Shadow of the Non-Corresponding Other: "Material Nature" in Wordsworth's Poetry[1]

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1. Ecocriticism and Nature's Materiality

Materiality, in principle, is out of bounds for literature. Systems of linguistic signs on which literary texts are based comprise Saussurean differences that ontologically precede signs themselves. Thus, for literary works to deal with material existences per se is theoretically impossible. Literature in this sense is ultimately textual, immured in the prison-house of language.

This does not indicate, however, that literature can do without external reality. Many literary works may be written under the anxiety of textual influence as Harold Bloom defines it. Such texts, however, do not exhaust all that is written for creative purposes. Motivation to write also lies outside the textual sphere. This is what Yves Bonnefoy claims in his article "Lifting Our Eyes from the Page." Regardless of the claim of modern literary criticism, "the work studied . . . might have been an experience of the tragedy of life" (Bonnefoy 796). The poet's business is to "stir up the need for it [experience], keep open the path that leads toward it" (801). Bonnefoy asserts that intentionality towards the external world is among the principal motives of artistic creation and that one chief role of literary works is to lead their readers' attention towards things and incidents outside their texts. Among various positions in literary criticism, ecocriticism has particularly strong awareness of such extra-textual direction's significance because this school developed from recognition of the world's undeniable material reality—accelerating deterioration of the natural environment.[2]

Indeed, some leading ecocritics have concerned themselves with textual representations in connection with external nature's material existence. James C. McKusick, for instance, has found linguistic ecosystems in the poetry of John Clare and Samuel Taylor Coleridge to be comparable with those in the real world. According to McKusick, Clare allows language and the external world to permeate each other by creating linguistic analogues to things in nature. The title assigned to a collection of his poems, *The Midsummer Cushion*, refers to a piece of greensward on which wild flowers grow. With its poems corresponding to these flowers, the collection is clearly intended to be a linguistic equivalent of this mini-ecosystem (McKusick 88, 89–90). Furthermore, McKusick interprets Coleridge's 1798 poem, *The Ancyent Marinere*, as an ecosystem of language. The poem's use of archaic diction and spelling, in particular, emphasises the growth of words over time, leading to recognition of language as an organic being (McKusick 48–49).

Onno Oerlemans also takes up the materiality of nature in his 2002 study, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature*. Its chapter devoted to Wordsworth claims that the poet "directly confronts the physical . . . materiality or otherness of nature" (34). Despite his philosophical view that nature is permeated by divinity, Wordsworth is simultaneously aware of "material reality" (35), which is indifferent, hostile and inimical to this metaphysical conviction. From this perspective, Oerlemans examines nature's materiality in recognition scenes of death in Wordsworth's elegiac verse. More recently, in *Romantic Things*, Mary Jacobus discusses "things" as represented in poetry, an issue closely related to nature's physical presence. While keeping her main focus on Wordsworth and his elegiac poetry, Jacobus substantiates her argument by investigating a wide range of poets and thinkers, from the British Romantics to modern poets and philosophers.

Another noteworthy critical perspective is "material ecocriticism," a concept advanced by Serenella Iovino, Serpil Oppermann and others. This burgeoning school draws on the recent development of "new materialisms," which claim "kinship between out-side and in-side, the mind and the world . . . in non-dualistic perspective" (Iovnio and Oppermann 79). New materialisms stress the concreteness of existential fields, non-human systems of signs and the idea that matter possesses agency. Material ecocriticism thus concerns "matter's (or nature's) non-human agentic capacities" (79) and their representation in narrative texts.

With these "material" trends in ecocriticism in mind, this study attempts a fresh reading of Wordsworth's poetry. Wordsworth famously composed poems on the scenery of the English Lake District, the West Country and the Alps. His nature poetry is multidimensional and has inspired rich critical readings including, in recent years, ecocritical interpretations. A new critical perspective endowed with awareness of nature's materiality may uncover further significance in his works. Among a number of interpretive strategies available, I choose those proposed by Kate Rigby and Steven Vogel. The former considers materiality represented in works of art as nature's otherness, and the latter develops a comprehensive perspective for examining modern philosophical thinking on nature. Rigby's interpretation combined with Vogel's theoretical argument may help us bring material otherness to light in Wordsworth's poetry of nature.

2. Wordsworth's Nature: Origin and Critique

As nature poet, Wordsworth was at the height of his creativity from his late twenties to mid-thirties, and a number of critical views have been proposed for understanding his works from this period. For this article's argument, the philosophical framework that Vogel has advanced seems particularly effective. In an article originally published in 1999, Vogel categorises modern philosophical thinking on nature into four types: "nature as origin," "the critique of nature," "nature as difference" and "nature and practice." Of these, the first three are particularly relevant to my argument, and I will touch upon the fourth briefly towards the end of my discussion. In this section, I establish the context for my argument by examining the first two categories.

