

Ideology and the Sublime in William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*

Research Article
pp. 87-106

Ghiasuddin Alizadeh^{*1}

Masoud Farahmandfar²

Received: 2021/07/20

Accepted: 2022/02/12

Abstract

In order to follow the contours of Wordsworth's ideological development and the role played by the sublime in the growth of his mind, one is well-advised to follow the temporal and narrative progression of *The Prelude* (1799). Through a Žižekian analysis of Wordsworth's *magnum opus*, this study argues that the sublime can be approached from two different points. First, it can be conceived as the symbolic intrusion into the imaginary world of the subject, rifting the sense of unity and perfection, and relocating the object of desire from the imaginary to the symbolic order. Next, it can be perceived as the intrusion of the real into the symbolic order, as the lack at the heart of the Other, making a perfect correspondence of the signifying elements and the ultimate achievement of the object of desire impossible. What links these two different significations of the sublime together is the crucial realization that, in both cases, the sublime holds the place of illusory and non-existent states.

Keywords: Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, sublime, Žižek, Romantic literature

* Corresponding Author

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature and Human Sciences, Malayer University, Malayer, Iran.

Ghiasuddin.alizadeh@malayeru.ac.ir

² Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran.
farahmand@atu.ac.ir

DOI: 10.22051/lghor.2022.36979.1528

DOR: 20.1001.1.2588350.2023.7.1.4.2

Introduction

Like many of his contemporaries, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) became intellectually involved with the sublime— that power in nature and art which inspires awe and deep emotion and which is manifest in grand and wild natural scenes (Day, 2001). One of the main literary sources in which Wordsworth put forth his theory of the sublime is *The Prelude* (1799), the autobiographical account of the poet's life and the growth of his intellectual and imaginative powers. In order to gain an insight into Wordsworth's opinion about the ongoing philosophical debate regarding the sublime, therefore, we have to rely on his poetry and try to disentangle his theoretical viewpoints from the warp and woof of *The Prelude*. The amount of his dependence on, or his deviation from, the popular discussions on the concept can be measured only after a careful analysis of his colossal autobiography.

In what follows, we will try to show that the sublime played a more drastic role in Wordsworth's life than a mere abstract and philosophical concept which would have no significant bearing on the subject's social reality. Drawing on the theories of Slavoj Žižek (1949), we will argue that the notion of the sublime provided the post-revolutionary Wordsworth with the opportunity to justify his failure in actualizing his potential artistic imagination, as well as the failure of the French Revolution in realizing the apocalyptic prophesies attributed to it by the supporters of freedom and liberty all across the Europe. The sublime object(s) of Wordsworth's ideology, which constitute the focal points of *The Prelude*, point to the desperate effort of the poet to salvage a foothold for himself in a world where the long-expected angel of liberty turned out to be nothing but a devil spreading its grim shadow over the expanse of the universe.

Literature Review

Numerous studies have been carried out on the subject of the sublime in Wordsworth's poetry such as Heffernan (1967), Owen (1973), Wlecke (1973), Kelley (1984), Stoddard (1985), Myers (2008). These have mostly, if not exclusively, focused on Wordsworth's theoretical direction, trying to trace either similarities or dissimilarities with the major philosophical and psychological arguments of the time. Yet, few, if any, have ever dealt with the ideological effects

of the sublime on the poet's life and thought. For instance, two of the most significant scholarly studies in the field, Hartman (1964) and Weiskel (1976), cover the philosophical and psychological aspects of the work. For Hartman, the sublime brings the poet face to face with the ontological incapacity of Nature in meeting the needs and desires of imagination; it is a reminder that natural environment, regardless of all its sublimity, cannot satisfy the insatiable appetite of the mental faculty. Weiskel, on a different plane, links the concept of the sublime to the Freudian theory of the Oedipal complex, as "the very moment in which the mind turns within and performs its identification with reason" (pp. 93-4).

In his groundbreaking study of the Romantic poetry, *Natural Supernaturalism*, M. H. Abrams (1973) argues that Wordsworth, in line with the major literary and intellectual figures of the period, believed in the possibility of attaining self-consciousness as the ultimate purpose behind human existence. Freedom, Abrams contends, was for the Romantics the final moment in the progress towards the completion of the historical process, and it was the French Revolution, with its emphasis on freedom and liberty, that kindled in the heart of these intellectuals the hope that the time had finally arrived for humanity to build the prophesied Heaven on earth. Even when the Revolution failed in realizing its dreams, Abrams claims, the Romantics did not give up their hope of a free world; rather, they came to the conclusion that Revolution should begin, first of all, in the mind of the individual if it is to appear on the social and political scale. Thus, to Abrams, *The Prelude* is the account of the fall of the human mind from unity into discord only to be restored to a higher unity after the cyclical progress of the soul is complete and the mind is reconciled to what it believed to be impediments on its way toward self-consciousness.

