

Directed Studies Literature
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Eliana Dockterman

Paradise Lost, Again

by Eliana Dockterman

At first blush, Wordsworth's "Nutting" appears to be an elaborate sexual metaphor for man's "rape" of nature. The poem is littered with the sexual language of rape: the "virgin scene" of hazels rising "tall and erect" is "tempting" to the boy who finally "[rises] up" to "ravage" the trees in the bower he has visited.¹ Yet in light of Wordsworth's spiritual treatment of nature in his other works, nature's "tempting" man cannot be merely sexual; he may have had a more ambitious agenda when writing "Nutting." Just as his "Prelude" is often perceived to be a rewriting of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "Nutting," too, can be read as Wordsworth's reinterpretation of the Fall of Man. But rather than merely tracing man's fall from God's grace, Wordsworth, employing various poetic devices, seeks to trace the psychological process through which the protagonist of the poem brings about his own sin against Nature and subsequent Fall.

Wordsworth begins his poem by hinting at the parallel between Eden and the setting of "Nutting." The narrator begins by recalling his boyhood activities on "One of those heavenly days that cannot die" (3). Wordsworth's diction evokes the prelapsarian world of the Garden: he calls the occasion "heavenly" and eternal ("cannot die"), just as place, time, and existence were for Adam and Eve. Thus, the setting of the poem begins as perfect, eternal, and Eden-like.

Having efficiently created Eden, Wordsworth paints a paradoxical picture of nascent pride within the boy, setting the scene for the pride before the Fall. The voice describes his boyhood self on that day as "a Figure quaint, / Tricked out in proud disguise of cast-off weeds" (9-10). Here,

¹ Wordsworth, William. "Nutting" (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965) 21, 22, 43, and 45.

Wordsworth employs paradox by juxtaposing two contradictory ideas—the idea of being “tricked out in proud disguise” and that of being “quaint” in “cast-off weeds.” Ironically, the humble dress of the boy is very proud. The boy’s regular clothes are too good for Nature, so he uses “husbanded” castoffs instead (11). The elaborate process of costuming himself in old garments, which the older speaker admits were “more ragged than need was,” demonstrates a surprising false humility, which only highlights the excessive pride of man (14). The time Wordsworth spends describing the clothes also indicates something of man’s silliness and vanity in his preoccupation with his outward appearance as opposed to his natural self. Just as when the reader senses hints of pride before the Fall in Eve’s vanity in *Paradise Lost*, the reader of Wordsworth’s poem senses that the boy’s own pride will eventually cause his Fall.

In the next passage, Wordsworth explicitly foreshadows how the Fall will occur. When the boy encounters the pristine bower of hazel trees, negative constructs predict transgression and destruction. Wordsworth writes, “I came to a dear nook / Unvisited, where not a broken bough / Drooped with its withered leaves, ungracious sign / Of devastation” (17-19). The poet does not describe the scene by explaining what *is* there. Rather, he describes what is “*not*” there—no broken boughs, no withered leaves, no devastation. Wordsworth employs negatives to describe the beauty of the scene, slyly insinuating the degradation to come. The sylvan description paired with the comment that if the vegetation were broken and withered it would be an “ungracious sign of devastation,” foreshadows the boy’s ravaging of the woods and a consequent fall from grace (16). By describing the scene in the negative, Wordsworth also suggests that the destruction is predestined. Both suggestions clearly refer to the Fall. But Wordsworth also advances his psychological theme, underscoring the point that the boy—or the wiser man in retrospect—perceives the forest in the way that he will eventually affect it; already he recognizes his impact on the place.

As the boy surveys the hazel tree bower, Wordsworth introduces his version of the temptation. Looking upon the forest, the narrator describes, “The hazels rose with tempting clusters hung, / A virgin scene!—A little while I stood, / Breathing with such suppression of the heart / As joy delights in; and, with wise restraint / Voluptuous, fearless of a rival, eyed / The banquet” (20-25). When the boy looks upon the untouched setting, he takes on the persona of Eve, perceiving the woods as “tempting.” These images recall the temptation in the Garden itself, with the bower of trees (rather than the single Tree of Knowledge) playing the role of the temptress. When he encounters the bower, the boy reveals his sense of entitlement; the scene is a “banquet,” laid out for him to eye with pleasure, something grand at his disposal. Later, the boy looks at this finding as his own personal gain and thinks he has “been blessed” (26). The focus is on the self, and Nature plays a secondary role, serving the boy’s appetite. Even though he perceives the scene as his gift—and thus perceives himself as the master of it—he exhibits “wise restraint” and initially resists the temptation (23). For now, the boy retains a respect for Nature.

Yet somehow the boy transitions from “wise restraint” to his eventual desolation of Nature. In *Paradise Lost*, Eve’s basic vanity is not sufficient; it takes the Devil to intervene and persuade her. In Wordsworth’s Garden, Man alone is responsible for his downfall and, in the next passage, Wordsworth maps out the process. Wordsworth launches into a mystical description of the child’s savoring the spot. Here, Man and Nature meld. The speaker describes a place in which the “violets of five seasons re-appear / And fade, unseen by the human eye” (31-31). Using violets as a symbol for innocence, Wordsworth emphasizes the purity of both the child and nature. The violets also suggest that both share in the eternal; for though the violets “fade,” they also “re-appear” in the everlasting cycle of Nature. The reader is reminded of the days that “cannot die” at the beginning of the poem.

