

**Motherhood in Wordsworth:
A Psychoanalytic Study of his Poetics**

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By definition, the Romantic ego is a male; the creator of language which helps him to establish “rites of passage toward poetic creativity and toward masculine empowerment.”¹ The outlet for a male quest of self – possession in Romantic poetry is women. For the Romantic poets, the “true woman was emotional, dependent and gentle –a born flower”² and “the Ideal mother was expected to be strong, self-reliant, protective and efficient caretaker in relation to children and home.”⁴ With emphasis on the individual in Romantic literature and ideology, mothers are depicted as good when they are natural or unnaturally bad. In the Romantic period then, women’s maternal function equals the “foundation of her social identity and of her sexual desire.”⁵ Consequently, “convinced that within the individual and autonomous and forceful agent makes creation possible”, the Romantic poets “struggle to control that agent and manipulate its energy.”⁶

In a number of William Wordsworth’s (1770-1850) poems, this creative agent who possesses the powers of creation and imagination becomes a female character who is also often a mother. Nonetheless, when critics examine mothers in Wordsworth’s poetry, they also explore the child/poet’s relationship. Events in Wordsworth’s life surely influenced his attention to mothers. From a psycho-analytic perspective this interest might be an unconscious desire to resurrect the spirit of his dead mother Ann Wordsworth who died when the poet was almost eight. Thus in his poetry, the mother is the counterpart of the genuine faculty of the imagination of the poet and has a strong and felt presence within the poet’s poetic system.

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth acknowledges his mother’s deep influence on him. He associates her death with the break within his own poetic development; a sign that the poet relies upon in his creative power. It is through her that the young poet came first in contact with the genial current of the natural world. Nevertheless, without his mother, the male child’s connection to nature not only stands, it grows stronger:

Those incidental charms which first attached
My heart to rural objects, day by day
Grew weaker, and I hasten on to tell

How nature, intervenient till this time
 And secondary, now at length was sought
 For her own sake. (II, 197-202)

As the *Prelude* tells us, Wordsworth locates his early poetic experience as an infant at his mother's breast:

Bless'd the infant Babe,
 (For with my best conjecture I would trace
 Our Being's earthly progress) blest the Babe,
 Nursed in his Mother's arms, who sinks to sleep
 Rocked on his mother's breast, who with his soul
 Drinks in the feelings of his Mother's eyes
 (II, 233-38)

Once his mother dies, the poet allies with nature is essentially unmediated:

I was left alone,
 Seeking the visible world, nor knowing why.
 The props of my affections were remov'd,
 And yet the building stood, as if sustained
 By its own spirit!

(II 278-82)

In these lines from the *Prelude*, Wordsworth associates language acquisition, poetic power and mourning in the context of the mother-infant relationship. Barbara Schapiro considers the elegiac tone of these lines an ideal example of "the imagination as a form of transitional phenomenon arising out of the child's negotiation of separateness and union with the mother."⁷ He describes the infant mind which is the model for the poetic spirits as "creator and receiver both" (274) and states that this experience is the "first/poetic spirit of our human life." (275-76) These "mute dialogues with [his] mother's heart" (283) lead to communion with nature, typically personified as maternal, and illustrate the receptive and creative imagination.

Wordsworth's own creativity hinged on his mother's death and he recreates this in his poetry by attempting to depose female creativity:

For him, in one dear presence, there exists
 A virtue which irradiates and exalts
 All objects through wildest intercourse of sense
 No outcast he, bewildered and depressed
 Along his infant veins are interfus'd
 The gravitation and the filial bond
 Of nature that connect [s] him with the world
 (II, 339-45)

In his tender years, the poet communicated instinctively through "mute dialogues":

From early days,
Beginning not long after that first time
In which a Babe, by intercourse of touch
I held mute dialogues with my Mother's heart
(II, 362-365)

In a number of Wordsworth's poems the figure of the mother is the agent of creativity and imagination. Such poems include "The Mad Mother", "The Idiot Boy" and "The Thorn."⁸

"The Mad Mother" tells the tragic story of a woman going through hard circumstances. She goes insane and becomes dependent on her child for emotional stability after her husband and the people of the town abuse her. She loses her dignity and social status as a wife because her husband leaves her. She does not receive any support or comfort from her society which regards her as a mad mother. Through metaphors and vivid imagery, Wordsworth paints a surreal picture of a tragic mother and child relationship. This mother, however, finds comfort with her "Sweet babe! They say that I am mad / But nay, my heart is far too glad." (11-12) The mother sings these words while rocking her child on whom she depends for survival. The sense of motherhood gives her a good feeling and brings her good spirits.

