Rowing to Sublimity: The “Stolen Boat” Episode from

The Prelude*

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Abstract
The “Stolen Boat,” one of the most celebrated episodes from William Wordsworth’s The Prelude, recounts the occasion when the poet as a youth takes a boat from the shore of the Ullswater in England’s Lake District and begins rowing into the middle of the lake. Suddenly, when he sees a higher peak emerge from a lower hill adjacent to the bank from which he is rowing, he is taken aback by the sight and immediately returns to shore. The episode in recent years has rightly been cited by critics as a representative example of the sublime, but on-site investigations by the author suggest that the matter should be further considered in light of physical evidence that the poet may have amalgamated the image of the mountain with other information in a time-integration analogous to the motion of the boat. The result is a new reading that does not necessarily refute earlier theoretical insights into the episode as a sublime experience, but rather qualifies them by underscoring the complicated manner in which Wordsworth incorporates nature into the “growth of the poet’s mind.”

Keywords
William Wordsworth, Immanuel Kant, Jacques Derrida, the sublime

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One of the episodes most often excerpted from William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* is the poet’s recounting in some four dozen lines of an incident that occurred when he was about 10 or 12 years of age and living in England’s Lake District. While spending a holiday in the village of Patterdale, then and now a tiny settlement of a few hundred people on the southeast bank of the Ullswater, Wordsworth walks one evening along the lake and encounters a rowboat used by the shepherds in the adjacent agricultural areas. Taking what might today be termed a “joy ride,” Wordsworth begins rowing outward from the shore and, facing backward, first sees a small craggy hill appear above the top of the willow tree near where the boat was tethered. After rowing a bit further, the poet next observes a dark hulking “cliff” emerging above the smaller hill. The sight affects him strongly, and he immediately returns to shore. But for days his mind is overwhelmed by the sight of the huge cliff.

The “Stolen Boat” episode has frequently been discussed by critics in reference to the sublime. Thomas Weiskel argues in *The Romantic Sublime* that the “Stolen Boat” is an instance in which “[f]ear changes the imaginative medium from perception to fantasy, and if a successful identification ensues, there is a further change from fantasy to symbol” (100-01). Aurélie Thiria-Meulemans also emphasizes physical perception, but sees the episode as a disruptive avenue by which the poet visualizes himself in a landscape that “implicitly evokes the myth of Narcissus” (55). Nicholas Williams believes that movement is the key to the episode, given that “the cliff’s motion is lent to it by the boy, that his life is the external force which allows the cliff to seem ‘a living thing’” (22; emphasis in original). Scott Harshbarger, on the other hand, views the episode as a “moral lesson” in which the “sublime Other” possesses the “agency, a projected property assigned by the child’s emergent intentionality system” (124). And in a distinctly separate vein, Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr. invokes the Oedipal conflict and Freud’s “fort-da” game to suggest that Wordsworth describes a cognitive progression from the early “Stolen Boat” sublime episode to the later “Snowdon” episode (97).

I would like to depart from most if not all of these earlier analyses by focusing

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1 The episode is recounted in lines 81-129 of the “First Part” of the 1799 *Prelude*, in a slightly rewritten version in lines 373-427 in “Book First” of the 1805 *Prelude*, and in a slightly shortened version in lines 358-400 of “Book First” of the 1850 *Prelude*. I quote primarily from the 1799 version throughout this paper, but draw attention to variations in the 1805 and 1850 editions when they are relevant. I do so in part because of Jonathan Wordsworth’s very compelling argument that the 1799 version is especially noteworthy in the way it handles the “spots of time” episodes from Wordsworth’s childhood.
more intensely on the actual even as it occurred in the poet’s youth. In fact, I propose to create a bridge of sorts between theoretical readings involving the sublime and the more traditional approach by Jonathan Wordsworth and Geoffrey Hartman that appear in the 1979 Norton edition of *The Prelude*. To summarize, Jonathan Wordsworth argues that the two-book edition of 1799 is “poetry in which what is not seen is as important as what is (J. Wordsworth 570). The poet’s impetus, the critic argues, is announced in the very first line of the two-Part *Prelude*: “Was it for this” is an indication that the poet is looking for an “excuse for not getting on with the great philosophical work which Coleridge felt so confident that he could write” (572). Here, Jonathan Wordsworth is referring to the long-planned but never-completed *The Recluse*, but the point I wish to take away from this passage is the fact that Wordsworth’s “childhood memories could provide material that would actually replace the philosophy that Coleridge expected him to produce” (572). Approaching this insight correctly, I argue, assumes that *The Prelude* is best read as an amalgamation of philosophical thought, such as that of Immanuel Kant, with empirical observation.²

Hartman, for his part, sees *The Prelude* as a vehicle for the poet to show the complex and often paradoxical interrelationship between the human consciousness and Nature. In fact, Hartman states as his goal the demonstration “that Wordsworth came to realize that Nature itself led him beyond Nature; and how and when the realization was achieved” (Hartman 599).³ Here, I wish to qualify Hartman’s “beyond Nature” by arguing that *The Prelude* is a unique poetic vision calling for direct experience to be supplemented with philosophical contemplation.