The first category, nature as origin, believes nature to be an organic whole from which human culture and society originated, but have since been estranged. This view, which can be called Rousseauian or Romantic, is characterised by a degree of naivety and was subjected to criticism with the advent of post-structuralism in the late twentieth century. Post-structuralism revealed the "constructedness" of the concept of nature, showing that the appearance of what is natural requires a complex process of linguistic and social construction. This philosophical stance is what Vogel calls the critique of nature, the second of his four categories (Vogel 297–98).

Interestingly, traditional literary criticism has long suggested that Wordsworthian nature has to do not only with the first but also with the second of Vogel's categories. Conventional critical readings see the central philosophical position of Wordsworth's meditative poem, "Tintern Abbey," as nature as origin. The poem's narrator owes to the "forms of beauty" (24) along the River Wye "sensations sweet" (28) and feelings of "unremembered pleasure" (32), the latter described as having moral influence on the poet's life. Nature as origin then leads the poet to the redeeming experience of recognising "the life of things" (50) in those "forms of beauty" (24), and to that of perceiving "something far more deeply interfused" (97), a divine presence pervading the entire world. *The Prelude*, too, celebrates the holistic presence of nature: "with bliss ineffable / I felt the sentiment of being, spread / O'er all that moves, and all that seemeth still" (1799.2.449–51). Both these poems assume that nature is a divine organic presence that responds sympathetically to human imagination. Furthermore, the poems imply that humanity originated from nature and should ideally be reintegrated with it.

Wordsworth, however, does not always feel one with nature, nor does he invariably describe a universal order permeated by divinity. Despite such epiphanic moments as evoked in the two poems above, the blessings of nature are often out of reach for the poet. Once in a while, Wordsworth has an agnostic doubt about nature as origin. A shadow of scepticism can be observed in statements of reservation in "Tintern Abbey": "If this / Be but a vain belief" (50–51) and "perchance / If I were not thus taught" (112–13). *The Prelude* admits to a similar misgiving: "If this be error, and another faith / Find easier access to the pious mind" (1799.2.465–66). The "bliss ineffable" of natural holism may ultimately be unsustainable for Wordsworth.[3]

Studying Wordsworth's thinking during this period, critic Jonathan Wordsworth demonstrates the poet's holistic view of nature as subtly but crucially weakened. Referring to the compositional process of fragments intended for the 1799 version of *The Prelude*, the critic argues that in one of them, written in February 1799, Wordsworth shows an unabated faith in the total unity of nature, divinity and humanity. In that fragment, the poet believes in "the one interior life . . . In which all beings live with God, themselves / Are God, existing in one mighty whole" (MS. 33; *Prelude 1798–1799* 165). In the revision of late 1799, however, he modifies these lines into a more cautious view in which beings, nature and God are separate entities that may or may not be amalgamated into a single whole: ". . . all beings live with God, are lost / In God and Nature" (MS. RV; *Prelude 1798–1799* 207). Finally, in the fair copy of the 1799 *Prelude*, this sequence is cut altogether (J. Wordsworth, "Two-Part *Prelude*" 574).

That Coleridge was Wordsworth's philosophical mentor from the late 1790s to the early 1800s is well known, and Coleridge, too, perceives nature elusive as a unified, organic whole. While endeavouring to affirm an all-encompassing divine principle in the universe, he admits that this vision is, in truth, unavailable to him much of the time: "I can at times feel strongly the beauties, you [his correspondent John Thelwall] describe . . . but more frequently all things appear little . . . the universe itself—what but an immense heap of little things?" (*Letters* 349).

These pieces of evidence indicate that even before the arrival of modern critical views, Wordsworth and Coleridge were aware that nature as origin might be untenable. Wordsworth's nature poetry becomes, accordingly, an endless pursuit, rather than a static description, of the unity of being: ". . . whatsoever point they [the mind's faculties] gain they still / Have something to pursue" (*Prelude* 1799.2.370–71). Nature as origin does not seem to exist autonomously. Rather, it requires the participation of human consciousness. The Romantics, and their French forerunner Jean-Jacques Rousseau, may certainly be credited with natural holism that subsumes the human, natural and divine. However, it is also correct to consider these thinkers as going beyond modernity and to associate them, at least partially, with the newer concept of the critique of nature.

3. Another Face of Wordsworthian Nature: Otherness and Materiality

Vogel's philosophical interpretation seems to work particularly well in explaining Wordsworth's poetry of nature. The poet's concern with nature has produced literary visions that a philosophical perspective can appreciate two centuries later. The third category proposed by Vogel, then, may shed further light on Wordsworth's nature poetry.