In this poem, the mother is depicted as both natural and unnatural. Wordsworth strips the mother of her humanity by portraying her as monstrous and evil creature "Her eyes are wild; her head is bare / The sun has burnt her black hair, / Her eye brows have a rusting strain" (1-3). Norman Cohn suggests that her being "Forever sad, forever melancholy, is to be forever a witch, unable to pray, in league with the devil, embraced not by a wedding band, but by the and deadly band of the Incubus."⁹

This mother "came from over the main," (4) but talks and sings in the "English tongue." (10) Not only does this woman look demonic but she also begets demons "And fiendish faces, one, two, three, / Hung at my breast, and pulled at me." (23-24) She is also parasitic looking at the world through the sight of her child whom she does not give birth to in a normal, physical way. She wakes up to find the child materialised:

A fire was once within my brain;
And in my heart a dull, dull pain;
And fiendish faces, one, two, three
Hung at my breast, and pulled at me
But then there came a sight of joy,
It came at once to do me good;

I waked, and saw my little boy
My little boy of flesh and blood

(21-28)

The little boy, not the mother, is associated with “flesh and blood”. It is he that gives life to the mother “Suck, little babe, oh suck again! /It cools my blood; it cools my brain;/Thy lips I feel them baby “!they /Draw from my heart the pain away.”(31-34) She needs him more than he does “Oh! Love me thou art thy mother’s only joy (41-42). Wordsworth endows the child with the power to save his mother’s “precious soul” (48) or to become her “little life”(71)

As the poet does with his mother in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth links the mad mother with the energy of nature. He endows her with the power and knowledge that he associated with nature. She knows “The leaves that make the softest bed”(56), “ the poisons that shade”(95), “the earth-nuts fits for food”(96) and the songs of nature. If her child promises to love her until death, then he “shall sing / As merry as birds in spring” (59-60). In her turn, the mother promises, “I, ll teach my boy the sweetest things / I’ll teach him how the owlet sings”(81-82) Though looks natural, the mad mother is endowed with supernatural qualities. Her wild maternal passion is inspired by her communication with the secrets of life; the thing that threatens to destroy her child.

Artistically speaking, the mother successfully composes her song (poem) and if the poet (Wordsworth in this case) can resist her influence and creative poetic ability, then he would liberate his own ability to create. His poetic creativity begins only after the destruction of that of the mad mother. The depiction of the mother figure as such, shows Wordsworth's own easiness with female dominance and power of creativity. The mother in this poem succeeds to create and has full control over it while the poet is unable to create and loses the control over his object since he fails to connect with the mad mother .Though there is no place for this mad mother except in nature, this insane deserted female figure remains attractive to the poet who remains fascinating for her powerful imagination and maternal passion. The mad mother in this poem represents one of Wordsworth’s most powerful female figures in her maternal ability to create life as well as to destroy that life. This power remains with her despite the infant’s evident power. He remains dependent upon her to provide aliment and protection.

Like the mad mother, Martha Ray in “The Thorn” is a woman that has the ability both to create and to destroy. This melodramatic poem tells the story of a solitary, rejected mother. The opening stanzas introduce us to the thorn describing it as “so old and gray” which “stands erect”.

It is “A wretched thing forlorn” and is “Not higher than a two year’s child”. We are told that Stephen Hill gets Martha Ray pregnant and leaves her to marry another woman. As a result she has a baby who is never seen by other people. The mysterious death of that child is the subject of their rumors:

But some will say
She hanged her baby on the tree
Some say she drowned it on the bond
Which is a little step beyond
But all and each one agree
The little babe as buried there
Beneath the hill of moss so fair

(203-208)

Despite her critical situation, this mother has the power to create outside the patriarchal system. She exists outside that system after giving “With a maiden’s true good-will / Her company Stephen Hill” (106-107). Not only does she challenge the social code, she usurps the poet’s leading role in the poem. People express their unease and disgust with her condition. They stigmatize her as a witch, mad woman, inconsiderate of moral codes and social norms. In Romantic poetry, madness is often linked to demonic possession; not human and therefore beyond help. The mad were often depicted as “recalcitrant children, who needed to be taught, by persuasive means rather than overt coercion, how to function adequately as members of society.”¹⁰ By losing her virginity outside the bond of marriage, Martha Ray complicates her social situation. Nevertheless, the town must incorporate her in a new system and reintegrate her within its patriarchal system. The narrator contemplates the town’s speculation “What could she seek? or wish to hide” (126) and laments “O guilty Father would that death/Had saved him from that breach of faith!” (131-132). He also asks:

But what’s the Thorn? and what the pond ?
And what the hill of moss to her?
And what the creeping breeze that comes
The little pond to stir?