The reason that I propose to bridge these earlier readings with more contemporary interpretations is the benefit in analyzing the boat episode both within the abstractions of the sublime, as well as from a careful examination of the events

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² A reasonable starting-point is surely an answer to the question of how thoroughly Wordsworth was familiar with Kant. In fact, *Wordsworth’s Reading: 1770-1799*, by Duncan Wu, notes that the poet had likely read *Critique of Judgement* by November 26, 1798, when he discussed Kant with the German poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock. This and other references to Kant are scattered throughout *The Prose Works*, although none suggest anything about the effort that Wordsworth had applied to understanding Kant. Nonetheless, Wu specifically cites the *Critique of Judgement* as a book that Wordsworth had probably read by the time that he wrote the 1799 *Prelude*, which suits my argument nicely, considering that I focus particularly on Kant’s explanation of the sublime in that particular work.

³ Interestingly, Hartman himself states that there is no major discrepancy between the “more traditional readings, which stress the poet’s adherence to Nature,” and the “small group” of critics who detect paradox and irony in the poet’s musings on the interactions between the imagination and Nature.
that provided Wordsworth a narrative to begin with. If the views of Jonathan Wordsworth and Hartman can be amalgamated in one quick and superficial summary, I believe that the result would show that they assume a commitment on Wordsworth’s part to cognize certain meaningful external events (or “spots of time”), and to find the most memorable poetic expression possible for these processes in the apprehension of—but never total absorption in—Nature itself. Thus, I believe that a careful reconstruction of the boat episode leads to a somewhat different interpretation of the sublime that the aforementioned critics have suggested, and in fact is closer to the “parerga” reading of Kant that Jacques Derrida supplies in *The Truth in Painting*.4

To approach this issue, I made two trips to the Ullswater in 2009 in hopes of pinpointing the locale of the “Stolen Boat” cove.5 On the first trip in January 2009, I rented a small rowboat from a concession in Glenridding (another small village just to the west of Patterdale) and rowed along both the eastern and western shorelines in search of vantage-points in which a larger peak looms behind a smaller hill. The results were inconclusive, so I returned in August with a travel research grant, and this time rented one of the motorboats that were available only during the summer months. I eventually spotted a “rocky cove” a mile or so north of Patterdale on the eastern shore that lay beneath a gentle hill. Looming above the hill a few hundred meters in the distance was a flat ridge similar to the one described in *The Prelude*. After checking all other areas of the southern half of the Ullswater to eliminate any other possible candidates, I then rented another rowboat to confirm that an observer would indeed see a “huge cliff” emerge in the distance above the smaller hill while rowing westward from the bank. Finally, I purchased a ticket on the ferry that runs the length of the Ullswater in order to check the entire lake to ensure that there were no other potential candidate sites.

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4 An on-line abstract of Sunjay Sharma’s Cornell dissertation, “Abyssal Grounds: In Search of the Sublime in Wordsworth and Kant,” indicates that the author references Derrida’s theories of “différence” in the dissertation. However, the abstract also indicates that the argument largely focuses on the boat episode in Wordsworth as an “undoing of the mind.” Thus, I would categorize the dissertation with the other works I mentioned previously.

5 I first visited the Lake District in the winter of 2003, and at that time decided on a whim to climb Place Fell, which looms above the village of Patterdale as the highest peak on the east side of the Ullswater.
Fig. 1. Pictured is the eastern shore of the Ullswater at a point north of the village of Patterdale. The rocky outcrop at the water's edge is the “rocky cove” mentioned by Wordsworth, and the lower hill above it is the “rocky steep.” From this angle one may also see in the background the “huge cliff” that emerges dramatically as one rows westward from the shore.
Therefore, I can say with confidence that the enclosed photographs I took from my rented boat depict the very site from which Wordsworth launched out in his borrowed rowboat in the early 1780s. This information is perhaps of new interest, in part because the location that I identified is not the same as the one cited in a footnote in the 1979 Norton Critical Edition of The Prelude. What is of greater interest is the seeming discrepancy between Wordsworth’s description of the physical reality of the “cliff” and that of the same peaks that the poet recounts having climbed in the preceding lines of Book I of all three editions of The Prelude. First of all, it is unlikely that the “huge cliff” which Wordsworth describes would invoke sheer terror due to its dimensions, for the cliff is simply not the terrifying entity of Burkan sublime standards. Admittedly, a climb to the top of nearby Place Fell (the highest peak above Patterdale on the east side of the lake) is a physical exertion that will favor those who are physically fit. But it is not Mount Everest. Nor is it even the Helvellyn, which is a couple of kilometers to the west.

Of course, one may carp with the definition of a “cliff,” and I am certainly not implying that Wordsworth exaggerated the description. What I do want to argue is that his choice of words, whether a conscious alteration of his memory or not,

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6 According to the second note on p. 4 of the Norton Critical Edition, “the ‘huge cliff’ is probably Black Crag (2,232 feet), and west of Ullswater, which would appear suddenly behind the nearer ridge, Stybarrow Crag, as the child rowed out from the shore.” I believe that this note is inaccurate. For one thing, the Ordnance Survey map OL5 indeed displays the Black Crag feature on the west side of the Ullswater, but Wordsworth would have had to walk through the village of Glenridding to get there and would have likely been within visual sight of habitations, of which not even the slightest hint is apparent in any three versions of The Prelude. As for Stybarrow Crag, a lower hill just north of Glenridding, I simply could not find a line of sight on the Glenridding side in which one may observe a cliff looming up from a lower hill when one rows from the bank.

