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**PRECARITY, SUBLIMITY, AND ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS:
WORDSWORTH'S *THE PRELUDE* IN THE ANTHROPOCENE**

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Abstract:

*The Anthropocene has redefined humanity's relationship with nature, emphasizing the fragility and interconnectedness of ecological systems. William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* prefigures this discourse through its exploration of precarity—a state of vulnerability that characterizes human and nonhuman lives in a changing world. The poet's vivid portrayal of natural landscapes as active participants in human moral and emotional development anticipates the environmental precarity of the Anthropocene, where nature is no longer perceived as a stable backdrop but as a dynamic, threatened force. This paper examines Wordsworth's poetic engagement with ecological precarity, emphasizing his portrayal of nature as both a healer and a site of vulnerability. By foregrounding the poet's ecological consciousness, the study connects his vision to Anthropocene debates surrounding the destabilizing impact of human actions on the planet. Wordsworth's attention to the entanglement of human and nonhuman worlds reflects a proto-Anthropocenic awareness, challenging anthropocentric perspectives and urging a recalibration of humanity's ethical and ecological responsibilities. Ultimately, *The Prelude* provides a framework for understanding ecological fragility in an era marked by environmental crises and precarious futures.*

Keywords: *Nature; Anthropocene; Catharsis; Precarity, etc.*

Introduction: Romanticism, Anthropocene, and Precarity:

The Anthropocene, a term first proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000, describes the epoch in which human activity has become the dominant influence on Earth's geological and ecological systems (Crutzen and Stoermer, 17). It is a period marked by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and environmental degradation, characterized by unprecedented levels of greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. The Anthropocene challenges traditional notions of nature as stable and enduring, revealing instead a precarious planetary system profoundly shaped by human actions. Scholars such as Timothy Morton and Donna Haraway argue that this epoch necessitates a rethinking of humanity's relationship with the natural world, emphasizing interconnectedness, vulnerability, and shared responsibility (Morton 18; Haraway, 4).

Precarity, a concept central to Anthropocene discourse, denotes a state of inherent instability and vulnerability. Judith Butler defines precarity as the condition of lives “marked by their exposure to injury, violence, and death,” shaped by social, economic, and ecological contexts



(Butler, 25). In ecological terms, precarity underscores the fragility of ecosystems under the pressures of anthropogenic change. In the Anthropocene, both human and nonhuman entities face heightened precarity as environmental systems become destabilized. This shared vulnerability challenges the anthropocentric binaries that have historically separated nature and culture, suggesting instead that survival depends on recognizing and addressing these entangled precariousness (Buell, 32).

Romanticism, particularly the works of William Wordsworth, provides a valuable lens for examining these concepts. Wordsworth's poetry, written during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, reflects a growing awareness of humanity's impact on the natural world. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth critiques the alienation and materialism of modernity, presenting nature as a fragile yet restorative force. His emphasis on the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life prefigures contemporary discussions of ecological precarity. The poet's intimate engagement with the landscapes of the Lake District exemplifies what Bate terms "ecological embeddedness," a recognition of the mutual dependence between humans and their environments (Bate, 64).

Wordsworth's portrayal of nature as both resilient and precarious aligns with Anthropocene concerns. For instance, the poet frequently laments the degradation of rural life, linking the destruction of natural landscapes to the erosion of human morality. This perspective resonates with Donna Haraway's concept of the "Chthulucene," which emphasizes the need for humans to "stay with the trouble" by cultivating ethical relationships within precarious ecosystems (Haraway, 14). By foregrounding the fragility and dynamism of natural systems, Wordsworth's poetry invites readers to confront the ecological challenges of the Anthropocene, fostering a deeper awareness of shared vulnerabilities.