Richard Stang (1966) follows Abrams' steps in his study of *The Prelude*. The poem, Stang argues, opens in a sense of frustration and mental agitation, since the poet (i.e., the voice) states that he does not have the power to embark on the colossal project of writing a poem of an epic scale. This initial moment of disappointment, Stang maintains, is the result of the fact that the poet looks for the outside world as a guide to help him through the twists and turns of his literary odyssey. However, as soon as the focus shifts from the outside to the inside, that is to say, as soon as the unconscious replaces the conscious mind as the source of

inspiration, composition begins and, as Stang concludes *a la* Abrams, “the final failure of purely political, i.e., external liberty” turns out to be nothing but “a false dawn” (p. 65), which will necessarily be succeeded by the true arrival of the morning.

Brooke Hopkins’s (1994) article focuses on the ideological overtones of *The Prelude*. Drawing on the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), Hopkins argues that the poem is a polyphonous construct in which different voices enter into a dialogical relationship, each pertaining to a specific stage in the life of the poet. This simultaneous co-presence of the voices adds to the ambiguity of the poem, as well as giving the poet the opportunity to carry out the project of self-criticism as he gives vent to his different ideological viewpoints throughout his life. Hopkins concludes that the poem denounces the illusory nature of the poet’s previous conceptions of freedom in favor of a “genuine liberty” which “is meant to be attained through the labor of its [i.e., the poem’s] reading” (p. 299).

Nonetheless, whether Wordsworth was a Kantian in his distinguishing between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds, seeing the sublime as the manifestation of the latter through a failure of the former, or he followed Burke in opposing the sublime to the beautiful and seeing in it a remedy for the weakness of the mind and soul caused by being too much exposed to beautiful shapes and scenes, it does not give us any clue as to the efficacy of the sublime in the poet’s ideological and philosophical development. It seems to be the proper time to abstract from the arguments about the nature of the sublime and its aesthetic effects in poetry and prose, and focus, instead, on the role it plays in the functioning of ideology and the constitution of the ideological subject.

Methodology and Approach

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek puts forth a painstaking and hairsplitting analysis of the Marxist concept of ideology by drawing the attention to the various ways in which an ideological discourse succeeds in deceiving ideological subjects into behaving as if it were possible to escape the ontological deadlocks and antagonisms which inherently mark the socio-symbolic order. Apropos of the problematic of ideology in relation to reality and fantasy, Žižek (2008b) maintains:

Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our 'reality' itself: an 'illusion' which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel... The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offers us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel. (p. 45)

Drawing on the Kantian notion of the sublime, Žižek equates the function of ideological fantasy with the function of the transcendental categories which, according to Kant, make possible the phenomenological appreciation of the noumenal Thing-in-Itself. “The way fantasy functions,” Žižek (2008b) argues, “can be explained through reference to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*: the role of fantasy in the economy of desire is homologous to that of transcendental schematism in the process of knowledge” (p. 133). In other words, like the Kantian notion of the sublime, ideology provides the subject with the illusion that beyond the ontological loss, beyond the social and political antagonism, there exists a consistent and unified concept of society which one day will turn into reality. “According to Lacan, a sublime object is an ordinary, everyday object which, quite by chance, finds itself occupying the place of what he calls *das Ding*, the impossible-real object of desire” (Žižek, 2008b, p. 221). In contrast to the vulgar Marxist conception of ideology as the distortion of reality, Žižek perceives ideology as a fantasy construct which, through externalizing the inconsistency inherent to the symbolic order as such, constitutes the very notion of reality. “Ideology is not simply a ‘false consciousness’, an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as ‘ideological’” (Žižek, 2008b, p. 15). That is to say, beyond the limits of ideology, there is no reality; rather, the only thing which awaits the subject beyond the veil of ideology is the empty place of the Thing.

In the same vein, Žižek (2006) probes into the nature of what he calls the “parallax gap” which separates the modes of thinking which can never become reconciled through a consistent and harmonious synthesis: “the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight” (p. 17). Žižek

(2006) explains this parallax gap as it functions in the three discursive domains of philosophy, science and politics. For him, such a parallax gap constitutes the very reality in which we live:

First, there is the ontological difference itself as the ultimate parallax which conditions our very access to reality; then there is the scientific parallax, the irreducible gap between the phenomenal experience of reality and its scientific account/explanation... last, but not least, there is the political parallax, the social antagonism which allows for no common ground between the conflicting agents. (p. 10).

