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PSYCHOANALYSIS AND “THE DISCIPLINE OF LOVE”

IN THE PAST three decades, psychological approaches to literature, including feminist interpretations, have been overwhelmingly psychoanalytic, and this is still the case even as cognitive psychology emerges as a relevant and fruitful secondary field for literary scholars. The dominance of psychoanalysis holds true for Wordsworth scholarship, an area in which, given the poet's developmental concerns, psychological orientations seem particularly apropos. Unfortunately, Freud's most basic assumptions about infant experience, still credited in various forms by Lacanian and many feminist scholars, are no longer accepted by developmental psychologists, who regard the infant as a self-organizing system engaged in a *fundamentally productive* and social relationship with his primary caregiver, usually his mother. By contrast, psychoanalysis, which opposes *union with the mother* in the state of primary narcissism to *separation and individuation*, envisions the mother-infant relationship as paradigmatically conflicted. Though both psychoanalysts and literary critics have pointed to the methodological weakness of placing “pathomorphically chosen clinical issues . . . in a central developmental role,” the implications of this insight for literary criticism have not been fully examined.¹

In misconstruing infant psychology and growth along the lines suggested by Freud and his followers, many of Wordsworth's interpreters unintentionally misrepresent and devalue both the poet's conscious understanding of that interaction as well as the unconscious motivations for the poet's attachment to nature. Most especially, the adoption of this conflict model has hampered interpretation of the “infant Babe” passage in Book II of *The Prelude*, a passage whose central importance has not, by all accounts, received its due recognition.² In the following

pages, I will review the Freudian and neo-Freudian readings of Wordsworth, critique commonly employed psychoanalytic assumptions about infant experience and, demonstrating the correlations between the current research model and Wordsworth's description of infant experience, make a case for the foundational importance of mother-infant interaction in *The Prelude*.

Since much of Wordsworth's poetry is manifestly concerned with the formative character of childhood experience, Freudian and neo-Freudian notions about the stages and nature of infant development have been applied to the poetry with great regularity. In accord with the procedures of depth psychology, these readings seek to uncover latent meanings, yet in addressing the "infant Babe" passage, a manifest statement about infant development, they find it, curiously, consistent with the latent dynamics. Thus a common theme of psychoanalytic readings is that nature and Dorothy are mother-substitutes who reveal the poet's regressive libidinal desire for union; in construing the attachment to the mother or mother-substitute as infantile by definition, all such readings correlate *pathology* with *union with the mother*. In Freud's formulation, "there are regressions of two sorts: a return to the objects first cathected by the libido, which, as we know, are of an incestuous nature, and a return of the sexual organization as a whole to earlier stages."³ Even critics such as Barbara Schapiro, James Heffernan, and Thomas Vogler, who discern the emotional and imaginative efficacy of mother-infant interaction, are paradoxically and simultaneously obliged by the psychoanalytic paradigm to interpret representations of mothers or presumed mother-figures as informed solely or chiefly by infantile sexual desires.⁴

More recently, feminist readings influenced heavily by the modified psychoanalytic models of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, which focus on the hypothesized pre-Oedipal phase and its implications for feminine development, continue to detect the poet's regressive desire for union with the mother—again symbolized as nature and/or Dorothy—but, in a new turn, seem especially to observe a specifically masculine desire for control over the mother, a critical theme lent further support for some critics by Kleinian notions of infant aggression and the Lacanian identification of language with the Symbolic order of the father. Romanticists including Diane Hoeveler Long, Alan Richardson, Anne Mellor, Margaret Homans, Marlon Ross, and Mary Jacobus, among others, emphasize the appropriative and destructive impulse of the masculine toward the feminine, thus employing a

theoretically driven gender dichotomy that is the inevitable result of the Freudian agon.⁵

A strong theme, then, in thirty years of psychoanalytic Wordsworth scholarship, is that of the poet torn between the regressive desire for union with the mother on the one hand and the desire for separation and individuation on the other. On the whole the most recent readings emphasize the masculine will-to-power over the mother and all female others, who are interpreted almost exclusively as mother-substitutes. Though Wordsworthians have voiced concern over the lack of nuance in emerging feminist readings and in the theory-driven character of psychoanalytic approaches, it has not been generally proposed that the psychoanalytic paradigm of development may be in good measure responsible for the progressively negative direction of these readings.⁶ And if one of the dubious effects of recent feminist theory has been to rescue female writers from the blame cast upon males by adopting Chodorow's and Gilligan's theories that feminine development, characterized by pre-Oedipal attachment and an ethic of care, is *essentially* different from Oedipal, individuation-oriented masculine development, it cannot be said that mothers are placed in a very positive light. For whether construed as socially produced or innate, pre-Oedipal and Oedipal stages establish a norm of conflict whose initial locus is the mother. Of course, in the pursuit of knowledge, none of this is a problem *if* psychoanalytic speculations about the infant are in fact true to subsequent observations of babies.