7 Edmund Burke’s A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757) considers the former to be a manifestation of the power or the physically intimidating dimensions of an object. For Burke, a hazardous cliff reaching into the sky is indeed an object that invokes the sublime. Immanuel Kant, on the other hand, sees the sublime in his Critique of Judgement (1790) as a mental effect brought on by the realization that we humans cannot fully comprehend certain phenomena. Being caught on a stormy sea in a rickety ship may well invoke terror in humans eager for self-preservation, but such is not necessarily the Kantian sublime unless it also accompanies the knowledge that we cannot fully integrate our understanding of such cognitions with our reason. There can be no mistaking that Wordsworth was familiar with at least some of Burke’s writings prior to his writing The Prelude, as is evidenced by his references to the philosopher in his 1793 prose work “Apology for the French Revolution.” Wordsworth also lauds the “genius of Burke” in the 1850 version of The Prelude (1850, VII, 512), but this particular reference is in connection with Burke’s Reflections of the Revolution in France (1790), as the note in the Norton Edition states (1850, VII, 512n), rather than with the Philosophical Enquiry.
points to interesting nuances of the sublime that are worth revisiting. And in particular I want to argue that the “Stolen Boat” episode is, in various intricate details, exemplary of the Kantian mathematical sublime. What I mean by this is that the poet is describing an integrative experience that incorporates both the perception of the moment, his prior knowledge of the cliffs in the region, and the motion of the boat. Thus, his understanding of the experience is conditioned by a time-dependent process rather than solely a moment of terror at the sheer dimensions of the cliff or of guilt for “borrowing” the boat. The act of rowing the boat forces him to confront the discontinuity between his ability to “reason” the progression of images and to “understand” their precise relationship. This, in effect, is the Kantian mathematical sublime.

To broach the general topic of the sublime, it is helpful to consult Philip Shaw’s guidebook, which describes the sublime as “the moment when thought trembles on the edge of extinction” (148). This definition is particularly relevant to the Kantian sublime in that the mental processes involved are not only privileged but also self-reflective. The sublime for Kant is a moment in which our reflective faculties—perhaps initially stimulated by sensual input but by no means subservient to it—are overwhelmed by our realization of the limitations of these processes. Thus, the sublime as Kant defined it in the Critique of Judgement is not to be thought of as a terrifying sight or a frightening horror of some sort, but rather as a

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8 The mathematical sublime, according to Kant, is the condition in which we realize that certain physical dimensions may defeat our ability to understand fully the relationship between number and actual extent. In other words, we may quickly learn how to comprehend the latest news item about astrophysical discoveries such as a primordial galaxy that is 13 billion light-years away, and may have some understanding that certain other distances such as the closeness of a nearby star is a tiny fraction of the first quantity. But we are overwhelmed by the realization that we really have no “understanding” of such large numbers. True, we may have learned to juggle exponential notations in late childhood or early adolescence, but our ability to “reason” these quantities through manipulations simply has no correlation with our “understanding.”

9 In an article appearing on the British Library Website on Wordsworth and the sublime, Shaw cites the famous Simplon Pass episode, when Wordsworth experiences a “failure to locate the sublime in nature” that nonetheless leads to “a rousing hymn to the imagination.” (www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/wordsworth-and-the-sublime.) I note that the “Stolen Boat” episode contrasts with the Simplon pass instance in that Wordsworth in the former succumbs to the swarming images in his mind that “were the trouble of my dreams,” while in the latter, as Shaw explains, “this image of the mind’s transcendence of matter is matched by a terrifying sequence” of physically intimidating natural phenomena. I discuss only the former episode in this paper, but a complete analysis of Wordsworth’s use of the sublime would necessitate a consideration of both, as well as the Mount Snowdon episode, which Shaw also discusses in the British Library article.
reminder that our mental faculties have their limitations. Furthermore, the sublime involves an intricate interplay between our understanding and our reason, as well as a complicated interaction between our perceptions of nature and of moral implication. As Kant writes in the introductory pages of his Critique of Judgement, “The function of prescribing law by means of concepts of nature is discharged by understanding, and is theoretical. That of prescribing laws by means of the concept of freedom is discharged by reason and is merely practical” (10). These lines are especially noteworthy in regard to the “Stolen Boat” episode because the entire experience revolves around a sensual perception of natural surroundings and an emotional reaction that may or may not be moral in nature, but nonetheless can be argued to assume a degree of freedom. Although the sublime for Kant does not necessarily involve the reaction to a sensory perception, the young Wordsworth’s reaction to the huge cliff definitely does so. Chaotic mental processes are the focal point of the experience for Wordsworth, and as Kant further explains, “Our entire cognitive faculty is, therefore, presented with an unbounded, but also, inaccessible field—the field of the super-sensible—in which we seek in vain for a territory, and on which, therefore, we can have no realm for theoretical cognition, be it for concepts of understanding or of reason” (Judgement 11). My argument is that the episode may at first seem like a representation of the Burkean sublime, which is more given to strong emotional reactions to physical manifestations, but is in reality an example of Kant’s “super-sensible” that provides “no realm for theoretical cognition” because Wordsworth follows his description of the episode with lines which reveal his inability to fully comprehend what has happened in his mind: “There was a darkness—call it solitude, / Or blank desertion—no familiar shapes” (1799, I, 123-24). The poet thus describes his own inability to comprehend the event as the result of an inherent resistance of his own mind to intellectually subsume its import. However, the inclusion of “call it” invites the reader to help the poet supply his or her own characterization, thereby dulling the sharpness of the effect.

