessness. This is reminiscent of Job's resilience *in* God, but there is constant need to reiterate in the face of his soul's putrefaction. The language of iterability and its arrangement within a literary form determines the sublime properties of this making. This, properly understood, makes Wordsworth's sublime allusiveness Biblical.

Dorothy Wordsworth writes at length about her visit to London with William in *The Grasmere Journal*:

[on] the 31st of July (I have forgot which) we mounted the Dover Coach at Charing Cross. It was a beautiful morning. The City, St. pauls, with the River & a multitude of little boats, made a most beautiful sight as we crossed Westminster Bridge.



The houses were not overhung by their cloud of smoke & they were spread out endlessly, yet the sun shone so brightly with such a pure light that there was even something like the purity of one of nature's own grand Spectacles. (*TGAJ*, ed. pp. 123, author's emphasis, not mine)

What I wish to argue through Dorothy's descriptive nature is the theory underpinned in the gap between "beautiful" and "most beautiful", traversing through "a multitude", "spread out endlessly", the Sunshine and disembarking at "nature's own grand spectacles". The transport of virtues from beauty to grandeur began with Dorothy who was intercepted by Wordsworth who transforms her personal into what is broadly subjective, and her observations into theory. What for Dorothy is "the River", is an intricate network of Subjective responses which embeds beauty but enforces its "will", its identification of the objective world through an infinite network of subjective responses. This "will" is moderated by a favorable degree of sweetness which does not have the last word in the characterization of "the river" – an objective phenomena which is also subserved by the poet-subject's valuation of infinity:

The river glideth at his own sweet will: (12)

The imagery in "the sun shone so brightly" infinitely perpetuated not just across nature. It perpetuated through its very infancy, communicating that transience never was an option, nor was passing observation meant to do anything but stay subserved by the mind. This mind, conditioned by the steepness of the celestial body, recreates rather than reinvigorates the ideal of the Universal system, thus justifying Wordsworth's use of "Never" and "first". The inflective order in "Never did sun" matches the inflective order in "Never saw I", subtly signaling how Wordsworth substitutes the sun with himself by abstracting the celestiality from the celestial body and incorporating it within his own categorical imperative. The depth of Wordsworth's "calm" also fashions forth an idea emerging out of Dorothy's "purity" of observation and appreciation for "Nature's grand spectacles":

Never did sun more beautifully steep,
In its first splendour, valley, rock or hill;
Never saw *I*, never felt a calm so deep! (9-11, emphasis mine)[3]

What Dorothy found beautiful in London draws its resources from what Charles G. Davis calls "emotional reaction" (19) and "emotional identification" (20) in the poem. Wordsworth does not disregard this emotion; he consecrates by subserving it under his sublime "will". Why this is, is a question that requires a different discussion. It is advantageous here to point out that it helps sustain the ideology that the theoretically impossible/infinite in essence expands upon the foundations of everyday observations, and everyday realisms. Dorothy herself cannot help confessing a little later how the best of observations in the making of literature are only "half so beautiful" (*TGAJ*, 125). In the words of Davis,

The tautness suggests great energy under harness, and this sense of both power and control infuses the poem – it is present in the symbol of the gliding river, the metaphor of the mighty heart, and in the use of a restrictive poetic form to express an emotional experience. (19)

Let me sum up both my arguments thus: The experience of the sublime vis-à-vis the Bible implies a "stopping" instead of the suggestive "pass by". This sublime is akin to the experience of a tragedy exacerbated by ignorance on a mass scale and indifference towards human architectural sublime, claiming it to be unnatural or beyond the natural. In the second case, the benevolent subservience of personal emotivism under the rising order of publicly acknowledged personal vision of humanity qualifies the latter as Sublime. What it establishes, ideologically speaking, is a forced equilibrium where the sublime subserves the beautiful, and Wordsworth subserves Dorothy textually.[4]

Notes:

[1]According to Patrick Holland, there is a combination of two distinct "intellectual-aesthetic perceptions which Wordsworth had witnessed simultaneously" (33). "The Two Contrasts of Wordsworth's "Westminster Bridge" Sonnet", *The Wordsworth Circle* 8:1 (1977): 32-34. JSTOR, web.

[2]Wordsworth borrows from Edmund Burke freely here, who, in the 'On the effects of TRAGEDY' section in *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas Of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Ed. Adam Philips, OUP, 2008 reissue) explicitly states that "The nearer it [the tragedy] approaches the reality, and the further it removes us from all idea of fiction, the more perfect is its power" (I: XV, pp. 43). Though London is comatose, London could not be any more real and any less fictional. This is co-incidental with the broader proposition that tragedy being power, and power sublime, one can see an element of natural interaction here.

[3]"Wordsworth appears to be saying that no sunrise in the countryside was ever so beautiful as this cityscape sunrise he was witnessing from the bridge. Of course, this is an exaggeration. It is employed as a way of reminding us of the obvious; that if you expect never to find the city beautiful, the few occasions on which you can and do find it so acquire a special significance" (Holland, ibid, 33).

[4]As Immanuel Kant puts it in the *Analytic of the Sublime*, "The combination of the two faculties of cognition, sensibility and understanding, which though, doubtless, indispensable to one another, do not readily permit of being united without compulsion and reciprocal abatement, must have the appearance of being undersigned and a spontaneous occurrence" (Book II, 51:322, ll.6-11, pp. 185). This is how I believe the sublime subserves beauty. See Kant's *The Critique of Judgment* Trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973. (Reprint).

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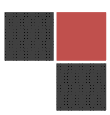

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