That is to say, our socio-symbolic reality is overlaid with gaps which can never be filled, with conflicts and antagonisms which can never be resolved nor reconciled, since there can never be a “common ground between the conflicting agents.” Reality, Žižek contends, is a bundle of contingent and chaotic events between which no synthesis can ever be established. What we should do, as critics of ideology, is to forsake the notion of reality as a unified and consistent whole in favor of a notion of reality as rent with parallax gaps and unresolvable conflicts. That is to say, “if we look at the element which holds together the ideological edifice...from the right...perspective, we are able to recognize in it the embodiment of a lack, of a chasm of non-sense gaping in the midst of ideological meaning” (Žižek, 2008b, p. 110).

Žižek’s ideas about the fundamental role of the sublime in the constitution and the survival of an ideological field can be very helpful in dismantling the ideological layers of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* and in finding convincing answers to questions which have plagued the critical literature ever since the poem’s publication.

Argument and Discussion

The Prelude opens with the poet’s description of an autumnal day, when he has recently returned from the dull and tiresome life in London to the Lake District, the beloved countryside where he spent his childhood and adolescence. The prospect of living in natural surroundings, free from the cumbersome limitations and inconveniences of civilization, kindles in Wordsworth’s heart a flame of joy and

happiness, and brings him the tidings that poetic genius can be once again awakened from the long sleep of lethargy:

*The earth is all before me: with a heart
Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
I look about, and should the guide I chuse
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
I cannot miss my way. (Book I, ll. pp. 15-19)*

From this very early stage, a careful, analytic reading reveals a problematic, hidden, meaning behind the apparent signification of the words and sentences. It seems that the poet is disturbed by his consciousness of an embarrassing state of things, by his recognition that there is something wrong with the account he presents to the reader. In *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique* (2007), Bruce Fink points to the processes of “unprovoked denial” and “overemphasized assertion” as a way to reach the true meaning behind the analysand’s words:

In this form of denial [i.e. unprovoked denial], the analysand insists that something is not the case even when no one has claimed that it is.... In such cases of unprovoked denial, one can always ask why someone is taking the time and energy to deny something that no one in the context at hand...has in any way suggested or affirmed. One could retort that...the analysand is simply trying to forestall a conclusion that he assumes the analyst will jump to. Similar to unprovoked denials are what I call “overemphasized assertions.” Here the analysand (or politician, business leader, or someone else) affirms something so forcibly and repeatedly that the listener begins to wonder why: if the speaker so fervently believes what he is saying, why does he feel the need to stress it so appreciably? (pp. 41-42)

The subject does all he can in order to prevent the addressee from getting too close to his unconscious truth, to what he really is behind the mask of appearances. Moreover, in order to conceal the lack in himself, the subject creates the illusion of wholeness and completeness for the other’s gaze, putting the onus of probable failure on the shoulders of external, adverse elements. Perhaps the most noticeable feature of *The Prelude* is the highly emphatic language which

Wordsworth employs in order to assure the reader of his intimate relationship with Nature, of the fact that he *cannot* fail because he has been under the tutorship of Divinity throughout his life. On the other hand, the repetitive negation of certain issues points to a probable (albeit, perhaps unconscious) attempt on behalf of the poet to conceal a traumatic knowledge. For instance, we should in no way take lines such as “with a heart / Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,” “I cannot miss my way,” “not mine, and such as were not made for me” as neutral informative sentences; rather, we should take them as highly biased and pointed speech which would reveal a significant truth about the poet’s life. It seems, at this early stage, that *the whole poem is composed in order to account for the failure of Wordsworth’s ideological life as such.*

The breeze which blows on the poet arouses within him “a correspondent breeze,” which slowly turns into a powerful tempest and breaks the “long-continued frost” of imagination. Wordsworth’s heart is filled with the hope that finally, having been delivered from the bonds of his “unnatural self,” the wells of his imagination will brim with water once again, and he will be able to carry out his life-long project of writing a monumental and everlasting work. In order to follow such a high and noble purpose, the lines continue, the poet lacks none of the prerequisites. He has a “vital Soul” and a “living Mind,” which are the “first great gifts” bestowed on the great masters of poetry; his mind is replete with “general Truths”, the “Elements and Agents” of the poetic mind; in one word, he is in possession of everything “needful to build up a Poet’s praise.” Also, there are numerous themes on which his mind can settle, from tales of love and chivalry, and stories of war for religion and liberty, to personal epics and philosophic songs. However:

... I have been discouraged; gleams of light
Flash often from the East, then disappear
And mock me with a sky that ripens not
Into a steady morning: if my mind,
Remembering the sweet promise of the past,
Would gladly grapple with some noble theme,
Vain is her wish; where'er she turns she finds
Impediments from day to day renewed. (Book I, ll. pp. 134-141)

Wordsworth’s bitter confession about his constant failure to fulfill his

hopes and dreams points to a highly significant fact regarding the ideological nature of *The Prelude*. One of the main tenets of any ideological belief is the ability to invert the cause of its failure from the inside to the outside world. (Žižek, 2008b, p. 142). That is to say, when the symbolic reality fails to achieve its professed goals and aims due to purely internal problems and shortcomings, ideology locates the roots of this failure in some external ground, projecting the cause of failure to some foreign object or element. Of course, this constitutes the negative aspect of the sublime object of ideology, as "an object which is just an embodiment of the lack in the Other, in the symbolic order" (Žižek, 2008b, p. 192). Such an object finds a pivotal role in the ideological discourse since it is through the materialization of failure in this object that ideology succeeds in keeping the social and symbolic façade from falling and shattering into pieces. Wordsworth, as a subject of ideology, fails to perceive the 'true' cause of his constant failure to fulfill his dreams. Wherever he turns, he finds impediments "from day to day renewed," impediments which he believes prevent him from the germination of his poetical and imaginative faculties:

*...Thus my days are passed
I live, a mockery of the brotherhood
Of vice and virtue, with no skill to part
Vague longing that is bred by want of power,
From paramount impulse not to be withstood,
A timorous capacity, from prudence;
From circumspection, infinite delay.
Humility and modest awe themselves
Betray me, serving often for a cloak
To a more subtle selfishness, that now
Doth lock my functions up in blank reserve,
Now dupes me by an over-anxious eye
That with a false activity beats off
Simplicity and self-presented truth. (Book I, ll. pp. 238-251)*

Here, Wordsworth mentions in passing all the reasons which he believes cause his never-ending "want of power" in carrying out his project. Prudence, circumspection, humility and awe are the culprits which, the poet asserts, are

responsible for his mental stagnation is “blank reserve” and lead him astray on his journey towards “simplicity and self-presented truth.” What Wordsworth overlooks, however, is the crucial fact that *the real impediment to the growth of his poetic mind lies in the inadequacy of the poetic mind with its concept*. The most important aspect of the Hegelian dialectics, according to Žižek, is the reversal whereby the failure of the particular to correspond to its universal, of the object to correspond to its concept, is reflected back into the universal concept itself. Apropos of explaining the Hegelian critique of Kant’s notion of the sublime, Žižek (2008b) claims:

In Kant’s view, the whole movement which brings forth the feeling of the Sublime concerns only our subjective reflection external to the Thing, not the Thing-in-itself – that is, it represents only the way we, as finite subjects caught in the limits of our phenomenal experience, can mark in a negative mode the dimension of the trans-phenomenal Thing. In Hegel, however, this movement is an immediate reflexive determination of the Thing-in-itself – that is, the Thing is nothing but this reflexive movement. (p. 242)

That is to say, whereas Kant believes that the feeling of the sublime is evoked when the appearance, or phenomenon, fails to correspond to the Thing-in-itself, to the Thing which persists in its positivity beyond the veil of appearance, for Hegel, the Thing is nothing but this radical negativity, nothing but this inadequacy of the appearance to its concept. In other words, for Hegel, the Kantian Thing is nothing but the gap which forever separates the object from its concept, and the sublime is an object which gives body to and materializes this unbridgeable gap, an embodiment of the lack which is responsible for the ultimate failure of the symbolic order (Žižek, 2006, p. 25). From another perspective, the sublime object is the “negative” embodiment of our desire for unity and perfection. It is an object which gives us the promise that perfection is in itself possible, that one day we will be able to realize the concept, or the Idea, only if we manage to surmount the obstacles which for now impede our way to reach the ultimate object of our desire. The sublime object is our excuse for not being able, for having failed, to fulfill our dreams.

Wordsworth laments over his inability to realize the ideal poetic genius, over his failure to actualize the potentialities of his imaginative faculty. For him, it is

possible to surpass the gap between concept and its realization, between universal and particular. For this reason, he locates the source of his failure in external elements, the most important of which being his forced relocation from the “rural” Lake District to the city. City, in a sense, turns into a sublime object for the mature Wordsworth, who, looking back over the years, sees his poetic life as one of disappointment and defeat. If he had not been removed from the arms of Nature, had he not been delivered to the custody of the dull and tiresome life of city so early in his life, he would have reached the summit of poetry and would not have sunken into mental torpor and lethargy. City, therefore, turns into the nodal point, the *point de capiton*, which gives coherence and unity to Wordsworth’s picture of life. Without it, without its quilting function, the world which he has made for himself falls to the ground. In other words, city is sublimated in order to cover the empty place of the Thing, in order to justify the inherent failure of Nature.