As all of these readings attest, the psychoanalytic model of human development is fundamentally agonistic because closeness to the primary caregiver is said to be at odds with selfhood and socialization, the imperative to individuate severing infants from the parent with whom they have existed in supposedly perfect union. Hence, central to the agonistic depiction of the mother-infant relationship is Freud's hypothesis of primary narcissism or primary identification itself. Moreover, for Freud, this conflict between individuation and union with the mother applies equally to female and male infants. Though feminist theorists astutely note masculine bias in psychoanalytical models, they locate that bias in the misapplication of the Oedipus complex to girls and women, never questioning the validity of Freud's notions of sexualized primary attachment and individuation. For instance, drawing on Freud and his follower Margaret Mahler, Chodorow proffers her description of this state:

At birth, the infant is not only totally dependent but does not differentiate itself cognitively from its environment. It does not differentiate between subject/self and object/other. . . . The infant experiences itself as merged or continuous with the world generally, and with its mother or caretakers in particular

In this period the infant is cognitively narcissistic; its experience of self is an experience of everything else in its world. . . .

After [the emergence of the first dim awareness of a mothering agent], the infant reaches the “symbiotic” stage of “mother-child dual unity,” a stage reaching its height during the fourth or fifth month, and lasting approximately through the infant’s first year. During this stage, the infant oscillates between perceptions of its mother as separate and as not separate. For the most part, in spite of cognitive perception of separateness, it experiences itself as within a common boundary and fused, physically and psychologically, with its mother. Accordingly, it does not experience gratifications and protections as coming from her. (pp. 61–62)

At first blush, the oblivion in which the infant purportedly dwells may match a casual observer’s perceptions, but closer inspection reveals that the psychological incoherence of the hypothesis of primary narcissism is exposed in Chodorow’s language alone. If the infant in fact feels merged with the world, how can it not have a rudimentary sense of separateness—surely the premise of an experience of merger? Indeed, can it be claimed that an undifferentiated being *experiences* at all, much less is “cognitively narcissistic,” when it has neither the conception of self nor the affective capability denoted by the second term? However impossible to imagine, this preconscious union with the mother nevertheless presumably represents, in the mind of the adult, a lost Eden to which he longs to return, and consequently establishes loss and conflict at the heart of human development.

Contributing further to the agonistic tenor of the Freudian paradigm is the assumption that sexual impulses first emerge in this narcissistic mother-infant union, and that, in fact, the “drive” underwriting the mother-infant bond is essentially sexual. As Freud points out,

when children fall asleep after being sated at the breast, they show an expression of blissful satisfaction which will be repeated later in life after the experience of sexual orgasm. This would be too little upon which to base an inference. But we observe how an infant will repeat the action of taking in nourishment without making a demand for further food We describe this as sensual sucking It is our belief that [infants] first

experience this pleasure in connection with taking nourishment but that they soon learn to separate it from that accompanying condition. (pp. 313–14)

If in the concept of primary narcissism Freud imagines an idealized unity that one could only resent losing, the additional inference that the pleasure of sucking is identical in kind to sexual pleasure and, therefore, that nursing is the ground of sexual instruction determines that the mother must become, in the psyche of the child, seductress and cheat. Via nursing, sexual jealousy between father and infant is ushered into the household, and the groundwork is laid for the Oedipal stage, when children must learn that the mother is not, alas, theirs to acquire.

The supposition that conflict fundamentally characterizes infant experience reaches its foreseeable conclusion in the theories of Melanie Klein, whose ideas have been widely assimilated to psychoanalytical literary criticism. Importantly recognizing that infants feel strong emotions, Klein erroneously found the etiology of such emotions in destructive impulses aimed at the mother. Klein theorized that, in the tortuous process wherein infants vacillate between fusion and separateness, they symbolize aspects of the mother, absorbing (introjecting) good qualities while projecting bad qualities outside of themselves. Klein reports that

sadism . . . is ushered in by the oral-sadistic desire to devour the mother's breast (or the mother herself) and passes away with the earlier anal stage. At the period of which I am speaking, the subject's dominant aim is to possess himself of the contents of the mother's body and to destroy her by means of every weapon which sadism can command.⁷

For Klein, then, the process of individuation is so deeply traumatic that sadistic fantasizing constitutes an identifiable stage in normal development.