This sort of hedging is typical of Wordsworth, but it also displays a particularly strong association with the Kantian sublime. Later in the Critique of Judgement, when Kant describes the sublime in a detailed 89-page section, he returns to the interplay of understanding and reason, contrasting the “indeterminate concept of reason” typical of the sublime with the “indeterminate concept of the

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10 I quote from the Oxford edition throughout this paper, and thus use the British spelling of the word that I have always spelled “judgment.”
understanding” that is characteristic of the beautiful (75). Earlier, Kant has defined the beautiful quite carefully as a quality that must be credible as a universal. That is, we may individually find delight in an object, but only if its pleasing qualities can be assumed to have a universal appeal may the object be deemed beautiful. To say that the beautiful is indeterminate in understanding thus means that we may not be able to wrap our cognizance entirely around the source of beauty, but that we are pleased rather than discomfited by this shortfall. To say that something is “indescribably beautiful” may be an admitted intellectual limitation, but it is not a negative feeling that throws us into the sort of melancholy mood that we observe in Wordsworth’s reactions after his nighttime experience with the boat.

An “indeterminate concept of reason,” on the other hand, “cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be aroused and called to mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation” (Judgement 76). In the case of Wordsworth’s huge cliff, we are not talking about a physically imposing entity if we are relating it to the Kantian sublime, but rather the insights imposed by a certain train of thought. Furthermore, the mathematical sublime constrains the huge cliff to a dimensional scale. As Kant explains, the Egyptian pyramids are not sublime if we view them from a distant vantage point, nor if we stand at the base, but only within a certain range of perspective (Judgement 82-83). The same can be said for Wordsworth’s cliff, which is not even the highest peak rising above Patterdale. Nevertheless, at a certain point on the lake, and in a certain moving frame of reference, the cliff is indeed a sight that might overwhelm the understanding—at least for a young boy all alone in a rowboat on a moonlit night.

This employment of the word “understanding” is best illuminated by beginning with Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason (1781), which provides a tantalizing clue as to why the huge cliff would have put Wordsworth in a state of mental turmoil to begin with. Wordsworth’s initial observation of the cliff is empirical in that it is an example of a sensory experience, and according to Kant’s preliminary definitions, “empirical judgments, as such, are all synthetic” (Reason 44). Synthetic judgments, Kant explains, are those that “add to the concept of the subject a predicate which has not been in any wise thought in it, and which no analysis could possibly extract from it” (Reason 43). To say that the cliff extends to the east of the Ullswater shoreline would thus be an analytic judgment because it merely restates as a predication that which is already contained somewhere in the terms. To say that the cliff brings to bear some sobering insight into the actions of a human in the
world, on the other hand, is arguably a synthetic judgment. In other words, Wordsworth incorporates additional reasoning into the empirical knowledge he already possesses. And if we take the early lines of Book I into consideration, his prior knowledge of the cliff would presumably minimize the physically imposing potentiality of the cliff:

Nor less in springtime, when on southern banks
The shifting sun had from his knot of leaves
Decoyed the primrose flower, and when the vales
And woods were warm, was I a rover then
In the high places, on the lonesome peaks,
Among the mountains and the winds. Though mean
And though inglorious were my views, the end
Was not ignoble. (1799, I, 50-57)

Thus, Wordsworth begins his elucidation of the complicated process by which he apprehends the physical dimensions of the Lake District hills. I draw particular attention to the final three lines quoted above, which amalgamates the attitude of the poet toward the reality of his enterprise on the cliffs. His mental attitude toward his task of egg-stealing may have been “mean” and “inglorious,” but the end itself “[w]as not ignoble.” This may simply be an instance of Wordsworth’s aforementioned “hedging,” but it can also serve as an early episode in the Prelude which exemplifies an interpretation which the critic Geoffrey Hartman sees as being “quite close to the truth.” According to Hartman, “a very small group” of critics have understood Wordsworth’s poetry in general to have “pointed to the deeply paradoxical or problematic character of Wordsworth’s dealings with Nature and suggested that what he calls Imagination may be intrinsically opposed to images culled or developed from Nature” (Hartman 598). In the lines quoted, we can see that the moral judgment of the young egg-stealer as “mean” and “ignoble” contrasts with the physical circumstances of both the stolen eggs as well as the snared woodcocks in other early lines, but in a “problematic” way because of Wordsworth’s tendency to employ litotes. “Not ignoble” may simply mean “more or less noble,” but the use of the double-negative expands a couple of simple words to multiple meanings: the possibility that the act is somehow mean-spirited or otherwise scurrilous, or that the act is noble even if others do not agree, or else that the boy’s actions are of some socially redeeming character, or perhaps even that the actions can initially be misunderstood by either an observer or the boy himself. If
this is what Hartman means by “deeply paradoxical or problematic,” then the process begins as soon as the poet describes himself having taken to the cliffs.