For Wordsworth, Nature is the epitome of Divine creation; it is the “breath of God,” “His pure Word by miracle revealed.” As such, there are no deficiencies in Nature, and whatever defects we find in it are due to *our* inability to have an insight into the overall divine framework and plan. In a celebrated passage of the first book of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes

his childhood experience of encountering the Sublime, of how one night he stole a boat and rowed across the Lake, when all of a sudden he found himself in the presence of a high peak beyond the lake, which seemed to menace him because of stealing the boat:

...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 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. With trembling hands I turned,
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the Cavern of the Willow tree.
There, in her mooring-place, I left my Bark,
And, through the meadows homeward went, with grave
And serious thoughts. (Book I, ll. pp. 401-417)*

This passage helps us analyze the concept of the Sublime under a new light, namely, its relation to the Lacanian notions of castration and oedipal complex. Of course, one cannot fail to see in this passage a dramatization of the oedipal scenario, whereby the imaginary mother-child unity is disturbed, once and for all, due to the intrusion of the paternal metaphor. The horrid and huge shape of the “peak” disturbs the peaceful nocturnal journey across the Lake. The young poet, dipping his oar “lustily” in the water, moving swan-like on the surface of the Lake under the influence of the moon and the stars, seems to be unconsciously acting out and enjoying the imaginary unity with the mother. However, all of a sudden, he witnesses the “grim shape” which towers up “between me and the stars,” preventing him from getting closer to his destination which, read analytically, is the ultimate union with the mother. In other words, through its intrusion, the paternal metaphor of the mountain peak, with its erect and phallic shape, signifies the impossibility of reaching the ultimate object of desire, namely, the mother. The young Wordsworth, afraid at the sight of this unwelcome intruder, finds no way other than turning back to the shore and putting an abrupt end to his quest.

The effect of this encounter with the sublime image of the mountain, that is, the effect of castration on the psychical world of the poet is keenly described in the lines which follow. From the moment, up until many days, nothing seems to be the same as before. Wordsworth sees everything under a new light. The pleasant images of nature evacuate his mind, and nothing occupies their place but “huge and mighty forms” which remind him of the frightening shape of the mountain peak. In analytic terms, all the imaginary objects of the child’s world are mortified by the intrusion of the Name of the Father, by the intrusion of signifiers occupying the place of imaginary objects. (Fink, 1995, p.120). The disintegration of the imaginary unity separates, forever, the child from ultimate union with the mother, putting her beyond reach as the impossible/prohibited object of desire. And it is precisely at this point

that the psychoanalytical concept of castration reveals its relevance to the argument of the sublime. In a sense, the sublime disturbs the relationship between the subject and Nature, creating a discordance at the heart of the supposedly harmonious connection between human beings and the surrounding world. That is to say, the experience of encountering the sublime introduces a gap into the subject's conception of Nature as a comprehensible totality. All of a sudden, the subject finds himself in the presence of an unknowable, incomprehensible phenomenon which does not fit into any existing system of signification. At this moment, Nature no longer functions as the passive object of perception, exposed before the subject's gaze; rather, it turns into a blot which blurs the subject's overall appreciation of the picture. (Lacan, 1998, p. 96). In Lacanian terms, the moment of the encounter with the sublime is the moment of Nature's 'de-subjectivization', the moment Nature turns the gaze back onto the subject himself. (Žižek, 1992, p. 186). The subject stares at the scene, yet its signification eludes him. It is at such a moment that the subject realizes the insufficiency of his mental apparatus to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of Nature, that he becomes aware of the radical impossibility which marks the core of the world around him. In other words, the effect of encountering the sublime is the same as the effect of castration, albeit on the optical and intellectual plane. The image of the sublime (which is almost exclusively of a phallic shape) creates a rupture in the subject's unity with the Mother Nature, turning the prospect of an ultimate possession of her into a mirage.