In contrast to the fundamentally agonistic Freudian model whereby the child in the first year of life is torn between two modes of being, present-day psychologists view development as a progressive phenomenon from the time of birth onward—and, indeed, doubt that issues of separation principally characterize this age (Stern, *IW*, p. 10). In both their views of an evolving self-concept and those of connection to others, researchers see human infants as engaged in organizing their perceptions and responses; continuity and growth, rather than strict

stages, characterize development. These early modes of orienting and relating, moreover, are universally apparent.⁸

For instance, Daniel Stern, a psychoanalyst and psychologist who maps the overlapping phases of infant development based on empirical studies, expresses the conclusion of contemporary developmentalists that Freud's belief in primary narcissism is fundamentally wrong. According to Stern,

There is no confusion between self and other in the beginning or at any point during infancy. [Infants] are also predestined to be selectively responsive to external social events and never experience an autistic-like phase.

During the period from two to six months, infants consolidate the sense of a core self as a separate, cohesive, bounded, physical unit, with a sense of their own agency, affectivity, and continuity in time. There is no symbiotic-like phase. In fact, the subjective experiences of union with another can occur only after a sense of a core self and a core other exists. *Union experiences are thus viewed as the successful result of actively organizing the experience of self-being-with-another, rather than as the product of a passive failure of the ability to differentiate self from other.* (*IW*, p. 10, my italics)

Observing the ability of infants to draw inferences and relate objects and experiences with one another, Stern here refutes the claim of Freud, Mahler, Chodorow and others that the infant's experience is undifferentiated. Much to the contrary, infants exhibit a capacity for amodal perception, which enables them to experience a world of perceptual unity. Experiments conducted in recent decades demonstrate that infants can match sensations across sensory fields—for instance, visually distinguishing an irregularly shaped nipple they've sucked from a normal one (age three weeks), matching sound and light intensities (age three weeks), matching facial configuration to actual sounds produced (age six weeks) (*IW*, pp. 47–53). Thus infants under two months are not only aware of a world beyond themselves, but exhibit very distinct biases in organizing it. Repeated and varied experiments demonstrate that, though physically dependent, a two-month-old actively seeks face-to-face interaction and, contrary to the psychoanalytic notion that it does not discriminate sources of care and comfort, directly perceives emotional support as coming from the mother. When an infant of this age responds to an audiotape of its mother's voice but then does not get the response expected in face-to-face interaction, it frets at the breakdown of the conversation-

like exchange; likewise, when mothers are instructed to keep blank faces while talking to and listening to their infants' responses, the babies begin to fret. Indeed, even the newest newborn acts in ways revealing an attempt to orient relationally, for studies show that immediately after birth infants look toward their mothers. While it is clear, then, that the infant progresses from a state of *relative* undifferentiation to greater and greater differentiation, it *never* experiences complete merger with the mother.⁹

Thus, just as a self-concept evolves out of, rather than in opposition to, the early relationship with the mother, the emotional bonds that develop in tandem with mother-infant interaction are not, as psychoanalysis would have it, opposed to an earlier connection or union with the mother but result from it, as attachment theory explains. Attachment behavior, defined as the "seeking and maintaining of proximity to another individual," consisting of crying, calling, smiling, gesturing, and babbling, and presumed to facilitate species survival, is observable in human infants by six months and highly observable in the second year of life (*Attachment*, p. 194). Shortly after attachment behaviors are first observed, they become directed toward other family members. In short, while the Freudian concept of primary narcissism implies that connection with the mother inherently threatens adult psychic health and extensive social relations, Stern and Bowlby claim that a strong initial relationship with the mother provides the *foundation* for a child's growth, individuation, and sociality. When Bowlby tells us that "in the early months of attachment the greater the number of figures to whom a child was attached the more intense was his attachment to mother as his principal figure likely to be," he is noting that, far from encouraging incestuous, infantile isolation, a strong primary bond with the mother provides security and teaches the practical and affective rewards of social interaction (p. 202).

And whereas Freud posits that the infant's attachment to the mother is a byproduct of nursing, a secondary drive derived from a sexualized primary drive for food, developmentalists have long considered these views in error.¹⁰ First, studies of animal behavior consistently demonstrate across a wide variety of species that there is no causal relationship between food and attachment, the most important research in this respect being Harlow's 1961 experiments with infant rhesus monkeys who were isolated in cages and would cling to a cloth and chickenwire "mother" rather than eat, and who later manifested severe emotional and social disturbances. These findings are supported by Konrad

Lorenz's studies in the thirties of imprinting behavior, which demonstrate that even chicks attach to a parent-figure independent of food availability. Indeed, primates and humans characteristically develop strong attachments to those who do not meet their physiological needs, a fact which psychoanalytic theory is poorly equipped to explain.