The critique of nature, Vogel's second category, has deconstructed nature into an assemblage of human artefacts. As Vogel himself claims, as important an achievement as it is, such a position may not be very useful in the current age of environmental deterioration. Humanity today urgently needs a standard by which the environmental consequences of their actions can be judged; however, such a standard can no longer be found once we have adopted the critique of nature as our philosophical stance. Seeking a more positive perspective for thinking about nature that can escape the naivety of the Rousseauian idea is necessary. Vogel finds in the view of "nature as difference" a position that meets these requirements (301).

Nature as difference, according to Vogel, regards nature as the otherness of the world or that which eludes any attempt to grasp the world as a whole. Here, the fundamental assumption is that what we see as real existence is subject to a framework of understanding. If a framework is available, we can grasp an aspect of reality, but if not, understanding the world is impossible. Reality, in other words, is a product of a cognitive scheme. By revealing an aspect of reality, however, every scheme inevitably occludes or excludes something in the very act of this revelation. A scheme shows the world to us in some particular way, and not in some other way, because every scheme has limitations. In this philosophical vision, Vogel argues, nature can now stand for "difference," the gap between frameworks or that which is left out of knowing in efforts of cognitive framing. This view also leads to humility because it indicates the incompleteness of human technological practices and of their endeavour to establish theoretical structures. No understanding of the world can ever be complete, neither can any technological remaking of it. Every humanised world that we inhabit always has something of the non-human in it. In all actions to transform the world exists an inescapable moment of otherness, and we could call that moment "nature." Nature now comes to stand for humanity's inevitable failure (Vogel 301–02). In this study, I argue that Wordsworth's poetry foreshadowed this postmodernist philosophical conception.

Here, before applying Vogel's interpretation to Wordsworth's poetry, examining Rigby's critical analysis of modern art is necessary because Rigby, too, is concerned with the inevitable otherness of the natural world that spills out of artists' cognitive frameworks. Drawing on Heideggar's concept of 'phusis', or self-disclosing nature, Rigby regards nature as addressing humans. Human artists respond to nature with word and song, joining in the self-disclosure of phusis (Rigby 433–34). However, nature also makes humans experience its inscrutability since human perceptual limitations never allow them to grasp nature's disclosure in its entirety. Rigby refers to the example of modern artist Harry Nankin's photographic project, "Sacred Theory of the Wave."

This project attempts to capture a nocturnal image of coastal waves on a large sheet of photographic paper. In Rigby's terms, Nankin attempts to catch nature's self-disclosure. Accidental movements, however, frustrate the artist's intention. On one occasion, a cloud passing over the moon affected the photographic process, and on another, a strong undertow ripped apart the photographed image. However, according to Rigby, these accidental occurrences indicate nature's presence. Nature finds its voice in Nankin's art "precisely by defeating his original intentions through its incalculability and capacity to surprise" (Rigby 434–35). Even though nature is invisible and beyond photographic representation, it still influences the artist's project with physical force. Closely analogous to the third of Vogel's categories, nature's invisible physical presence in Nankin's project is characterised by otherness from the human sphere.

Such a failure to grasp nature, in the view of critic Jean-Louis Chrétien, lies within the core of artistic efforts or experiences. In our encounters with things, otherness and the world, a certain dimension exceeds our capacity to respond. However, in this non-correspondence of response to a call from nature, we remain open to that which addresses us in an other. At such a moment, "our existence is altered and opened, and becomes itself the site of the manifestation of what it responds to" (Chrétien 122; Rigby 438).

How do these theoretical arguments contribute to the reading of Wordsworth? As I see it, they can indeed provide significant insights because several of his poems suggest momentary emergences of the side of nature normally hidden by the cognitive scheme he employs. In one of these poems, Wordsworth records the very moment at which nature's otherness is intimated in his unsuccessful attempt to interact with it. The text in question is "There was a boy. . . ."[4] This late 1798 piece is usually interpreted as an example of harmonious correspondence between the poet's consciousness and external nature. Yet a closer examination indicates otherwise. The true significance of these blank verse lines is not in the harmony but in the breakdown of symmetric relationship.