As we revisit *The Prelude* through the lens of the Anthropocene, Wordsworth's ecological philosophy becomes strikingly relevant. His work critiques the industrial exploitation of nature, highlighting the moral and spiritual consequences of ecological alienation. Wordsworth's emphasis on nature's precarity and its role in human development anticipates modern concerns about sustainability and resilience. By exploring the intersections of precarity and the Anthropocene in *The Prelude*, this study seeks to illuminate the poet's enduring contributions to contemporary environmental discourse.

Precarity in Wordsworth's Ecological Vision:

Wordsworth's ecological vision in *The Prelude* is deeply informed by an awareness of nature's precarity—a recognition of its fragility and susceptibility to human influence. The poet's reflections on the Lake District, a landscape simultaneously celebrated for its beauty and imperiled by industrial development, reveal a proto-Anthropocenic understanding of ecological vulnerability. This duality underscores Wordsworth's portrayal of nature as both a source of renewal and a site of potential loss.

In Wordsworth's time, the encroachment of industrialization threatened rural communities and natural landscapes alike. The poet's critique of urbanization and its consequences anticipates the Anthropocene's destabilization of ecosystems. For instance, Wordsworth contrasts the simplicity of rural life with the alienation of urban existence, portraying the "rustics" of the Lake District as precarious figures who embody a harmonious yet fragile relationship with nature. This portrayal reflects what Timothy Morton describes as "ecological entanglement," the interwoven vulnerabilities of human and nonhuman actors in a shared environment (Morton, 24).

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In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's depiction of the natural world often emphasizes its agency and dynamism. The poet's vivid descriptions of landscapes as "alive with love" (Wordsworth, *TP*, 123) challenge the perception of nature as a passive backdrop, instead portraying it as an active participant in human life. This perspective aligns with Lawrence Buell's assertion that literature in the Anthropocene must "disrupt anthropocentric hierarchies," foregrounding the mutual dependencies between humans and their environments (Buell, 45). Wordsworth's vision, however, also acknowledges the precarious balance that sustains these relationships, warning of the consequences of disrupting ecological harmony.

One of the most striking examples of precarity in *The Prelude* is Wordsworth's reflection on the transformative power of nature. The poet frequently depicts moments of natural sublimity as both exhilarating and humbling, evoking a sense of awe that underscores humanity's vulnerability within larger ecological systems. These moments invite readers to confront the precariousness of their own existence, fostering an ethic of care and responsibility. For example, in the following passage, Wordsworth describes his experience of nature's sublime power:

Oh, there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
A visitant that while it fans my cheek
Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings (Wordsworth, *TP*, 15-17).

Here, the breeze becomes a metaphor for nature's precarious yet restorative presence, highlighting its capacity to inspire both joy and reverence. This duality reflects what Donna Haraway terms the "precarious joy" of living in the Anthropocene—a recognition of nature's beauty and fragility, and the ethical responsibility it entails (Haraway, 19).

Wordsworth's ecological vision thus offers a nuanced understanding of precarity, emphasizing both the interconnectedness and the vulnerability of human and nonhuman worlds. By foregrounding these themes, the poet anticipates contemporary discussions of environmental resilience and the need for sustainable practices. His work challenges readers to engage with nature not as a resource to be exploited, but as a precarious and dynamic force that demands ethical stewardship.

Nature and Anthropocene Catharsis:

Catharsis in the Anthropocene takes on a new dimension as a mechanism for confronting ecological crises and fostering emotional resilience. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth employs catharsis as both a narrative and ecological device, guiding readers toward an awareness of nature's precariousness and its capacity for renewal. The poet's reflections on the sublime power of landscapes invite moments of emotional purification that align the individual with larger ecological rhythms.

For Wordsworth, catharsis is not merely an aesthetic experience but an ethical awakening. In passages such as:

...With brisk and eager steps and came, at length,
To a green shady place, were down I sate
Beneath a tree, slackening my thoughts by choice,
And setting into gentler happiness (Wordsworth, *TP*, 60-64).