Wordsworth then employs assonance, consonance, alliteration, and repetition to evoke a hypnotic and idyllic space. He repeats long ‘ee’ sounds throughout the passage—“leaves,” “seasons,” “re-appear,” “unseen,” “cheek,” “green,” “fleeced,” “beneath,” “trees,” “sheep,” “sweet,” and “ease,” soothing the reader with the repetitive vowels and guiding him into the paradisiacal setting (28-38). ‘S/sh’ sounds also figure prominently (“unseen,” “sparkling,” “stones,” “moss,” “shady,” “scattered,” “sheep,” “sound,” “sweet,” “ease,” and “secure”), evoking whispering and thus softness and pleasure (28-38). Nature thoroughly saturates the boy’s imagination and envelops him into a completely natural domain. This place, “unseen by the human eye,” is special not only because of its independence from humanity, but also because—in the boy’s mind—it boasts mystical qualities: “Where fairy water-breaks do murmur on / For ever; and I saw the sparkling foam” (34-35). In a transcendent realm, the boy imagines fairies and “sparkling foam” in the scene. Again, the boy envisions himself to be in a setting that is eternal (as Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden): he describes the water-breaks as murmuring “for ever.” Wordsworth continues the passages with more comforting onomatopoeic wordplay, lulling the reader into a trance with ‘m’ sounds in “murmur,” “foam,” “moss,” “me,” “murmuring,” and “mood” (33-39). Wordsworth entrances the reader with this beautiful and serene Eden, only to startle her when the boy suddenly rises up and ravages the bower.

The crux of the poem is in this development of the boy’s attitude, as he passes from dallying with the flowers to a “mood” in which he acknowledges that his “joy” in the gifts of nature “is secure” and his “heart luxuriates with indifferent things” (40 and 41). His view quickly shifts from gloriously melding with Nature to viewing Nature as “indifferent things.” His realization that his “joy is secure,” so that he may “luxuriate” in Nature, prompts this transition to a sense of entitlement—a characteristic that Wordsworth had hinted at when the boy adorned himself in “proud disguise” and again when the boy first looked upon the wood. The boy becomes

infuriated by the idea that his heart is “Wasting its kindliness on stocks and stones, / And on the vacant air” (42-43). He now sees the earth as merely a collection of available, lifeless objects—“stocks and stones.” The words “vacant air” specifically suggest that he now believes Nature to be empty and soulless. The word Wordsworth uses to describe the boy’s action immediately preceding his volte-face is significant: “luxuriates.” The word connotes over-indulgence due to abundance and even excess. By over-indulging, Man becomes jaded to Nature’s gifts; once the boy develops this jadedness, he sees Nature as cheap, available, and, ultimately soulless. This is his sin. The transformation is reflected structurally in the break mid-line with the end of the sentence “And on the vacant air.” Wordsworth visually highlights the drastic change in the boy’s mood from wise restraint to merciless rage as one sentence ends and the next begins.

The boy’s quick and ruthless destruction of the bower is characterized by gratuitous violence that reinforces for the reader how man’s dying appreciation and respect for Nature is, to Wordsworth, Man’s Original Sin. Wordsworth suddenly quickens the pace of the action with anaphora, repeating, “And... And... And” at the beginning of consecutive lines (43-45). The reader is caught up in the boy’s rushed emotion. Anaphora appears paired with a flurry of hard consonant sounds, emphasizing the brutality: “Then **up** I rose, / And **dragged** to earth **both branch** and **bough**, with **crash**” (43-44). In contrast to this wild violence stands Nature reflected by the branches which “Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up / Their quiet being” (47-48). Perhaps Wordsworth’s version is like Milton’s in that Nature, like God, permits the sin. However, Wordsworth’s version is far from abstractly metaphysical; rather, it is grounded in the natural essence of the earth and man’s psychology. The physical destruction of the bower is real and palpable as the boy moves from awe to surfeit to, finally, contempt and destruction.

In the conclusion, the boy almost immediately regrets his transgression, just as Adam and Eve did. Suddenly, the boy shifts from “exulting” in his unequal victory over Nature to feeling

“pain” (51, 52). The gaping wound of the “intruding sky” signals to him that he has disfigured the bower, and, in doing so, he has destroyed his own source of pleasure, his own Paradise (53). He has torn Eden apart and thus has devastated what he so recently thought to be eternal. The speed with which he moves from the moment of purity to the moment of sin and rage shows how aware man must be of the temptation to succumb to indulgence and indifference.

Yet Wordsworth, like Milton, suggests the possibility of redemption. As Adam and Eve gained painful knowledge in their transgression, so too does the boy. In Wordsworth’s version, the boy, now grown into an older man, passes on his newfound and painful knowledge to someone else—the “dearest Maiden”—so that this transgression against nature will not happen again. Thus, though the boy may fall, it is not necessarily an unhappy Fall. Just as Milton offers his reader hope as Adam and Eve walk into the brave, new world hand in hand, Wordsworth assures his reader that *his* protagonist has learned his lesson and has passed it on to a loved one. The boy, now as a grown man, can recall his knowledge for the Maiden in that man should treat Nature with “gentleness of heart; with gentle hand / Touch—for there is a spirit in the woods” (55-56). Paradise need not necessarily be “lost” forever nor for all of man. For Milton, Paradise regained is the story of Christ and God as Man’s Redeemer. In “Nutting” Wordsworth argues that it lies within the hands of Man himself to find redemption, by passing the lesson of Nature’s soul to others.

Works Cited

Wordsworth, William. “Nutting.” 1798. *Wordsworth, The Major Works*. New York: Oxford, 2008.