In yet another sense, the sublime is the moment of the intrusion of the real into the texture of the symbolic order, the moment when the subject recognizes the elemental nullity and the radical impotency of the Other, when it becomes apparent "that the Other (the symbolic order) is only a fiction" (Žižek, 2008a, p. 251). The sublime resembles the real in that, like the latter, it disturbs the symbolic reality by its obstinate resistance to interpretation, by its aversion to all the categories of understanding. It materializes the lack in Nature and gives body to the fact that Nature (as a consistent, totally comprehensible whole) does not exist. Thus, the ideal picture which the subject ever drew from Nature melts into thin air, and what remains is nothing other than the strange and morbid pile of objects which no longer signify anything. Harmony and order give their place to discord and chaos, leaving behind nothing but the fanciful illusion of a prelapsarian, primordial, time when

humanity was one with Nature, when human beings recognized themselves in the universe.

Therefore, the sublime can be approached from two different points. First, it can be conceived as the symbolic intrusion into the imaginary world of the subject, rifting the sense of unity and perfection, and relocating the object of desire from the imaginary to the symbolic order. Next, it can be perceived as the intrusion of the real into the symbolic order, as the lack at the heart of the Other, making a perfect correspondence of the signifying elements and the ultimate achievement of the object of desire impossible. What links these two different significations of the sublime together is the crucial realization that, in both cases, the sublime holds the place of illusory and non-existent states. In the first case, the sense of unity is an illusion, a state which has not existed in the first place. That is to say, the imaginary unity with the object of desire, later on disturbed by the intrusion of a third party, is a fantasy of a subject who has always found himself lacking and in search of the ultimate object of desire. In the second case, the real is also nothing but a subsequent creation of the symbolic order, the effect of the system of signification rather than its cause. In other words, the real comes into being the moment the symbolic order finds itself incapable of corresponding to its notion, the moment it recognizes the impossibility of perfect signification. In both cases, the sublime is a fantasy creation in order to justify the present state of things. The sublime did not put an end to an existing unity, neither did it create a hole at the heart of the symbolic system. It is, as Žižek often points out (2008b, p. 59), the case of a cause which comes after its effect: first we find the lack and only then do we look for its cause.

It is in this sense that we find the sublime experience appealing and appalling at the same time. Appalling because it disintegrates our illusory sense of unity with Nature; appealing because it gives us a chance to sink into our illusion, giving us a breathing space against the dark and bitter truth of our being. In other words, the sublime points to a state beyond itself, to a realm in which once we abided and we are now fallen from it. In a sense, it promises us that, behind the appearance of this world, filled as it is with wants and lacks, there is the Thing-in-itself, i.e. the ultimate object of our desire. The sublime, as it were, takes the full responsibility of our fallen, split, existence on itself, thus saving us from realizing the traumatic truth of the Other's ontological incompleteness. For Hegel, it was

Kant's attempt to avoid facing this traumatic truth that led to his supposition of the Thing-in-itself as a positive being forever excluded from our comprehension. The weight of acknowledging the intrinsic failure of reality was so heavy for Kant that he was more than ready to attribute the apparent inconsistencies of the system to his own limited capacity to understand the Thing-in-itself. The sublime, for Kant, marked the failure of our cognitive power to encompass the boundless realm of the real, to reach behind the phenomena to the noumenal realm. For Hegel, however, the sublime does not point to anything beyond itself. The supersensible Thing, Hegel argues, is nothing but a fantasy creation of philosophy in order to account for the present state of things. (Žižek, 2008b, p. 194). In ideological terms, the sublime is a privileged object which justifies the apparent failure of the social field, by giving body to the cause of our social problems, whereby, in an act of ideological inversion, the lack, inherent to the system, is projected onto an external object.

The effect of the encounter with the sublime, however, is passed unnoticed by the poet. His strong belief in the perfection of Nature prevents him from acknowledging the fact that perhaps the reason behind the failure of his poetic mind has not been anything *other than the failure of his source of inspiration itself*. Wordsworth's failure, he believes, is the effect of his separation from Nature and being overwhelmed in the trivialities of academic life and, later on, the life of the metropolitan London. The source of failure cannot be Nature since Nature is the mighty work of the Universal Wisdom, not the vulgar work of humanity. Therefore, phenomena such as the sublime, which seem at first glance to deviate from the immutable laws of Nature, turn out to be necessary elements in the education and the purification of the soul. The lines, preceding the passage of the encounter with the sublime, best portray Wordsworth's view on such apparently problematic experiences:

*...there is a dark
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, makes them cling together
In one society. How strange that all
The terrors, pains, and early miseries,
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes, interfused
Within my mind, should e'er have borne a part,*

*And that a needful part, in making up
The calm existence that is mine when I
Am worthy of myself! Praise to the end!
Thanks to the means which Nature deigned to employ! (Book I, ll.
pp. 352-366; emphasis added)*