Up to line 404, the relationship of the boy and nature—the latter represented by the song of owls in the dark—is of almost perfect correspondence. The owls are hooting, and the boy hoots back, imitating them:

> . . . with fingers interwoven, both hands
> Pressed closely, palm to palm, and to his mouth
> Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
> Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls
> That they might answer him. And they would shout
> Across the wat'ry Vale, and shout again,
> Responsive to his call. . . . (*Prelude* 1805.5.395–401)

After these lines, this mutual responding suddenly fails. Nature ceases to respond to the boy's "mimic hootings" (1805.5.398). Symmetrical interaction is lost in silence that seems to ignore his masterful impression of owls: "pauses of deep silence mocked his skill" (1805.5.405). A contingent incident, similar to nature's capricious interventions in Nankin's photographic work, defeats the boy's intention.

Wordsworth knows, however, that despite being a "very event of wound" (Chrétien 122), this experience leads to a far deeper interfusion of the perceiving self and external nature. The boy is struck by "a gentle shock of mild surprize" (1805.5.407), which then carries deep into his heart:

> . . . the voice
> Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
> Would enter unawares into his mind
> With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
> Its woods, and that uncertain Heaven, received
> Into the bosom of the steady Lake. (1805.5.408–13)

This new stage of relationship, brought about by loss of symmetrical correspondence, removes the boundary between nature and human consciousness. Loss of boundary, then, conducts both the boy and nature to interfusion and reveals the internal dimension of the boy's mind. Before this, nature and the boy's mind were merely two sides of interaction, described objectively, lacking depth. However, when this dichotomous relationship is replaced by subject-object blending, three-dimensional experience emerges. Nature here goes beyond its former superficial state of presence and is felt as a deeply physical presence. While harmoniously responding to the boy's imitative hootings, nature has remained in the realm of shallow everyday experience composed of call and response. The sudden break in correspondence brings home to the boy, and the narrator poet, its unfamiliar aspect, i.e. otherness linked with physical materiality.

"There was a boy . . ." is a remarkable poem in the Wordsworthian corpus as this text suggests that failure of a perceptual framework can lead to intuitive grasp of a hitherto unrecognised dimension of nature. In the passage quoted above, lines 408–13, the boy's subjectivity has disappeared, engulfed by nature's material presence. This seems to witness the poet's deconstructive understanding that nature's otherness ultimately eludes the perceiving subject. As Vogel suggests, nature as otherness can only be suggested as something left out of cognitive attempts to comprehend the world (301). In this sense, the poet can be regarded as narrowly escaping the temptation of "re-reifying" (Vogel 302) nature.

Nature's material otherness is suggested in a famous elegiac piece, written also in late 1798, "A slumber did my spirit seal." Oerlemans is perhaps the first critic to discuss materiality and otherness in the poem from an ecocritical perspective. According to him, death as described in this poem "defines our most direct connection to the world through the mortality and materiality of our bodies" (Oerlemans 36). The poem, narrating the death of a woman, records a confrontation with material, "elemental nature" (39).

The narrator's love for the dead woman initially leads to denial of human mortality: "She seemed a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years" ("A slumber" 3–4). Yet, the poem soberly regards this psychology as a kind of blindness. The opening lines, "A slumber did my spirit seal; / I had no human fears," indicate that the narrator's consciousness is in a dormant state, sealed to the idea of mortality (Oerlemans 40). Then, the second stanza shifts to an awakened phase:

> No motion has she now, no force;
> 　She neither hears nor sees,
> Rolled round in earth's diurnal course
> 　With rocks and stones and trees. (5–8)

This stanza redefines the woman as a dead thing. She does not have powers of movement or perception. She is no longer an active agent but passively subject to the physical "diurnal" rotation of the earth. She is reduced to mere matter that exists outside the realm of life and consciousness. Although the woman is in a consolingly calm state, "A slumber" can still be read as describing a potentially shocking encounter with death, otherness and materiality.

In recounting a private experience, these lines are certainly unsettling.

However, if placed in the context of Wordsworth's nature poetry, their significance becomes even more profound. Wordsworth, the nature poet, believed that nature was an organic whole, beneficent to humanity. On the other hand, he was aware that "nature as origin" did not always come about of itself—an awareness shared with "the critique of nature." From this perspective, nature, which should ideally be divine, benevolent and responsive to human imagination, becomes something different. Not containable in human interpretive frameworks, nature now shows some alien aspects characterised by otherness, indifference and even cruelty to humanity.

Thus, the first stanza of "A slumber" has repressed nature's otherness, and the concluding second stanza in turn intimates the same otherness. This development is not limited to "A slumber." A comparable case is observed in a poem written shortly after it. By reading this piece, the apparently un-Wordsworthian face of nature suggested in "A slumber" can be further explored.