Other paradoxical lines occur immediately following the ones previously cited:

Oh, when I have hung
Above the raven’s nest, by knots of grass
Or half-inch fissures in the slipp’ry rock
But ill sustained, and almost, as it seemed,
Suspended by the blast which blew amain,
Shouldering the naked crag, oh, at that time,
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ears; the sky seemed not a sky
Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds! (1799, I, 57-66)

Once again, the poet hedges the experience. Does he hang fearlessly, as he initially seems to have us assume? If not, was he somewhat nonplussed by the experience of being “[s]uspended by the blast which blew amain” as he dangled “on the perilous ridge”? Or as a third possibility, was he relatively undaunted by the steepness of the mountain when a boy, but sufficiently impressed by the physical circumstances to reflect on the experience 20 years later with a feeling of consternation? Nonetheless, the first lines of the next stanza suggest, in summarizing his early mountain adventures, that the experiences are more akin Kant’s concept of the beautiful than of the sublime: “The mind of man is fashioned and built up / Even as a strain of music” (1799, I, 67-68). That is, the experience indeed involves an “indeterminate concept of understanding,” but not a sobering reflection that would torture his sleep, as was the case with the huge cliff. To emphasize the former point further, one need only consider the next lines:

I believe
That there are spirits which, when they would form
A favored being, from his very dawn
Of infancy do open out the clouds
As at the touch of lightning, seeking him
With gentle visitation—quiet powers,
Retired, and seldom recognized, yet kind,
And to the very meanest not unknown—
With me, though rarely, in my boyish days
They communed. (1799, I, 68-77)

Returning to Kant, one may assume that a “gentle visitation,” even though the poet does not entirely understand its ramifications, is by no means the following:

But in what we are wont to call sublime in nature there is such an absence of anything leading to particular objective principles and corresponding forms of nature, that it is rather in its chaos, or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation, provided it gives signs of magnitude and power, that nature chiefly excites the ideas of the sublime. (Judgement 77)

This description conforms well to the reaction that Wordsworth recalls after viewing the huge cliff from his rowboat. As he says in ending the recollection,

In my thoughts
There was a darkness—call it solitude,
Or blank desertion—no familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
But huge and mighty forms that do not live
Like living men moved slowly through my mind
By day, and were the trouble of my dreams. (1799, I, 122-29)

To sum up the argument thus far, the huge cliff means two different things to the young poet: it is a venue for daring adventures that pleases the spirit, but also an entity that can haunt the dreams if integrated into a thought pattern resulting from actions of a different variety. The significance of the huge cliff, then, is relative to the integration in which it occurs in the poet’s mind, and this is the very factor that makes it exemplary of the Kantian mathematical sublime. In short, the cliff is sublime only within a certain moving time-frame and at a certain scale.

I do not choose the word “integration” lightly, for as the Critique of Pure Reason makes clear, both time and space are the necessary quantities that must exist for a priori knowledge of the cliff’s significance to take on a novel usage in the latter experience. What exactly is going on in the young Wordsworth’s mind when
he is overwhelmed by the huge cliff? The answer is that he doesn’t understand it himself, and the reader certainly cannot hope to do so. Nonetheless, what we can assume is that a synthetic process is necessarily occurring in his mind that integrates the happier past moments of egg-robbing and youthful gallivanting with the darker experience in the rowboat. Even though it is impossible to characterize these mental constructs precisely, they seemingly conform to what Kant describes as transcendental knowledge “which deals not so much with objects as with our manner of knowing objects insofar as this manner is to be possible a priori” (Reason 52). And since “time is nothing but the form of inner sense, that is, of our intuition of ourselves and of our inner state” (Reason 69), it follows that Wordsworth’s newly experienced agitation at the sight of a cliff he already knows in its physical dimensions is dependent on time integration. Further, his sobering insight has nothing to do with the inherent qualities of the mountain itself—whatever they are—but rather is dependent on the Kantian notion that time is “merely a subjective condition of our (human) intuition (which is always sensible, that is, so far as we are affected by objects), but in itself, apart from the subject, it is nothing” (Reason 70).

Perhaps it will be helpful to return to the very beginning of the “Stolen Boat” episode in Book I of The Prelude in order to illustrate precisely what Wordsworth says about the experience. First, it should be pointed out that Wordsworth has no particular qualms about any of his initial perceptions:

A rocky steep uprose
Above the cavern of the willow-tree,
And now, as suited one who proudly rowed
With his best skill, I fixed a steady view
Upon the top of that same craggy ridge,
The bound of the horizon—for behind
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky. (1799, I, 96-102)

Not only is Wordsworth not disconcerted by the sight of the “rocky steep” (or “craggy ridge”), but he immediately sees its potential as a point of reference to help him row in a straight line. Nor does he seem at all concerned that he cannot see where he is going when he rows backward, and instead appreciates the opportunity the rocky steep affords him to steer the boat “[w]ith his best skill.” However, the sight suddenly changes:
When from behind that rocky steep, till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge cliff,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
And, growing still in stature, the huge cliff
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,
With measured motion, like a living thing
Strode after me. (1799, I, 107-14).

If one wonders why the “craggy steep” is minimized in importance until it becomes almost as familiar and manageable as the “elfin pinnace” which he rows, while the “huge cliff” only grows in importance, the only possible conclusion is that Wordsworth initially perceives a mastery of the discrete experiences, but then is abruptly overwhelmed by the experience of the huge cliff.

However, it is not the looming quality of the huge cliff alone that presumably haunts the young rower, for the craggy steep hasloomed as well, rising above the “cavern of the willow tree” as the boat moves away from the shore. Granted, the motion of the huge cliff is noted by the poet, who in fact testifies that it “strode after me” as he continues rowing. But the fact remains that one feature above the cavern rises in a calming way, while the second rises threateningly.