Second, Freud's assumption that incestuous desire is natural and normative should have struck a discordant note even in the nineteenth century, for before the theory of natural selection and the discovery of genetics, breeders had long known of the damaging effects of inbreeding depression. This alone makes it improbable that attachment to the mother is mobilized by a sexual drive. An alternative hypothesis known as the Westermarck effect, which holds that those with whom one associates closely in early childhood are avoided as sexual objects, was an early rival to Freudianism and seems more plausible in the face of all subsequent evidence.¹¹

Finally, Klein's belief that infant frustration and anger are expressions of rage toward the mother have not been borne out by research. If the neonate is not indiscriminating, it does not, on the other hand, have the capacity for abstract cognition required to internalize psychically the breast-for-mother equation. In fact, before eighteen months and the surge in language development, infants do not have the symbolical abilities required for the fantasies central not just to Klein's ideas, but to all psychoanalytic theory and, further, cannot as yet direct feelings toward specific individuals. Infant frustration is explained more parsimoniously by helplessness, boredom, and disorganized digestion, themselves the result of a shortened gestation and premature birth forced on the human species by the evolutionary pressures of upright posture and fetal encephalization.¹²

Taken together, these developmental studies delineate the productive character of mother-infant interaction, and it is, I believe, this *essentially* productive formative relationship that Wordsworth acknowledges in Book II of *The Prelude*.

Bless'd the infant Babe,
 (For with my best conjectures I would trace
 The progress of our being) blest the Babe,
 Nurs'd in his Mother's arms, the Babe who sleeps
 Upon his Mother's breast, who, when his soul
 Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul,
 Doth gather passion from his Mother's eye!

Such feelings pass into his torpid life
 Like an awakening breeze, and hence his mind
 Even [in the first trial of its powers]
 Is prompt and watchful, eager to combine
 In one appearance, all the elements
 And parts of the same object, else detach'd
 And loth to coalesce. Thus, day by day,
 Subjected to the discipline of love,
 His organs and recipient faculties
 Are quicken'd, are more vigorous, his mind spreads,
 Tenacious of the forms which it receives.
 In one beloved presence, nay and more,
 In that most apprehensive habitude
 And those sensations which have been deriv'd
 From this beloved Presence, there exists
 A virtue which irradiates and exalts
 All objects through all intercourse of sense.
 No outcast he, bewilder'd and depress'd:
 Along his infant veins are interfus'd
 The gravitation and the filial bond
 Of nature, that connect him with the world.
 Emphatically such a Being lives,
 An inmate of this *active* universe;
 From nature largely he receives; nor so
 Is satisfied, but largely gives again,
 For feeling has to him imparted strength,
 And powerful in all sentiments of grief,
 Of exultation, fear, and joy, his mind,
 Even as an agent of the one great mind,
 Creates, creator and receiver both,
 Working but in alliance with the works
 Which it beholds.

(II.238–79)

Because Freudians make much of the mother's breast as a site of sexual excitation and thus an object arousing possessiveness and concomitant rage, literary readings that follow Freud, Klein, and Chodorow discern a conflictual relationship between mother and child in Wordsworth's passage. Combining psychoanalysis with historicism, for instance, Richardson claims that the 1850 version of this passage, the basic substance of which is the same as the 1805 version quoted here, corresponds to other images of nursing in Romantic literature,

“graphically [representing] the male child’s absorption of his mother’s sympathetic faculty even as his primary affective bond is established” (p. 17). But it is worth noting that, although Wordsworth employs the words “nursed” and “breast” in the passage, neither he nor the child he describes is preoccupied with breasts and breastfeeding. Instead, the poet’s focus on the *place* of nursing (“in his Mother’s arms”) and of continued holding (“Upon his Mother’s breast”), as the cradled child is lulled to sleep, highlights physical contact—holding and the warmth, protection, and security that such proximity confers. Furthermore, the repetition of “his Mother’s” in conjunction with the specific descriptions of the infant’s closeness to his parent conveys not only the importance of continued contact but also the value, at a time when wet nurses were commonly employed by the middle and upper classes, of being nurtured and protected by one’s *actual* mother. Aware that newborns demand to be held, Wordsworth here is less fixated on the mother’s breast than appreciative of the ongoing nurture that originates in bodily contact. Indeed, he makes this point explicitly in the subsequent paragraph when he asserts that as “a Babe, by intercourse of touch / [He] held mute dialogues with [his] Mother’s heart” (l. 282–83), engaging in a conversation-like, turn-taking affective exchange that enables the “infant sensibility” (l. 285) to form the core of adult consciousness.

Whereas Freud sees bodily contact and the early emotional rewards connected to it as a byproduct of feeding, Wordsworth apparently places primary importance on the contact itself. If the Harlow experiments demonstrate that bodily contact and the attachment behavior soon to emerge from it correspond to basic biopsychological needs, Wordsworth seems to have intuited the crucial importance of holding and closeness for infants well before psychology’s theoretical formulations.