4. The Epiphany of the "unfeeling" Other

"A narrow girdle of rough stones and crags," the fourth of "Poems on the Naming of Places," is collected in the second and ensuing editions of *Lyrical Ballads*. The scene of narration is the eastern shore of Grasmere, where roughly hewn stones form a narrow embankment. The opening scene presents Wordsworth, Coleridge and Dorothy Wordsworth enjoying a morning walk on a September day. The first half of the poem appears merely descriptive of the Grasmere shore, leaving few strong impressions on the reader's mind. Nonetheless, the poem contains important features that cannot be defined as simply descriptive.

As Heather Glen and Frederick Garber argue, the poem tacitly introduces a metaphysical view developed by Wordsworth and Coleridge (Glen 311; Garber 114):

> . . . in our vacant mood,
> Not seldom did we stop to watch some tuft
> Of dandelion seed or thistle's beard,
> Which, seeming lifeless half, and half impelled
> By some internal feeling, skimmed along
> Close to the surface of the lake that lay
> Asleep in a dead calm—ran closely on
> Along the dead calm lake, now here, now there,
> In all its sportive wanderings all the while
> Making report of an invisible breeze
> That was its wings, its chariot, and its horse,
> Its very playmate, and its moving soul. (16–27)

Seemingly a faithful depiction of dandelion seeds and thistle's beard gliding over the lake, this scene is actually based on a philosophical thought. These fluffy things are impelled by a "breeze" (25), and this invisible agent of nature is called their "moving soul" (27). A reader of Coleridge can find here an echo of his earlier poem, "Effusion XXXV, The Eolian Harp":

> . . . what if all of animated nature
> Be but organic Harps diversly fram'd,
> That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
> Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze,
> At once the Soul of each, and God all? (44–48)

In Coleridge's philosophical verse, "one intellectual Breeze" blows through individual existences, giving them life and consciousness. Similarly, the invisible breeze over Wordsworth's Grasmere gives motion to seeds in the air. They seem to be receiving life and feeling, as suggested in their "sportive wandering" ("A narrow girdle" 25) and "internal feeling" (20). Philosophical thinking shared by the two poets is suggested by their use of the same word, "soul," to characterise the breeze. In more precise terms, Wordsworth presents a natural description while suggesting its possible metaphysical significance, whereas Coleridge expresses his philosophy more straightforwardly. Nevertheless, it seems obvious that they refer to one and the same view, poetically elaborated in their own ways.

What Coleridge calls "the Soul of each, and God of all" ("Effusion" 48) is renamed in the same poem as "the one Life within us and abroad, / Which meets all motion and becomes its soul" (26–27). This naming is used elsewhere by Wordsworth, too: ". . . in all things / He saw one life, and felt that it was joy" (*Pedlar* 217–18; *Prelude* 1799.2.459–60). Since Coleridge was Wordsworth's philosophical mentor at the time, this mutually employed name, together with the congruity in concept, shows that "the moving soul" (27) and "an invisible breeze" (25) in "A narrow girdle" can be regarded as coming from Coleridge's metaphysical thinking. Apparently a description of natural scenery, the world of "A narrow girdle" is quietly set in a philosophical framework.

Discussion on "one Life" does not exhaust the significance of "A narrow girdle." As we continue to read, we find another framework functioning in it, i.e. epiphany by transcendental imagination. The following lines, which apparently describe another everyday experience, tacitly prepare a process leading to imaginative revelation:

> . . . in the fashion which I have described,
> Feeding unthinking fancies, we advanced
> Along the indented shore; when suddenly,
> Through a thin veil of glittering haze, we saw
> Before us on a point of jutting land
> The tall and upright figure of a man
> Attired in peasant's garb, who stood alone
> Angling beside the margin of the lake. (45–52)

These lines remind Wordsworth's readers of some of his important poetic moments. Conducting the walkers to the encounter with the tall man closely follows the revelatory structure of Wordsworth's poetry that unfolds human imaginative power. In particular, the pattern of "spots of time" in *The Prelude* and some other autobiographical passages.

The said pattern is observed almost from the outset of "A narrow girdle." Lines 7 to 8, "ere the mist / Had altogether yielded to the sun," signify that the poem's morning scene is still covered by residual haze. The walkers are in a "vacant mood" (16), a special state of mind somewhat detached from the events of everyday life. Then, after the Coleridgean metaphysical view of "one Life" has been suggested in the form of natural description, the scene in question comes—the passage that introduces "The tall and upright figure of a man" (50). This very encounter is narrated as an unexpected disclosure through a veil of mist: "suddenly, / Through a thin veil of glittering haze, we saw" (47–48).