(199-202)

The narrator tries to detect the possible facts from the people’s gossips: “I cannot think, whatever they say, / They had to do with Marta Ray” (164-165) and “But kill a new-born infant thus, / I do not think she could!” (212-213), but he becomes an eye witness to her presence: “But that she goes to this Thorn /I will be sworn is true.” (166-169) Supposedly, the narrator spots her on the mountain one day

when he climbs to view the ocean in some fit of melancholy or nostalgia. While he is there, he first to beholds Martha Ray whom he mistakes for a “jolting crag” but he discovers that it is “A woman seated on the ground.”(127) She sits on the top next to the wretched thorn and the assumed grave of the baby and continually cries “Oh misery! Oh misery.” That mother must be big enough to be like that crag which the narrator thinks of it as a shelter from the violent storm. Then, we are told that:

Instantly the hill of moss
Before their eyes began to stir!
And, for full fifty years around ,
The grass it shook upon the ground!
(225-228)

The female creativity that leads to the poet / narrator creative anxiety is given more attention in “The Idiot Boy”, the poem most clearly allied to this. The passive narrator in this poem recalls Wordsworth’s own bouts of creative incapacity.

“The Idiot Boy” begins with a series of confusions and contradictions: it is nighttime and the moon is out, but we have a clear, blue sky. The narrator struggles to set the scene for the poem. He wonders about the source of the creativity of that female:

Why bustle thus about your door,
Why are you in this mighty fret?
And why on horseback have you set
Him whom you love, your Idiot Boy?
(7-11)

The narrator cannot find answers to these questions. The poem seems to be out of his control proceeding without the poet’s direction. It is anything but organic, unfolding for the poet as it does for his readers. Betty occupies a position of considerable power within the poem though her situation is ostensibly as out of control as the narrator’s. The poet – narrator tries to get hold of his poem as Betty must care for both her son and her sick neighbor, Susan Gale, with “No hand to help them in distress.” (23) Betty has no choice but to send her child Johnny to fetch the doctor. Aside from the absent child and the worried mother, the poem examines the mysterious illness of Susan:

Old Susan lies a-bed in pain
And sorely lies puzzled are the twain
For what she ails they cannot guess.
(24-26)

Betty seems to be hopeless since Susan’s illness is beyond the two women and they are as unable to comprehend the situation as the poet

is his poem .Betty remains at Susan's side, waiting for her son Johnny to return:

And Betty, still at Susan's side
By this time is not quite so flurried
Demure with parringer and plate
She sits, as if in Susan's fate
Her life and soul were buried.

(128-131)

Betty and Johnny emerge as successful creators while the poet seems to be helpless. That this is a poem about narrative deficiency and inadequacy becomes even more evident when the poet admits his inability to reconstruct the tale:

Oh Reader! Now that I might tell
What Johnny and his Horse are doing!
What they,ve been doing all this time ,
Oh could I put it into rhyme!
A most delightful tale pursuing!

(312-317)

In an attempt to do this job, the confused poet invokes the help of his muses:

O gentle Muses! is this kind?
Why will ye thus my suit rebel?
Why of your further did bereave me?
And can ye thus unfriended leave me!
Ye Muses! whom I love so well ?

(342-346)

These repeated and frustrated exclamations illustrate that the poet-narrator is stranded, neither able to invent nor to rhyme. Since his artistic ability betrays him, he must rely on female Muses for inspiration. Thus the narrator's own creative act requires a double female mediation. He directs his questions either to Betty or to the Muses, the two creative authorities.