Wordsworth clearly envisions a causal relationship whereby the physical closeness of mother and infant, possible only through the parent’s initiative, stimulates positive affective development whose ultimate outcome is interest in and a sense of connection to the larger world. As Jean Hagstrum notes, “natural and bodily energy inspires and shapes the poetry of both tender familial affection and transcendental vision.”¹³ The child’s enthusiasm is not solely the result of holding, but equally of the other feature of mother-infant interaction on which Wordsworth focuses, eye contact. If touch forms the most basic ground of nurture and affective exchange, it is augmented by early gaze behavior, as the child “[gathers] passion from his mother’s eye,” the resulting positive feelings stimulating cognitive development and pro-

moting the organization of sensory experience. More than windows on the soul, the eyes are the conduit of emotion, motivating the child “to combine / . . . all the elements / And parts of the same object, else detach’d / And loth to coalesce” (l. 247–50)—that is, to create a coherent picture of his environment. While “[sleeping] / Upon his Mother’s breast” (l. 240–41) provides the security for further growth, the progression of the passage attributes cognitive development to the exchange of feelings he experiences as he awakens to and explores not his mother’s breast but her eyes and face.

In asserting the primacy of visual exchange, Wordsworth is once again ahead of Freud and his constituents, perceiving a key feature of development recognized by current psychologists. Stern reports:

For the first several weeks after birth, the majority of the baby’s awake alert time is spent in and around feeding and somewhat less in diapering and bathing. What will he see? It turns out that when the infant is in the normal breast- or bottle-feeding position his eyes are almost exactly eight inches from his mother’s eyes (if she is facing him). We have found that, during feeding, mothers spend about 70 percent of the time facing and looking at their infants. Accordingly, what he is most likely to look at and see is his mother’s face, especially her eyes. (Several earlier theories assumed that the first and most important object the infant sees is the breast. This is certainly not correct since during suckling the breast is too close to be in focus.) *Thus the arrangement of anatomy, normal positioning, and visual competence dictated by natural design all point to the mother’s face as an initial focal point of importance for the infant’s early construction of his salient visual world, and a starting point for the formation of his early human relatedness.*¹⁴

Basing his conclusions on research that indicates the innate preference for facial configuration and/or specific facial features, Stern tells us that it is the predisposition to attend to the human face that draws an infant’s attention to his mother’s gaze. As he puts it, “From the very beginning, then, the infant is ‘designed’ to find the human face fascinating, and the mother is led to attract as much interest as possible to her already ‘interesting’ face” (*FR*, p. 37).¹⁵ It is no accident that the normal focusing distance for the human neonate is about eight inches, the same as the approximate distance between the eyes of the mother and those of the infant during feeding.

Rather than the breast forming the locus of visual and emotional development, as Freud and Klein theorized, our more recent knowledge of the nonsymbolic centrality of gaze behaviors and the maturation

of the visual system provides a physiological basis for understanding that psychic and physiological growth mirror one another, and that both are primarily progressive rather than conflicted. Mutual gaze, a nonsymbolic interaction, provides the emotional stimulation for further exploration of the environment; given the prolonged course of human development, the human visual system matures remarkably early. By three months of age, a human infant can track, fixate upon, or bring an object into focus as well as an adult. Remarks Stern, "This developmental landmark is extraordinary when contrasted with the immaturity of most of his other systems of communication and the regulation of interpersonal contact, for instance, speech, gesture, locomotion, manipulation of objects" (*FR*, p. 38–39). Of the two other motor systems to mature early, sucking and head movement, the latter serves primarily to support and expand the range of the visual system.

Apparently sensitive to the efficacy of eye contact between mother and child, Wordsworth glorifies without sentimentalizing gaze behavior, identifying its centrality in affective development, creative inspiration, and cognitive coherence. Securely ensconced in his mother's arms, the child looks into her eyes and senses her love, "[gathering] passion" that at once catalyses his responsiveness and unequivocally identifies this moment, through the metaphor of the "awakening breeze" that harks back to the beginning of the poem and betokens creative inspiration, as the origin of poetic power.¹⁶ For the time being, the motivating force of powerful feelings encourages the "prompt and watchful" child to direct his nascent synthesizing ability to the world beyond himself—first and foremost, to the "object" offering these affective rewards, his mother's face.