Vapoury atmosphere that filters sight, a special mood of mind and a sudden moment of revelation—these events form a process that parallels the revelation of imagination on Mt. Snowdon in the thirteenth book of *The Prelude*:

> Little could we see
> Hemmed round on every side with fog and damp,
> And, after ordinary travellers' chat
> With our conductor, silently we sank
> Each into commerce with his private thoughts.
> . . . .
> When at my feet the ground appeared to brighten,
> And with a step or two seemed brighter still;
> Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,
> For instantly a light upon the turf
> Fell like a flash! I looked about, and lo,
> The moon stood naked in the heavens at height

> Immense above my head, and on the shore
> I found myself of a huge sea of mist. . . . (1805.13.15–19, 36–43)

This night scene depicts initial restriction of visibility, sinking into a non-everyday mood, sudden unfolding of a sight unrecognised until then and, finally, a spiritual epiphany (Kamio 293–96). The same process occurs in the sudden appearance of the tall man in "A narrow girdle." The shared features of the Snowdon lines and that shorter lyric also include focus on the narrator's own subjectivity while describing a walk in company.

A similar series of events is also recorded in the Alps-crossing scene of *The Prelude*'s sixth book: the high expectations of the climbers, the sudden emergence of imagination in the form of rising vapour and the recognition of imagination's "glory" (1805.6.532) brought about as the blinding cloud of vapour recedes. One critic suggests that Wordsworth might have been surrounded by mist when he was walking in the mountains (Kamio 307). If this interpretation is correct, the Alps-crossing episode even more faithfully follows the epiphanic pattern.

The same movement leading to revelation can be traced in poems outside the *Prelude* corpus. "A Night-Piece," one of the earlier "Poems of the Imagination," begins with a night skyscape covered "With a close veil of one continuous cloud" (2). The moment this cloud cover is "split / Asunder" (8–9), "the clear moon and the glory of the heavens" (10) is unfolded to a traveller, who has, until then, been musing with his eyes cast downwards. "St Paul's," written around the closing phase of the Wordsworthian great years is a more subdued version of revelation. The poet, distressed from a quarrel with Coleridge, shuts himself up, isolated from the world. His heart is unfeeling, and his eyes are "Downcast, ear sleeping, and feet masterless" (4). Then quite unexpectedly "the huge majestic Temple of St Paul" (15) comes into sight. This "visionary scene," which gives his heart "An anchor of stability" (11), is again revealed through a veil, this time the "sacred veil of falling snow" (28).[5]

All these revelatory passages unfold, more or less, a transcendental dimension that goes beyond the everyday. Implied in each moment is the power of imagination that enables an epiphany. In contrast, "A narrow girdle" seems not to be connected with the transcendental. The poem appears merely to reveal the figure of a person and nothing more. However, I would argue that the poem, in fact, goes beyond mere description and exposes what is not everyday. It discloses an un-Wordsworthian side of external nature, i.e. nature's otherness, which exists independently of the human sphere, indifferent to humanity or to its wellbeing.

At first glance, that tall man seems to be simply fishing in Grasmere. Wordsworth and his company think that the man is idling away his time when labour is needed to harvest crops around the lake. Yet, approaching the man, they find his condition very different from their expectation.

> . . . he turned his head
> To greet us—and we saw a man worn down
> By sickness, gaunt and lean, with sunken cheeks
> And wasted limbs, his legs so long and lean
> That for my single self I looked at them,
> Forgetful of the body they sustained. (63–68)

Thus, the poem introduces a sudden tragic moment. The man's painful appearance reminds us of the tall, thin soldier of another semi-tragic piece, "The Discharged Soldier": "He was of stature tall, / A foot above man's common measure tall, / Stiff in his form, and upright, lank and lean" (*Prelude* 1805.4.405–07). An encounter with a strange, "ghastly" (1805.4.411) figure, this *Prelude* episode turns out to be a story of human virtue and friendship, with the narrator Wordsworth eventually helping the way-worn soldier secure lodgings. First, the focus is on the otherworldly eeriness of the soldier, and then, it shifts to the narrator's spiritual acceptance of it. The encounter with a leech gatherer in "Resolution and Independence" may be regarded as another episode of a similar kind as it contains a chance meeting with an old man, seemingly from an otherworldly realm and suggestions of final redemption and divine benevolence.

However, the fishing man episode in "A narrow girdle" differs crucially from these works in a thematic respect. The poet's attention does not stay with the man but is drawn to external nature surrounding him. The focal point of the passage becomes Grasmere's indifference to his effort to earn the day's sustenance from the water. Here, nature is not at all helpful to humanity.

> Too weak to labour in the harvest field,
> The man was using his best skill to gain
> A pittance from the dead unfeeling lake
> That knew not of his wants. (69–72)

The man's situation becomes even more disconcerting when it becomes known to the reader that the lake is "unfeeling" (71) and shows no sign of benevolent intention to save the man from his predicament. Nature's significance, as disclosed in this poem, is thus decidedly different from Wordsworth's other revelatory moments. As discussed above, in other moments, nature has provided a sublime gateway to transcendental recognition or divine benevolence.