As for the precise effect that the experience has on Wordsworth, the following lines make clear that he is distracted for days:

and after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
There was a darkness—call it solitude
Or blank desertion—no familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
But huge and mighty forms that do not live
Like living men moved slowly through my mind
By day, and were the trouble of my dreams. (1799, I, 119-29)

Whatever it is about the huge cliff that has haunted him, he is not reminded of other physical entities with familiar shapes, but rather of “huge and mighty forms” that
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To every scheme of holiday delight,
And every boyish sport, less grateful else
And languidly pursued. (1799, II, 47-53)

Here, the poet does not exactly minimize Nature, but nonetheless emphasizes the importance of his social interactions that at times must relegate Nature to “collateral” status.

A more persuasive conclusion is that Wordsworth is highly ambiguous about assigning guilt to the act of taking the boat itself in all three versions of The Prelude. Guilt in the knowledge of wrongdoing may have been part of his experience that night, but the mental turmoil that begins with his spying the huge cliff and continues both night and day for a period is more persuasively viewed as a mental construct that is merely inspired by a sequence of visual sightings.

Therefore, we should avoid focusing solely on the “guilt” argument for the episode, as well as any notion that the young poet is overwhelmed by the sheer physical size of the mountain. True, he mentions both the perils of hanging on the cliffs in the lines leading up to the boat episode, and indeed employs the adjective “guilty” in his recounting of the actual rowing of the boat. But Wordsworth hews particularly closely to the Kantian mathematical sublime in the “Stolen Boat” episode, which further implies that earlier experiences of the cliff, and perhaps other related matters as well, are integrated in his sobering moment when he first sees the huge cliff emerge in the background.

This connection may be made by further examining Wordsworth’s experience of the mathematical sublime in the “Stolen Boat” episode in relation to Immanuel Kant’s brief “parerga” passage from The Critique of Judgement, and especially by Derrida’s deconstructive reading of the parerga passage in The Truth in Painting. I hope to demonstrate that Wordsworth may have indeed experienced somber musings after the boat episode, but that his incorporation of the experience into his epistemology is an inherently unstable tack. That is, his perceptions may indeed lead to sobering mental consequences, but consequences that signal a discontinuity in the “growth of the poet’s mind” that he identifies as the principal theme of The Prelude.

To make this argument, it is necessary to state the entire content of the parerga passage from Kant’s Critique of Judgement:

Even what is called ornamentation (parerga), i.e., what is only an adjunct, and not an intrinsic constituent in the complete representation
of the object, in augmenting the delight of taste does so only by means of its form. Thus it is with the frames of pictures or the drapery on statues, or the colonnades of palaces. But if the ornamentation does not itself enter into the composition of the beautiful form—if it is introduced like a gold frame merely to win approval for the picture by means of its charm—it is then called finery and takes away from the genuine beauty. (Judgement 57; emphasis in original).

If we take the instantaneous view of the huge cliff as the primary work of art, and other surrounding moments in time and other cognitive input as the parerga, then perhaps we may determine whether the “taking away from the genuine beauty” is tantamount to the indeterminacy that is typical of the sublime. The crucial assumption is whether these surrounding experiences can be considered as an interface between the huge cliff and the rest of the world, and if so, what this means for Wordsworth’s morose reaction to the sensual perception that he experiences when rowing away from the shore.

Not 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. (1799, I, 91-96)

If the boat episode is a meditation on the hulking forms that persist in the young poet’s dreams for a time, then one must ask whether the moonlight reflections are nothing more than a beautiful decoration.

The answer may very well lie in the fact—assuming that my identification of the eastern shore of the Ullswater is accurate—that the hulking cliff earlier in the evening had taken on a warm glow that Wordsworth notes in the “Second Part” of the 1799 version, but deleted in both the 1805 and 1850 versions:

It was a joy
Worthy the heart of one who is full grown
To rest beneath those horizontal boughs
And mark the radiance of the setting sun,
Himself unseen, reposing on the top
Of the high eastern hills. \textit{(1799, II, 156-61)}

Wordsworth is referring to the hills to the east of Lake Windermere in these lines, but I would argue that the evening experience of seeing very similar hills overlooking the Ullswater a few miles to the north would have been similar. Furthermore, the poet has a bit more to say about the sight in lines that also appear only in the 1799 version:

\begin{quote}
And there I said, 
That beauteous sight before me, there I said
(Then first beginning in my thoughts to mark
That sense of dim similitude which links
Our moral feelings with external forms)
That in whatever region I should close
My mortal life I would remember you,
Fair scenes—that dying I would think on you,
My soul would send a longing look to you,
Even as that setting sun, while all the vale
Could nowhere catch one faint memorial gleam,
Yet with the last remains of his last light
Still lingered, and a farewell luster threw
On the dear mountain tops where first he rose. \textit{(1799, II, 161-74)}
\end{quote}

Far from a mere appurtenance, the reflections of the setting sun—and arguably by extension, the moon as well—serve as an unproblematic moment of stasis for the poet which Hartman might cite as the lines which led earlier critics to the conclusion that “his poetry honors and even worships Nature” (Hartman 598). Indeed, there is little in these lines to suggest the sort of “deeply paradoxical or problematic” characterizations that Hartman cites on the same page, which would undoubtedly include the boat episode.