The poet evokes a sense of tranquility that fosters both personal and ecological renewal. This moment of catharsis highlights nature's dual role as both a healer and a site of precarity, encouraging readers to embrace their vulnerability within larger ecological systems. Critics such as M.H. Abrams argue that Wordsworth's use of catharsis transcends traditional literary conventions, integrating emotional release with ecological insight (Abrams, 154).

In the Anthropocene, catharsis serves as a means of confronting the destabilizing impact of human actions on the planet. Wordsworth's portrayal of natural sublimity, characterized by awe and reverence, fosters a deeper awareness of ecological fragility. His emphasis on the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman worlds challenges readers to reimagine their relationship with nature, cultivating an ethic of care that aligns with contemporary efforts to address environmental crises.

Nature as Ethical Guide in the Anthropocene:

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth presents nature not merely as a healer but as an ethical guide, emphasizing its role in shaping moral consciousness and human behavior. This portrayal resonates deeply in the Anthropocene, where humanity's actions have destabilized ecological systems, creating a shared vulnerability among human and nonhuman entities. Wordsworth's ethical vision anticipates contemporary ecological philosophies, particularly deep ecology, which advocates for an intrinsic respect for all forms of life (Naess 95). Through his vivid descriptions of natural landscapes and their transformative impact on the individual, Wordsworth highlights nature's capacity to teach ethical lessons rooted in interconnectedness and reciprocity.

Central to Wordsworth's ethical philosophy is the recognition of nature as a nurturing presence that fosters empathy and responsibility. The poet often portrays landscapes as imbued with a moral force, capable of inspiring humility and reverence. For instance, in *The Prelude*, he writes:

...The earth is all before me: with a heart
Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
I look about; and should the chosen guide
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
I cannot miss my way (Wordsworth, *TP*, 271-275).

In this passage, the "wandering cloud" becomes a symbol of guidance, emphasizing the poet's trust in nature's wisdom. Wordsworth's reliance on nature as an ethical compass challenges anthropocentric views that prioritize human agency over ecological harmony. Instead, the poet suggests that attuning oneself to the rhythms of the natural world fosters a deeper understanding of humanity's place within a larger, interconnected system (Bate, 42).

The ethical dimensions of Wordsworth's ecological vision align with the principles of "earth ethics" articulated by contemporary scholars such as Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour. Haraway's concept of "making kin" emphasizes the need for ethical relationships that extend beyond human communities to include nonhuman entities (Haraway, 16). Similarly, Latour's idea of the "parliament of things" calls for a recognition of nature as an active participant in ethical and political discourses (Latour, 75). Wordsworth's poetry prefigures these ideas by portraying nature as an agent of moral instruction, capable of teaching lessons about humility, stewardship, and care. One of Wordsworth's most powerful ethical insights lies in his recognition of humanity's embeddedness within ecological systems. By presenting rural communities as models of



ecological coexistence, the poet critiques the exploitative tendencies of industrial modernity. In his depiction of the Lake District, Wordsworth celebrates the integration of human activity with the natural environment, offering an alternative vision of human flourishing rooted in sustainability. For example, his portrayal of rustic life as harmonious yet precarious underscores the ethical responsibility to protect these fragile ecosystems from the encroachments of industrialization (Wordsworth, *TP*, 295-300).

Furthermore, Wordsworth's engagement with the sublime highlights the ethical significance of awe and wonder in fostering ecological consciousness. The poet's encounters with vast and powerful landscapes evoke a sense of humility that serves as a counterpoint to the hubris of anthropocentrism. As Lawrence Buell observes, "sublimity in Wordsworth's poetry functions as a moral touchstone, reminding readers of their place within an expansive, interconnected web of existence" (Buell, 59). These moments of sublimity challenge readers to confront their ethical responsibilities toward the natural world, inspiring a commitment to preserving its precarious beauty.