This remarkably accurate depiction of the emotional and cognitive results of maternal nurture justifies Wordsworth's subsequent deification of the mother through the exalted terms "Being" and "Presence" and through the introduction into the passage of light imagery associated with her. Far from drawing the child back into an infantile and hermetic relationship, the mother "irradiates and exalts / All objects through all intercourse of sense" (l. 258–60)—metaphorically shedding light on the full range of their interactions and on the child's early excitement about the world. Indeed, the chronological progression in the passage from interest in the mother, expressed through mutual gaze, to interest in the surrounding environment also corresponds to developmental research, which indicates that by three to four months infants prefer object exploration and hand games over face-to-

face interactions (Trevarthen). At the same time, as David Miall notes in his commentary on the dynamics of feeling in this passage, “the infant’s feelings about an object will be governed by the feelings it senses in the adult.”¹⁷ As the mother’s disciple, her apprentice in the “discipline of love,” the child is united with the world through the feeling it now reciprocates, a light which, far from following an outmoded Freudian economy of drives and energy, is augmented through positive emotional exchange. Whereas the Freudian model suggests that we all experience an infantile desire to return to a preconscious sanctuary of primary union and primitive emotions (pre-emotions?) embodied in the mother, and thus, as Homans puts it, “look for her representation in the later objects of [our] love” (p. 49), Wordsworth envisions goal-directed living in the world (i.e., active *being*) as the outgrowth of the initial mother-infant bond, which renders the child, *like his mother*, a deified being who now shares with her and the “one great mind” the status of “creator and receiver.”

Understood within the larger context of *The Prelude*, this passage represents an epiphanic moment of primary importance to the entire text, not merely expressing joy and gratitude but denominating the source of and reason for the moral imperative to write, a moral imperative whose emotional force precipitates the poem’s forward momentum in Book I but remains unarticulated until Book II. More than equal in significance to *The Prelude*’s other visionary epiphanies, the “infant Babe” passage has priority over them inasmuch as neither the experiences of vision nor the epiphanic recognitions are possible without the founding relationship of the child and this correspondingly grounding epiphany of the poem.

Offering valuable insights about the structural complexity of this poem that attempts to dramatize the interruptive process of self-understanding even as it tells a story of apparent chronological growth, critics in recent years have become increasingly attuned to the way Wordsworth’s placement of insights captures the emotional and cognitive vagaries of the mind.¹⁸ So, too, the “infant Babe” passage marks, arguably, the culmination of the poetic persona’s struggle, depicted in Book I, to find an appropriate topic for a long poem and to fortify his writerly resolve. Wordsworth’s self-mocking, introductory “glad preamble” (I.1–54) locates easy claims for poetic inspiration and productivity squarely in the past, and the poet, tempted alternately to luxuriate passively in nature and to dwell on unfulfilled ambition and guilt (I.55–272), generates his forward course out of the guilt and despair of

feeling “[l]ike a false Steward who hath much receiv’d / And renders nothing back” (I.270–72). But the pronounced tonal shift from this despair to the poet’s exuberant rhetorical question—“Was it for this / That one, the fairest of all Rivers, lov’d / To blend his murmurs with my Nurse’s song” (I.272–74)—does not explain why “rendering back” is so necessary. Alternating between depictions of the soul’s “fair seed-time,” in which, alongside his playfellows, the boy is tutored “by beauty and by fear” (I.306–307) and general commentary asserting the spiritual and developmental value of those experiences, the remainder of Book I, “[fixes] the wavering balance of [Wordsworth’s] mind” (I.651) and implies the poem’s subject—that mind’s development—but it does not explain how poetry represents a reciprocal gift to nature. Rivers, after all, cannot read.

Coming several hundred lines into Book II after Wordsworth describes his growing love of the peace and solitude to be felt in nature, the “infant Babe” passage explains the moral necessity of writing even as it corrects—by anticipation—the quietistic direction of the adolescent boy’s new awareness of nature. Neither the “vulgar joy” nor dreamy solitude are possible without the relationship that founds, simultaneously, emotional attachments and interest in the world, and this most basic social relationship, too, is a part of nature. It is the specifically human dimension of natural life that obligates the poet to supercede contemplative ease and that dictates the subject of his poem, the growth of the creative mind in nature whose source is mother-love.

Within the immediate context in Book II, Wordsworth signals the importance of the passage by preceding it with a verse paragraph depicting a moment of cognitive hesitation in the analysis of his own experience, thus aligning the passage with the many like juxtapositions, wherein despair, disappointment, doubt, or relaxation are reversed by a overflow of emotional and/or intellectual confidence. Beginning with the claim that he had reached a new stage in his development, Wordsworth immediately questions his compartmentalization of experience, asking,

Who knows the individual hour in which
His habits were first sown, even as a seed,
Who that shall point, as with a wand, and say,
“This portion of the river of my mind
Came from yon fountain”?