Of course, Wordsworth is right in his assertion that there is “a dark inscrutable workmanship” which is responsible for the reconciliation of the apparent conflicts, turning discordant sounds and voices into a harmonious melody. From a Marxist vantage, such a conciliatory and pacifying role is unequivocally played by ideology. It is through ideology and ideological fantasy that we learn to see the world as we do, that we learn to see peace in conflict, happiness in misery, and victory in defeat. (Žižek, 2008b, p. 142). Nature does not speak or act by itself; it is we, the subjects of ideology, who give voice to the otherwise mute mountains, rivers, and trees. In the Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth describes the principal object of the work to have been to select “incidents and situation from common life, and relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, *whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect*” (Brett & Jones, 1991, p. 236). Wordsworth seems to be well aware that, without “a certain colouring of imagination,” natural objects fail to rouse the human mind from torpor and lassitude, that Nature, in itself, is nothing but a “neutral” proximity of objects, incapable to carry out the lofty project of the universal guidance of mankind. Therefore, the “ghostly language of the ancient earth” is nothing other than the voice of the poet himself which is projected to the mute and silent Nature, proclaiming ideological “fictions” in the name of universal facts and “truths.”

However, in spite of his consciousness and awareness, Wordsworth follows the logic of the fetishistic disavowal (Žižek, 2008b, p. 12), conveyed by the formula: “I know very well that [Nature is in itself incapable of communicating any truths to human beings;] however, I act as if [it is the ultimate guarantee of truth, the only medium which reveals divine wisdom and could educate and purify the human soul].” In other words, Wordsworth knows very well that Nature is not a unified and complete whole, that it is a lacking structure like all the other systems (his childhood

experience of encountering the sublime mountain peak at least points to this fact); however, in order to maintain the integrity of his psychical world, in order to save his life from collapsing into the abyss of psychotic disturbances, he *acts as if he does not know*. Here we are at the exact opposite pole of Marx's classical definition of ideology as "they do not know it, but they are doing it." As Žižek (2008b) puts it, the true formula of an ideological consciousness should put the stress not on "knowledge" but on the "act", that while people *know*, for instance, that money in itself is nothing but a worthless piece of paper, nonetheless they *act* as if it really possessed an intrinsic value of its own. (p. 27).

In the same vein, in order to give validity and a sense of consecration to his ideological inclinations, Wordsworth appeals to the universal wisdom of Nature and acts accordingly, in spite of his knowledge that there is no unique feature which would distinguish Nature from, say, City as such. In order to prove this point, it is enough to pay close attention to the passages in which Wordsworth addresses his life-long friend and companion, and the main addressee of *The Prelude*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). Unlike Wordsworth who spent his childhood and adolescence in a rural area, among natural objects and scenes, Coleridge grew up in London, where no trace of Nature could ever be found. However, in spite of being thus deprived, Coleridge manages to rise to the same heights as those by Wordsworth:

*Thou, my Friend! wert reared
In the great City, 'mid far other scenes;
But we, by different roads at length have gained
The self-same bourne. And for this cause to Thee
I speak, unapprehensive of contempt,
The insinuated scoff of coward tongues,
And all that silent language which so oft
In conversation betwixt man and man
Blots from the human countenance all trace
Of beauty and of love. For Thou hast sought
The truth in solitude... (Book III, ll. pp. 466-475)*

In fact, these lines create an oppositional atmosphere within the entirety of the poem, since they reveal Wordsworth's belief in the possibility of gaining

“genuine” and “pure” knowledge far away from the natural domain, in the middle of the trivialities of the urban life. That is to say, it is not necessary to dwell constantly among natural objects, to have perpetual communication with birds, mountains, flowers, trees, rivers and lakes, in order to find truth and achieve greatness of mind and soul. Here, “solitude” takes Nature’s place in leading the soul towards perfection. It is in solitude, Wordsworth claims, that Coleridge has found truth, in those moments when the soul shrinks back from the outside world and plunges deep into the remote recesses of the mind. Therefore, it becomes clear that Wordsworth’s tirade against the city as the reason behind his mental sluggishness and torpidity cannot be justified.

If Coleridge could survive the hustle and bustle of city life and keep his imaginative faculty sharp and keen, then it turns out that City is nothing but a scapegoat which would account for Wordsworth’s failure in fulfilling his dreams. In other words, on his way towards poetical and spiritual perfection, Wordsworth reaches an untraversable gap which impedes his progress, where, in an act of ideological inversion, he externalizes the sources of failure. For him, City turns into a sublime object (albeit of a negative nature), giving body to all the internal gaps and inconsistencies which have brought about his imaginative and poetic downfall. And this best clarifies the elevated place of City in the poet’s psychical economy, since, the moment it would dissipate and cease to function as the cause of failure, Wordsworth’s world would fall apart into pieces. That is, it makes it possible for Wordsworth to escape the traumatic knowledge that there is no way leading to perfection, that all the attempts to reach wholeness and integrity are doomed to failure.