But is Nature therefore a decoration if it is apprehended in circumstances that do not create moral quandaries? To explore the question further, I will turn to Derrida’s “Parergon” from \textit{The Truth in Painting}. Before he even cites the excerpt directly (but after broaching the general topic of Kant’s aesthetics), Derrida writes the following:

\begin{quote}
On the one hand, Kant declares that he “neither wants nor is able” . . . to
\end{quote}
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examine whether “common sense” (here reinterpreted as a nondetermined, nonconceptual, and nonintellectual norm) exists as a constitutive principle of the possibility of aesthetic experience or else whether, in a regulative capacity, reason commands us to produce it (hervorbringen) for more elevated purposes. This common sense is constantly presupposed by the Critique, which nevertheless holds back the analysis of it. It could be shown that this suspension ensures the complicity of a moral discourse and an empirical culturalism. (35)

One may infer from Derrida’s words that there is something about the image and its processing in the mind of the observer that inherently invites conjecture. After all, Wordsworth himself has told us that he didn’t understand at the time the significance of his experience, equating the “spectacle” with “unknown modes of being.” If we then take the loftiness of the mountain as the primary spectacle, then the somber realization that something is wrong with the picture can be understood as the “common sense” prohibition to revel in the sight with unabashed glee.

However, we should also keep in mind that the only difference between the sight of the eastern cliffs of Lake Windermere and the eastern cliffs of the Ullswater is that the poet is interrupted in his musings in the latter incident.

The bound of the horizon—for behind
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
She was an elfin pinnace; twenty times
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And as I rose upon the stroke of my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan—
When from behind that rocky steep, till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge cliff,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head. (1799, I, 101-10)

The poet is drifting into a moment of peaceful contemplation when he is musing over the stars and the grey sky, as well as the moonlight reflections, in much the same manner as he later contemplates the illuminated hills that he wishes to remember until he dies. The crucial difference is the imposition of the hulking cliff. Therefore, we should not take either experience as a mere decoration, but instead as a manifestation of Nature that—for the moment, at least—presents no moral
dilemmas to the young poet.

It is the architecture of the surroundings that we may now consider, just as Derrida finds it more expedient to dispense for the moment with Kant’s original analogy of the framed painting and instead analogize the relationship through larger and more three-dimensional structures:

Now what does a good architect do, according to Kant? He must first of all be certain of the ground, the foundation, the fundament. “A Critique of pure reason, i.e., of our faculty of judging on a priori principles, would be incomplete if the critical examination of judgment, which is a faculty of knowledge, and, as such, lays claims to independent principles, were not dealt with separately. . . .” (Meredith, 4-5). (40)

On the other hand, this foundation does not create a seamless continuity, but like any mortar, will tend to crack up a bit under stress (my analogy and not Derrida’s). Therefore, an inherent disjunction exists between that which appeals to the consciousness as an a priori principle, and that which our freedom paradoxically imposes as a necessary imposition on that freedom.

As a result, we may liken Wordsworth’s initial perception of the mountain as an a priori tempered by his prior empirical experiences, but further complicated by his question of whether his freedom to pursue his uninhibited inclinations should perhaps be curtailed. “They guided me: one evening led by them / I went alone into a shepherd’s boat” (1799, I, 81-82), what is the antecedent of the “they” who provide this guidance? Wordsworth has already answered the question in the preceding lines:

I believe
That there are spirits which, when they would form
A favored being, from his very dawn
Of infancy do open out the clouds
As at the touch of lightning, seeking him
With gentle visitation—quiet powers,
Retired, and seldom recognized, yet kind,
And to the very meanest not unknown—
With me, though rarely, in my boyish days
They communed. (1799, I, 68-77)
The crucial question is whether these spirits are enticing Wordsworth to seek out meaningful experience, or gently admonishing him when he does so. After all, as Kant has demonstrated in *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), our free-will choices should be tempered by an obligation to act on them only if they are universally binding—that is, a principle by which all can individually accept as a general rule for everyone. There is something about this prohibition (the categorical imperative) that is one of the complications in Wordsworth’s head when he turns the rowboat around and returns to shore.

Thus, we can assume that Wordsworth’s experience was in fact a time-integration that incorporates prior experience, the immediate sensory perception of the mountain, and other input as well. If this input is not prior ethical constraints—which I am arguing that it is not—then what remains is the subsequent moments of sensory perception as the boat propels away from the shore.

To make this argument, we must once again peruse the precise words of the “Stolen Boat” passage carefully to see exactly what happened and when. We first recall that Wordsworth has begun by recounting various episodes of mountain-roving that were in keeping with “spirits” that would “form / A favored being” that would interact with him “[w]ith gentle visitation.” However, Wordsworth also advises in the succeeding lines that there are more somber spirits of “[s]everer intervention,” even though the ultimate purpose of these entities are nonetheless “aiming at the self-same end.” An example, he next proffers, is the episode with the boat.

At first he sees nothing that causes consternation, and in fact the mountains are “hoary”—that is, benign and welcoming like a country child’s wonderful grey-haired grandfather. Even the voices of the spirits are evident, and in Wordsworthian fashion, the poet employs litotes to draw our attention both to the calming mountain voices and the possibility of their absence. Even though the initial rowing moments are “troubled pleasure,” we must nonetheless assume that his operating “[n]ot without the voice” is a good thing in a world where a voiceless presence might be otherwise. When the smaller hill first arises (the “rocky steep”), the poet is not only unfazed but actually takes pride in his grown-up ability to use the smaller hill as a Shakespearean “ever-fixed mark” in order to navigate more surely. The poet rows another twenty strokes, and does so with no hint of negativity, but rather “like a swan.”