In the Anthropocene, where ecological crises demand urgent ethical responses, Wordsworth's vision remains profoundly relevant. His poetry invites readers to reimagine their relationship with nature, embracing an ethic of care that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life forms. By presenting nature as an ethical guide, *The Prelude* offers a blueprint for cultivating ecological responsibility and resilience in an era of profound environmental challenges.

The Prelude as Anthropocene Text:

William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* functions as a proto-Anthropocene text, offering a critical exploration of humanity's entanglement with the natural world. While written during the early stages of industrial modernity, the poem anticipates many of the key concerns of Anthropocene discourse, including ecological precarity, human agency, and the destabilization of natural systems. Wordsworth's portrayal of nature as both a life-giving and precarious force resonates with contemporary debates about the Anthropocene's ethical and ecological implications.

One of the defining characteristics of Anthropocene literature is its critique of the nature/culture dichotomy, which has historically positioned humans as separate from and superior to the natural world. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth disrupts this binary by presenting nature as an active participant in human life, capable of shaping emotions, thoughts, and moral character. For instance, his reflections on the transformative power of the Lake District emphasize the mutual dependencies between human and nonhuman actors. Wordsworth writes:

...That first great gift of joy and fear,
To sojourn among waters, hills, and groves (Wordsworth, *TP*, 120-121).

Here, the "gift of joy and fear" encapsulates the dual nature of humanity's relationship with the environment—both a source of inspiration and a reminder of ecological vulnerability. This perspective aligns with Timothy Morton's concept of "ecological entanglement," which emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman worlds in the Anthropocene (Morton, 21).

Wordsworth's depiction of the sublime further situates *The Prelude* within the Anthropocene's literary framework. Moments of sublimity in the poem, such as his encounter



with the “huge peak” during a boating episode, evoke a sense of awe that challenges anthropocentric worldviews. The poet describes the experience:

...A huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head. I struck, and struck again,
And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars (Wordsworth, *TP*, 179-183).

This passage captures the dynamic interplay between human and nonhuman forces, emphasizing the agency of the “huge peak” as a symbol of nature’s power and precarity. The imagery reflects what Bruno Latour identifies as the Anthropocene’s “geostories,” narratives that foreground the entanglement of human and geological forces (Latour, 89).

In addition to its thematic resonance, *The Prelude* critiques the social and economic systems that contribute to environmental degradation. Wordsworth’s lament for the destruction of rural life and natural landscapes underscores the exploitative tendencies of industrial capitalism. His portrayal of industrialization as a force that disrupts ecological harmony anticipates the Anthropocene’s critique of unsustainable practices. For example, Wordsworth writes:

The wealthiest man among us is the best:
No grandeur now in nature or in book
Delights us. Rapine, avarice, expense,
This is idolatry; and these we adore (Wordsworth, *TP*, 312-315).

Here, Wordsworth critiques the commodification of nature, highlighting the moral and ecological consequences of prioritizing profit over preservation. This critique aligns with contemporary Anthropocene literature, which seeks to expose the systemic drivers of environmental crises and advocate for sustainable alternatives (Buell, 47).

Finally, *The Prelude* exemplifies what Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm term “ecocritical texts”—works that engage with the intersections of literature and the environment to foster ecological awareness (Glotfelty, 8). By portraying nature as both a healer and a site of precarity, Wordsworth’s poem invites readers to confront the ethical and existential challenges of living in a destabilized world. His emphasis on interconnectedness, resilience, and moral responsibility offers a vision of ecological coexistence that remains profoundly relevant in the Anthropocene.

To conclude, *The Prelude* stands as a foundational text for understanding the Anthropocene’s literary and ethical dimensions. Wordsworth’s ecological philosophy, rooted in his reflections on precarity and interconnectedness, challenges readers to reimagine their relationship with the natural world. By critiquing the forces that destabilize ecosystems and celebrating the transformative power of nature, *The Prelude* provides a compelling framework for addressing the ecological challenges of our time.

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