Elsewhere, Wordsworth indicates his faith in the affinity of the external world for the human mind, and he defines nature as a benign protector of humanity. "Beauty, whose living home is the green earth . . . waits upon my steps, / Pitches her tents before me where I move, / An hourly Neighbour" (*Home at Grasmere*, MS B 991, 994–96). The aspect of nature disclosed in "A narrow girdle" shares nothing with these lines. Nature in that short poem is certainly in physical proximity to humanity, surrounding the world of human affairs in the village of Grasmere. Nonetheless, it resides in a sphere of its own, unconnected to the human world. Coldly unconcerned with human life, nature in "A narrow girdle" is characterised by its otherness.

Wordsworth begins this poem with an attempt to describe charitable nature from a Coleridge-derived philosophical worldview. Then, halfway through, the poet changes his strategy, resorting to the pattern of transcendental revelation, before he finally presents the figure of the fisherman. What is revealed, in fact, is "dead unfeeling" (71) nature, something that cannot be comprehended within these two interpretive frameworks. "A narrow girdle," written during Wordsworth's most productive years, suggests a face of nature that appears alien to a nature poet. This other side of nature appears when the interpretive framework somehow ceases to function. This is, as it were, a negative picture that normally eludes the poet's conscious awareness, but can be intimated when cracks appear in, or between, cognitive schemes.

"A narrow girdle" is not an isolated example of negative nature among Wordsworth's writings. A similar example occurs in the poet's first view of Mont Blanc in the sixth book of *The Prelude*. Wordsworth's mood was one of elation while he was heading for the Alps during the last summer vacation of his university years. In France, he had just witnessed the "great federal day" (1805.6.357), the first anniversary of the attacks on the Bastille, and had felt "benevolence and blessedness / Spread like a fragrance everywhere" (1805.6.378–79). At that very time, when human nature seemed "born again" (1805.6.354), the poet came face to face with the "soulless image" (1805.6.454) of the mountain. This image, he says, annihilated "a living thought" (1805.6.455), a sublime mental picture that he had wished to have. An interpretive framework that could have imparted nature an exalted, beneficent face gives way to a totally negative experience.

Nature's otherness, momentarily surfacing in this Mont Blanc passage as well as in "A narrow girdle," is structurally related to the "rocks and stones and trees" of "A slumber did my spirit seal." As discussed above, "A slumber," too, is characterised by an ebbing cognitive scheme revealing a glimpse of nature's other face. Hence, in the sense that "A slumber" is a poem on nature's materiality, we can relate the soulless image of Mont Blanc and the "dead unfeeling" lake in "A narrow girdle" to nature's material otherness. However, these "material" moments do not evince the real, reified existence of nature. If they did, they would merely return us to the naivety of "nature as origin," the very first category that Vogel postulates. Rather, we should consider these moments as textual practices that attempt to deal with the unrepresentable. Material otherness, as stated at the beginning of this study, does not stand alone within the textual sphere. As text, literature comprises semiotic differences, and its signification is ultimately grounded on systems of differences, i.e. language-based interpretive frameworks, not on material presence in the external world. Hence, literary text cannot directly deal with materiality. At a moment when interpretive frameworks fall short of their proper function, material nature shows itself through schematic cracks in the form of an elusive, negative picture.

5. Difference and Practice in Wordsworthian Nature

Recent Wordsworthian studies have drawn attention to socio-political contexts that conditioned his poetry's creation. Thus, the poet's view of nature has been examined chiefly from the perspective of nature as a social construct. Partly in resistance to this trend, ecocritics have introduced viewpoints to redefine the nature poet Wordsworth. They are more concerned with current anthropogenic change in the physical environment and the stance humanity should adopt in facing this change than with the academic conception of social constructedness. Thus, Wordsworth and his environmental literature have been subject to fresh critical attention. Yet, criticism seems to have just begun to explore aspects of nature that cannot be defined as "green" (Fry 72). This study has discussed the issue, first by drawing on Vogel and Rigby's theoretical discussions and then by reading some key Wordsworthian texts from their perspective. Perhaps, however, its argument remains preliminary. Nature's material otherness, as intimated in these texts, should be further studied in other Wordsworthian moments and more broadly in Romantic literature at large.