(I. 211–15)

Even if the adolescent's contemplative appreciation of nature is remembered by the writing poet as a newfound joy, Wordsworth nevertheless implies that its origin cannot be known. Indeed, the final lines of the passage seem to consolidate this nascent epistemological nihilism:

Hard task to analyse a soul, in which,
Not only general habits and desires,
But each most obvious and particular thought,
Not in a mystical and idle sense,
But in the words of reason deeply weigh'd,
Hath no beginning.

(l. 232–37)

Taken in isolation, this passage suggests the logical endpoint of the poem, announcing as it does a disinclination to divide life into stages that feel to the poet like artificial constructs. Instead, in suddenly exhorting us with the blessed life of the neonate, Wordsworth tells us, more powerfully than he would if he stated it directly, that at least the river of “general habits” can be traced to its fountain, identifying the source of human well-being as the mother-infant relationship. All else is “best conjecture,” the passage seems to say, but *this* we know.¹⁹ Behind or above human life may reside some obscurely intimated divine entity, some transcendent source or cause, the “Presences of Nature” (I.490) or the “Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe” (I.429), but in our earthly existence it is the nurturing mother who is confidently identifiable as the source of the poet's being.

In accord with this reading, Wordsworth's claim at the end of the poem that the successful poet's heart will “be tender as a nursing Mother's heart” (XIII.207) is not a denial of his own mother's death or a co-optation of female sensibility, but a final confirmation and acknowledgment of all that is due to mother-love. Even while the emergent dualism of *The Prelude's* final book suggests that “love more intellectual” (XIII.166)—spiritual love—comes from a separate, divine source than human love, the logic of the poem, which has asserted that feeling and creativity have their source in the mother-infant relationship, indicates that spiritual love, which “cannot be / Without Imagination” (XIII.166–67), arises from and depends upon human love. But more than this, Wordsworth has taken care to point out that divine love does not supplant human love in the poet's affective constitution; rather, it is his nurturing sensibility that makes possible common pleasures, sublime

poetry, and a network of loving relationships exactly *because* sublime poetry reciprocates nurturing affection, rendering back many times over—to Coleridge, Dorothy, Mary, and, according to the poem's logic, Wordsworth's readers—a love that begins with the mother.²⁰

The stunted creature who yearns for the infantile state of primary narcissism, a sort of intercourse without effort, little resembles the poet who celebrates “the discipline of love” as the source of social feeling and poetry. Surely the durability of the psychoanalytic paradigm in literary studies attests to an abiding sexism in our general culture which replaces the positive fact of nurture with a primarily destructive dynamics. For as Wordsworth perceived and subsequent research in developmental psychology bears out, the primary caregiver, almost always the mother, holds enormous power, central as she is to the lifelong well-being of the child, and it is this positive power, so long culturally devalued, that we have failed to see as so justly central to Wordsworth's vision. Certainly, conflict exists between parents/caregivers and children, but this conflict has little to do with a lost primordial union or sexual competition for the mother: one thinks of the exhausted new mother, her sleep interrupted every few hours by a hungry infant as yet incapable of rendering back love and feeling or, a few years later, of the preschooler who cannot understand the annoyance of napkins soaked in milk and bran flakes arranged in casual piles on the kitchen table. (I'm sure the Wordsworths experienced their age's equivalent.) By the same token, adults are psychically blind, however intellectually schooled and imaginatively gifted, to the significance of these activities for the child. Occupying such different places in the life cycle and motivated by different kinds of commitments to our own cohorts and to other generations, parents and children will inevitably have disagreements. But those differences emerge against the background of an efficacious first relationship and its outgrowth, and it is within the lives resulting from that productive, formative time that conflict must be negotiated.

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ORLEANS

1. Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 20. See also John Bowlby, *Attachment* (New York: Basic Books, 1969); Frederick C. Crews, *Skeptical Engagements*

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Michelle Scalise Sugiyama, "New Science, Old Myth: An Evolutionary Critique of the Oedipal Paradigm," *Mosaic*, forthcoming.

2. William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book "Prelude"*, ed. Mark L. Reed, vol. 1 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

3. Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (1920; reprint, New York: Norton Books, 1966), p. 341.

4. Barbara Schapiro, *The Romantic Mother: Narcissistic Patterns in Romantic Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); James A. W. Heffernan, "The Presence of the Absent Mother in Wordsworth's *Prelude*," *Studies in Romanticism* 27 (1988): 253–72.

5. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Diane Hoeveler Long, *Romantic Androgyny: The Woman Within* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1990); Alan Richardson, "Romanticism and the Colonization of the Feminine," *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988); Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1993); Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Marlon Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Mary Jacobus, *Romanticism, Writing, and Sexual Difference: Essays on "The Prelude"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

6. See Susan J. Wolfson, "Lyrical Ballads and the Language of (Men) Feeling: Wordsworth Writing Women's Voices," *Men Writing the Feminine: Literature, Theory, and the Question of Genders*, ed. Thais E. Morgan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). For criticism of theory-driven approaches that seek to locate symbols of mothers and women, see G. Kim Blank, *Wordsworth and Feeling: The Poetry of an Adult Child* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995) and Richard E. Levin, "The New Interdisciplinarity in Literary Criticism," *After Poststructuralism: Interdisciplinarity and Literary Theory*, ed. Nancy Easterlin and Barbara Riebling (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 13–43. Nuanced interpretations of Romanticism and the feminine appear in Michael G. Cooke, *Acts of Inclusion: Studies Bearing on the Elementary Theory of Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Kurt Heinzelman, "The Cult of Domesticity: Dorothy and William at Grasmere," *Romanticism and Feminism*, pp. 25–78; Judith W. Page, *Wordsworth and the Cultivation of Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Sarah McKim Webster, "Circumscription and the Female in the Early Romantics," *Philological Quarterly* 61 (1982): 51–68.

7. Melanie Klein, "The Importance of Symbol-Formation in the Development of the Ego," *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1975), p. 219.

8. All developmental studies employed here draw on cross-cultural research. For a discussion specifically focused on cross-cultural continuities, see Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, "Patterns of Parent-Child Interaction in a Cross-Cultural Perspective," *The Behavior of Human Infants*, ed. Alberto Oliverio and Michele Zappella (New York: Plenum Press, 1983).

9. In addition to Stern and Eibl-Eibesfeldt, see Colwyn Trevarthen, "Interpersonal Abilities of Infants as Generators for Transmission of Language and Culture," *The Behavior of Human Infants*, pp. 145–76.
10. For discussions, respectively, of the historical prevalence of now-outmoded drive theories and of the contradictions between theory and empirical observation in Freud, Klein, and others, see Bowlby, pp. 177–78; 210–17; 361–78.
11. On early awareness of inbreeding depression, see Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (1859; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1959). For a discussion of the literature on incest avoidance, see Donald Brown, *Human Universals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 118–29; for a briefer summary, see E. O. Wilson, *Consilience* (New York: Knopf, 1998), pp. 173–80.
12. See Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1994), p. 288.
13. Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Romantic Body: Love and Sexuality in Keats, Wordsworth, and Blake* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), p. 74. However, the present essay disputes Hagstrum's assumption that the bodily origin of feeling and vision implies a necessarily sexual origin.
14. Daniel N. Stern, *The First Relationship: Infant and Mother* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 36, italics mine.
15. For research further demonstrating that this process is reciprocal, since caregivers respond to infant gaze and, later, babbling in ways particularly keyed to encourage further interaction, see Trevarthen, Eibl-Eibesfeldt, and D. Csermely and D. Mainardi, "Infant Signals," *The Behavior of Human Infants*, pp. 1–19.
16. For a discussion of the primacy of emotion in human cognition and motivation and a brief overview of contemporary theories of emotion, see Robert Storey, *Mimesis and the Human Animal: On the Biogenetic Foundations of Literary Representation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), pp. 7–15. For a discussion of the breeze as a metaphor for poetic inspiration, see M. H. Abrams, "The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor," *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).
17. Miall cites the developmental studies that document this transfer of feeling tone between parent and infants, called "social referencing," at approximately twelve months (p. 234). David Miall, "Wordsworth and *The Prelude*: the Problematics of Feeling," *Studies in Romanticism* 31 (1992): 233–53.
18. For seminal discussions of the general structure of the poem, see Herbert Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth's "Prelude"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) and M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton Books, 1971); for discussions of the placement and progression of epiphanies in the poem, see Nancy Easterlin, *Wordsworth and the Question of "Romantic Religion"* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 1996); Kenneth Johnston, *Wordsworth and "The Recluse"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); David S. Miall, "The Alps Deferred": Wordsworth at the Simplon Pass," *European Romantic Review* 9 (1998): 87–102; Ashton Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Movement* (Tuscaloosa:

University of Alabama Press, 1987); J. T. Ogden, "The Structure of Imaginative Experience in Wordsworth's *Prelude*," *The Wordsworth Circle* 6 (1975): 290-98.

19. See Heffernan (p. 266) for comparisons of several early versions of the poem which demonstrate that Wordsworth's "river of the mind" has its origin in the mother.

20. For readings that develop further the view that the love expressed at the end of the poem originates with the mother and does not succumb to a rationalistic economy, see Easterlin, Schapiro, and David P. Haney, *Wordsworth and the Hermeneutics of Incarnation* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1993).