Unaware of what is going on with her son Johnny, Betty starts to imagine things :

"Alas! What is become of him?
These fears can never be ended;
I'll to the wood" The word scare said,
As if by magic cured'

(422-426)

Conclusion

In these three poems Wordsworth illustrates that the happiness of the three mothers rests almost entirely on their children. This message is achieved much more effectively by portraying the mothers as solitary, thereby suggesting that nothing in their life is more important than the child, and thus illustrating the intensity of maternal passion.

These poems help to explain Wordsworth's poetic and personality. Joshua Gonsalves writes that Wordsworth recognizes some mother's extreme love for their children which he incorporates into his own personality "as a mother-like vulnerability, unafraid of being feminized ,demonized or condemned as effeminate, vulgar or disgusting."¹¹ Wordsworth's identification with mothers is also significant for understanding his poetic practice. In fact, in early versions of his works, he explicitly acknowledges the importance of balancing identification and individualism in the maternal relationships for developing a poetic imagination; however in later revisions and work, he anxiously represses and obscures the significance of mother figures and instead foregrounds a more general dynamic of identification and individualism. Understanding the development of these mental processes in the context of maternal relationship helps readers follow Wordsworth's development as a poet and comprehend his comment in *The Prelude* that a poet /child's mind functions as "creator and receiver" both .

In these poems, Wordsworth shows mothers having a disproportionately strong need for motherhood possibly inverting or, reflecting what was really his own longing for his mother. The poems then become an imaginative reversal of the child-mother positions, with mothers suffering the loss of children instead of a child suffering the loss of his mother, as the young Wordsworth did. In *The Romantic Sufferer*, however, Barbara Schapiro argues that Wordsworth seeks in his poetry not to recapture his lost mother but to resolve the pre-Oedipal ambivalence he feels toward her. His preoccupation with the figure of the abandoned women, she says, reveals a desire to punish the woman who abandoned him and project onto Nature the destructive tendencies he associates with her 'bad' side, and yet also to reckon with his own guilt ,to compassionately reaffirm her enduring goodness, and thus to renew his faith in humanity.¹² We may also interpret the interest as tied to guilt over his separation from his French mistress Annette Vallon and their daughter Caroline in 1793 because of the war with France. Within this framework, he perhaps displaces himself onto the child's position and becomes the absent one Annette desires, illogically punishes Annette for the pain the separation cause him by denying her the comfort of the child.

In Wordsworth's poetic system, the male's purchase on creativity is indirect and tenuous. However by appropriately female creativity, the male poet becomes genius. Ultimately, the poet's creative anxiety would regulate his language and by examining the gendered rhetoric as well as the poems' performative function, we reveal the strength and vigor of the female ideal. The mad mother, Martha Ray and Betty Foy emerge as successful creators despite the male poet's need to harness female creative power. In each of these poems, the female breaks her constraints; she creates meaning; she regenerates; she transgresses; she overflows. While she may be enslaved, never is she silenced or erased from existence; instead, she is writ-large and self – proliferating.

Notes

1. Irina Strout, "Mad Mother, Old and Hysterical Women in William Wordsworth's Poetry of 1798" in Catalina F. Florensou *Disjoined Perspectives on Motherhood*, (New York: Lexington Books, 2013), p.156
2. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.199
3. Claire Kahane, *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative, and the Figure of the Speaking Woman*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955), p.3
4. Florensou, p. 155
5. William Wordsworth and Samuel T. Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: The Text of the 1798 with Additional 1800 Poem*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). All the subsequent references are to this edition.
6. Barbara A. Schapiro "Literature and the Relational Self" in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, Jeffrey Berman(ed.) (New York: New York University Press, 1994), P.34
7. Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt*, (New York: Basic Books, 1975), p.236
8. This idea of the dependence on the male figure for support is the core of "The Ruined Cottage" which centers on a mother called Margret who is abandoned by her husband, goes mad. She begins to neglect her children and dies at the end because she cannot recover from her incurable sorrow.
9. Jane Aaron, "On Needle-Work: Protest and Contradiction I Mary Lamb's Essay" in *Romanticism and Feminism*, Anne Mellor (ed) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 77

10. Alan Bewell, "A Word Scarce Said: Hysteria and Witchcraft in Wordsworth's 'Experimental' Poetry of 1779-98. *ELH* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1986)
11. Ibid.
12. Wordsworth, Preface.
13. Cited in Wordsworth's Circle, Vol.39. no. 3.
14. Barbara A. Shapiro, *The Romantic Mother: Narcissistic Patterns in Romantic Poetry*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp.120-125.

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