I conclude this study by briefly referring to Vogel's last category of thinking about nature, "nature and practice" (304–09). This is a constructivist concept claiming that the world or the environment does not exist in itself but is formed and becomes present only through human practice. The natural environment, when represented, is thus accompanied by practical human engagement. This indicates that humanity carries responsibility for the environment because it is, then, of their making. The concept of nature and practice is thus closely connected with environmental ethics. Further, practice by definition is accompanied by frustrated attempts and occasional failure. The environment, in short, can never remain conceptual within human consciousness, but from time to time, it confronts humanity as an uncontrollable other, often defeating their intention.

The Romantics, including Wordsworth, were engaged in environmental practices such as landscape gardening, picturesque tourism and conservation. Vogel's fourth category may be a useful perspective for understanding Wordsworth as a practitioner of nature. This critical strategy should therefore be conducted, along with the current study's materiality approach, because it may assign the poet's ecological activities and literary writings a further significance that will be invaluable for present-day humanity.

Notes

[1] This is a revised version of my paper read at the 54th conference of the Society of English Literature and Linguistics, Nagoya University, at the Graduate School of Letters, Nagoya University, 18 April 2015. The author is grateful to the invaluable comments received during the session. Part of the discussion of this study was originally prepared for presentation at the 162th meeting of the Kansai Coleridge Society, Doshisha Women's University, 28 June 2014. This project, including those earlier forms, is supported by JSPS Grants-in-aid, nos. 15H03189 and 15K02301.

[2] This paragraph is indebted to Kate Rigby. Referring to Bonnefoy, she persuasively discusses the significance of extra-textual orientation for literary criticism in relation to her own pursuit of "eco-poiesis." See Rigby 437–38.

[3] Ecological implications of these misgivings are discussed in my earlier study, "Aesthetics of Nature and Environmental Consciousness" 34–35.

[4] The text used in this study is taken from the fifth book of the 1805 version of *The Prelude.*

[5] The discussion in this paragraph is indebted to Kamio 280–91.

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Synopsis

Shadow of the Non-Corresponding Other: “Material Nature” in Wordsworth’s Poetry

Ichiro Koguchi

Literary text cannot deal directly with materiality because it is based on linguistic signs comprising semiotic differences. Influenced by Saussurean linguistics and semiotics, modern literary criticism has also tended to show intra-textual inclinations. However, the emergence of ecocriticism has changed this situation. Aware of the damage to the natural environment’s physical reality, ecocriticism concerns itself with the materiality of external nature in textual representation. Following this recent critical development, the current study investigates how William Wordsworth’s poetry engages in nature’s materiality.

The theoretical grounds used here are those proposed by Steven Vogel and Kate Rigby. Vogel categorises modern thinking on nature into four types: “nature as origin,” “the critique of nature,” “nature as difference” (i.e. “nature as the other”), and “nature and practice.” The first category involves the Rousseauian idea of nature as an organic unity, and the second deconstructively critiques the naivety of the first. Vogel’s third category defines nature as unrepresentable otherness that is normally concealed under cognitive frameworks. Then, in her interpretive work on modern art, Rigby also turns to nature’s otherness, observing intimations of nature’s materiality in the form of such otherness.

The concept of nature’s material otherness, as theorised by Vogel and Rigby, helps to unfold fresh aspects of Wordsworth’s nature poetry. For instance, nature as the material other is suggested in Wordsworth’s “There was a boy . . . .” In this poem, the boy’s failure in harmonious interaction with wild owls discloses an unfamiliar aspect of nature characterised by otherness and physical depth. Similarly, nature’s physicality and otherness are dealt with in the poem “A slumber did my spirit seal.” When the hold

of the cognitive framework weakens in the transition from the poem's first stanza to the second, nature's material aspect—"rocks and stones and trees"—emerges. Contrary to the benevolence normally expected from Wordsworth's nature poetry, nature here resides in an alien dimension indifferent to human affairs.

Such material otherness is included in the revelatory structure of the lyric, "A narrow girdle of rough stones and crags." This complex verse initially provides a glimpse of nature permeated by the blessings of divinity and then refers to the working of human imagination. However, like the two poems above, these cognitive schemes fall short of functioning properly, and in place of a spiritually beneficent organic whole, "dead unfeeling" nature appears. In reference to the views of Vogel and Rigby, this recognition is equivalent to intimation of nature's material otherness. Usually such otherness is imperceptible in Wordsworth because it is repressed by interpretive frameworks that tend to express the auspicious side of the human experience of nature. However, in "A narrow girdle," otherness momentarily comes into view through accidental cracks in the frameworks. In this sense, the poem is an important text that gives witness to the material otherness of Wordsworthian nature unfolding itself.

As mentioned, Vogel's categorisation has a fourth type, "nature and practice." The current article concludes by suggesting this concept's interpretive potential for future studies of Wordsworth.