Clearly, the peripeteia occurs when the huge cliff arises. Importantly, the cliff

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12 This metaphor is from Sonnet 116.
seemingly possesses impetus of its own, for it arises “[a]s if with voluntary power instinct.” Thoroughly discomfited by this point, the young poet then turns his boat and returns to shore. The integration of input is completed, but it is still helpful to return one final time to Kant’s description of the sublime, and perhaps with these lines we can close the circle:

In the immeasurableness of nature and the inadequacy of our faculty for adopting a standard proportionate to the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of its realm, we found our own limitation. But with this we also found in our rational faculty another non-sensuous standard, one which has that infinity itself under it as unit, and in comparison with which everything in nature is small, and so found in our minds a pre-eminence over nature even in its immeasurability. (Judgement 92; emphasis in original)

Precisely how we manage to do this—and how Wordsworth recalls his having done this as a boy—is analogous to delineating a work of art (or architecture) and judging it in relation to its framework, and in an inherently nonsequential and perhaps not fully conscious manner.

In light of Kant’s work on the parerga, and on Derrida’s explanation that its unfolding defies logical time sequence, the answer must be that Wordsworth had the a priori notion of a “foundation” somewhere in the back of his mind. As the “building” is nearing completion, he is made aware that “plumb lines” betray an unacceptable skewing of the necessary symmetry, and this in turn forces him to readjust his “foundation.” To return once again to Shaw’s book on the sublime, the Derridean notion of the sublime can be seen as a postmodernist effect in which “the necessity of conceptual boundaries” becomes obvious. Derrida would have us view Kant as “a post-Romantic theorist for whom the drive towards transcendence is conditioned and facilitated by the limits of the conceptual ‘system’ in which it is expressed” (Shaw 116). What I think this means in regard to Wordsworth is that the sublime moment is not one that integrates the transcendental or even supernatural with the subjective experience, but one in which the empirical chain of events is rearranged to undermine the absolute acknowledgement of any such transcendence. In more simple language, Wordsworth’s “funk” is a mental state of his own making, but only insofar as he is a subjective entity living in time and space. And if we agree that this conclusion is no so far from that which Kant himself originally delineated, it is not difficult to understand why Shaw argues that Derrida would
have us “re-read Kant” as a contemporary (116).

The question remains whether Wordsworth’s sublime experience is his hindsight recollection of an early attempt to break the normal limits of cognition, or whether he is recording with fidelity an early proleptic attempt to imagine a desirable future as a poet of Nature rather than a wanderer of the hills (and later, the cities and countryside of France). But the answer almost becomes moot, because regardless of whether the imaginative insight is proleptic or not, Wordsworth the mature poet nonetheless has integrated the sublime message as an important and early instance of “the growth of the poet’s mind”—which, after all, is the subtitle of *The Prelude*.

Thus, if Kant can indeed be taken as a kindred spirit among postmodernists—which, again, is the point that Shaw attributes to Derrida—then the dynamics of the kindred relationship can be seen in the very manner in which the Kantian mathematical sublime explains a unique subjective experience such as the “Stolen Boat” episode. Wordsworth does not back away from the experience because he sees the manner in which his perception falls short of an ideal, for if this were true, he would merely readjust his cognizance to incorporate the newly understood ideal. Rather, the integration of moments creates a deeply unsettling doubt and lack of confidence in his enterprises. It is not so much that he knows his perceptions are wrong, but that he lacks confidence that they are correct. At such times, the more prudent tack is simply to row back to shore and start anew.

In conclusion, the boat episode may be approached in a manner that transcends the abstractions of the postmodernist critics mentioned at the beginning of this study, but at the same time preserves its postmodernist moorings. To wit, the material circumstances of the poet’s physical encounter with the cliff is the key. This reading does not refute arguments such as that of Weiskel, which asserts that the episode exemplifies “altering the imagination from perception to fantasy,” but instead progresses beyond Weiskel in mooring this alteration to a physical reality. Thus, Weiskel’s celebrated analysis of the sublime may tend a bit too much toward psychological effects to fully account for the boat episode. Likewise, Sitterson’s insight that the event is structurally similar to the “fort-da” game provides a fascinating connection between Wordsworth and both Freud and Lacan, but nevertheless analogizes the boat episode rather than incorporating the mental reaction with the physical experience. Wordsworth may well have been throwing himself outward and hauling himself back moments later, so to speak, but the limitation of Sitterson’s argument seems to be that a “fort-da” explanation relegates the episode to the psychological, while neglecting to amalgamate it with the
That said, we certainly must not ignore the psychological, or else we are back to the point at which we merely celebrate Wordsworth as the poet of Nature. Therefore, interpretations such as those of Weiskel and Sitterson preserve Hartman’s assertion that “Nature itself led [Wordsworth] beyond Nature” (599) because the psychological effects of the experience must be a part of the sublime experience, even if they neglect a full integration of physical Nature. After all, the episode with the boat is the narrative of an actual occurrence, and we should never lose track of a boy who is experiencing a memorable cognitive moment from his own unique perspective at a unique point in space and moment in time. Integrating all of the aforementioned is thus a combining of the insights of Kant, Derrida, Weiskel, and the others, with the physical details of the hills above Patterdale. The “growth of a poet’s mind” is thus a growth in Kantian perspective (if indeed Wordsworth knew his Kant as did his friend Coleridge), but is also a liberation from the static forces of nature that the human consciousness excels in apprehending.

Works Cited


**About the Author**

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