Conclusion

Wordsworth never seemed to stop believing in the truth of the sublime objects, to stop searching for the roots of failure outside the ideological field: the lesson which he overlooked when he was a child, when he perceived the negative force inside Nature itself in the experience of the sublime shape of the mountain peak, and the one he ignored when he witnessed the failure of the ideals of the French Revolution. Robespierre, Napoleon, City, all were surrogates for the system’s internal impossibility, ordinary object which by historical chance were

elected to materialize the Other's inherent infirmity and non-existence. Wordsworth's seeming ignorance of this crucial fact was the main reason behind his life-long mental and spiritual crises which showed themselves more and more as he grew more and more in age. From psychoanalytical perspective, Wordsworth failed in traversing his fundamental fantasy, in coming to terms with the ontological non-existence of the Other, with the primordial non-closure of the signifying system. Thus, we can consider *The Prelude* as Wordsworth's desperate attempt to save his ideological fantasy from falling to the ground, an attempt to prove both to himself and to the Other (materialized in the person of Coleridge, the absent addressee of the poem) that the Other exists, to prove that behind the disintegrated and lacking reality there is a unified and complete Whole, which is accessible through active inherence to and honest discipleship of Nature. *The Prelude* is the creation of an uneasy mind, of the mind of a poet whose (albeit illusory) belief in the perfection of Nature as the ultimate revelation of the Divine Spirit has helped him to rise above the ideological turbulences of his time, to find peace and solace though "[t]his Age fall back to idolatry, / Though Men return to servitude as fast / as the tide ebbs" (Book XIII, ll. pp. 432-434). By the end of the poem, Wordsworth has turned into the "Prophet of Nature," and *The Prelude* the guiding principle of humanity, "A lasting inspiration, sanctified / by reason, blest by faith":

what we have loved

Others will love; and we may teach them how,

Instruct them how the mind of man becomes

A thousand times more beautiful than the earth

On which he dwells, above this Frame of things

(Which, 'mid all revolutions in the hopes

And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)

In beauty exalted, as it is itself

Of substance and of fabric more divine. (Book XIII, ll. pp. 444-452)

References

- Abrams, M. H. (1973). *Natural supernaturalism: Tradition and revolution in romantic literature*. Norton.
- Brett, R. L., & Jones, A. R. (1991). *Lyrical ballads: William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Day, A. (2001). *Romanticism*. Routledge.
- Fink, B. (1995). *The Lacanian subject: Between language and jouissance*. Princeton University Press.
- Fink, B. (2007). *Fundamentals of psychoanalytic technique*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Hartman, G. (1964). *Wordsworth's poetry 1787-1814*. Yale University Press.
- Heffernan, J. A. W. (1967). Wordsworth on the sublime: The quest for interfusion. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 7(4), 605-615. <https://doi.org/10.2307/449528>
- Hopkins, B. (1994). Wordsworth's voices: Ideology and self-critique in "The Prelude." *Studies in Romanticism*, 33(2), 279-299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25601060>
- Kelley, T. M. (1984) Wordsworth, Kant, and the romantic sublime. *Philological Quarterly*, 63(1), 130.
- Lacan, J. (1998). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan: The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis (Book XI)* (Revised ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Myers, B. P. (2008). Wordsworth's financial sublime: Money and meaning in book VII of "The Prelude." *South Central Review*, 25(2), 80-90.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40211265>
- Owen, W. (1973). The sublime and the beautiful in *The Prelude*. *The Wordsworth Circle*, 4(2), 67-86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24039116>
- Stang, R. (1966). The false dawn: A study of the opening of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. *ELH*, 33(1), 53-65. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2872134>
- Stoddard, E. (1985). Flashes of the invisible world: Reading *The Prelude* in the context of the Kantian sublime. *The Wordsworth Circle*, 16(1), 32-37.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24040569>
- Weiskel, T. (1976) *The romantic sublime: Studies in the structure and psychology of transcendence*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wlecke, Albert O. (1973). *Wordsworth and the Sublime*. University of California.
- Wordsworth, W. (1995) *The Prelude*. London: Penguin.
- Žižek, S. (1992). *Enjoy your symptom*. Routledge.
- Žižek, S. (2006). *The parallax view*. MIT Press.
- Žižek, S. (2008a). *For they know not what they do*. Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2008b). *The sublime object of ideology* (2nd ed.). Verso.

