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Source / Izvornik: **Studia Romanica et Anglica Zagrabensia, 2018, 63, 113 - 126**

Journal article, Published version

Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:131:198837>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-09-09**



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UDC 821.111.09 Wordsworth, W.
821.111.09 Shelley, P. B.
Original scientific paper
Received on 23 June 2017
Accepted for publication on 24 January 2019

Politics as absence in *Tintern Abbey* and *Mont Blanc*

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This paper will take as its starting point the analysis of two complementary poems, by two Romantic writers, Wordsworth and Shelley. The comparative analysis of their two greatest 'nature' poems, namely 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Mont Blanc' is in many ways justified by the fact that Wordsworth was seen by Shelley as his literary father and 'Mont Blanc' is Shelley's response to 'Tintern Abbey'. In order to highlight the idea that in both poems 'nature' acts as an empty signifier and thus questions rather than asserts their radical potential, I want to focus on the controlling power of politics which is absent from these poems. This type of reading then becomes an extension of the new historicist view that most Romantic poems occlude their involvement in historical relations and shows that they cannot be read without taking into account the forces of politics.

Key-words: Wordsworth, Shelley, Tintern Abbey, Mont Blanc, new historicism, politics

In the traditional readings of 'Tintern Abbey', the poem embodies what M.H. Abrams called 'the psycho-natural parallelism', or the mind's relation to external nature. The wisdom goes that 'Tintern Abbey' is a miniature of a long poem Wordsworth never wrote, *The Recluse*, of which *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* would have been only minor parts. As Mary Jacobus pointed out, many images and themes dealt with in this poem owe so much to eighteenth century poets like Thomson, Cowper and Akenside, but in Wordsworth it is not so much the scene that stands out as the poet's presence in it. Wordsworth is primarily concerned with the 'growth of his own mind', as the subtitle to *The Prelude* would have it, on a smaller scale since he records the change in his perception, now that five years have gone by. In the renewed presence of a remembered scene, as Bloom would explain, Wordsworth comes to a full understanding of his poetic self – he learns the principle of reciprocity between the external world and his own mind and the story of reciprocity becomes the central story of his best poetry. Thus, the poem ends on a note of hope as it smoothly aggrandizes the poetic self – Wordsworth's own 'egotistical sublime' (the term is John Keats's).

However, if we take 'Tintern Abbey' to be one of Wordsworth's poems about the self and its relation to nature, we should not forget that the romantic concept of nature does not only embrace the private events because in many ways it embraces the social others. Thus the personal also becomes social and political. In 'Romanticism and Its Ideologies', Jerome McGann argued that 'in the case of romantic poems, we shall find that the works tend to develop different sorts of artistic means with which to occlude and disguise their own involvement in a certain nexus of historical relations'¹. In that sense, 'nature' can be seen as an ideal illusion to obfuscate the social reality. Again, the example of 'Tintern Abbey' is worth taking into account. The new historicist readings (Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson and Kenneth Johnson) of the poem have tried to show how Wordsworth strategically suppresses awareness of salient parts of the scene on the Wye—the beggars lurking in the Abbey ruins, the furnaces of the iron forges nearby that burned night and day, the busy river traffic that passed the Abbey etc. How could Wordsworth talk about the 'pastoral farms' and 'the vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods' knowing that the ruined abbey had been in the 1790s a favorite haunt of displaced persons. Though I agree with such readings of Wordsworth, it seems to me that they do not question Wordsworth's 'democratic principle' enough, which in the end leads to his re-establishment of a middle-class experience of the natural sublime. Again, the example of 'Tintern Abbey' shows that a solitary figure is a prompter of epiphany in the reflecting poet who never ventures a single gesture of generosity; it also shows that 'the unintelligible world' of towns and cities is rather an affectation of a poet who finds the sublime in the city as much as in nature and finally, it shows that the 'dark undersong of the poem' contained, according to Bloom and Trilling, in the phrase 'sad perplexity' could be linked to his fear of the rising capitalist economy and his loss of safety and ease.

Wordsworth's fascination with 'displaced persons' or 'figures of deprivation' (as Paul de Man would call them) has long been connected to his humanitarian principles. Thus David Bromwich wants to show that the Blind Beggar episode in *The Prelude* is a confirmation of Wordsworth being of a Rousseauist party: property, status, function, the whole train of social and moral relations do not define human identity. In other words, a beggar is not a prompter of charity, neither is he a pointless moral entity – he belongs to general humanity, regardless of his social status, because his feelings are as intense as anyone's². When Wordsworth encounters a solitary leech gatherer ('Resolution and Independence'), he becomes an emblem of perseverance and, according to Harold Bloom, teaches Wordsworth about the right course to take in the future. Here Wordsworth introduces us to the

¹ Jerome McGann. 'Romanticism and its Ideologies'. in *Romanticism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* edited by Michael O'Neill and Mark Sandy, New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 108 – 132

² David Bromwich. *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth's Poetry of the 1790s*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 30

world of, what Bloom called the “natural man”³. The leech gatherer, just like an array of similar characters including the old Cumberland beggar or the shepherd Michael, is a man reduced to naked desolation but still natural. Wordsworth himself owes strength and hope in what the future would bring to these natural men. ‘Tintern Abbey’ for that part also starts with an image of a hermit in the cave ‘where by his fire/ The Hermit sits alone’ (21-22). Again, the poet remains a detached observer and the scene observed is as important as it acts as an epiphany upon his own mind. In that sense, the poet’s location in describing the scene of ‘steep and lofty cliffs’ (5) and ‘sounding cataract’ (76) along the Wye river, rather than the ceaseless toil of iron smelters within half a mile of Tintern Abbey itself, is utterly unimportant. The suppression of the Abbey from the poem, also points to the fact that the place and therefore the people linked to that place by their daily work are less important than Wordsworth’s potentialities of memory and the ability of a landscape scene to evolve during the period of five years. It is true, however, that Wordsworth’s poem (as many critics have noted) has an ethical dimension. This dimension is often connected to the idea of the poet profiting from the sights of nature in ‘emotion recollected in tranquility’ and those ‘little, nameless, unremembered acts/ Of kindness and of love’. The latter foregrounds the idea of morality being a part of our habit rather than a part of our learning that Wordsworth would write about two months after finishing ‘Tintern Abbey’ in his *Essay on Morals* (composed between 26 September 1798 and 23 February 1799). In this short fragmentary essay Wordsworth would attack Godwin and Paley⁴ as preachers of morality and advocate the idea that morality is a matter of habit in which the act of giving is largely accidental:

‘Can it be imagined by any man who has deeply examined his own heart that an old habit will be foregone, or a new one formed, by a series of propositions, which presenting no image to the mind, can convey no feeling which has any connection with the supposed archetype or fountain of the proposition existing in human life?’ (105)

Yet, there are no such habitual, accidental signs of kindness in his poetry. To reiterate some of the first reviews of *Lyrical Ballads* and counteract the Arnoldian positive legacy on Wordsworth, I’ll briefly quote from Dr. Burney’s review of ‘Tintern Abbey’ in *The Monthly Review* of 1799 stating that the poem shows “reflections of no common mind (...) but somewhat tintured with gloomy, narrow and unsociable ideas of seclusion from the commerce of the world: as if men were born to live in woods and wilds, unconnected with each other (...)”. Indeed, Wordsworth stresses that the scenes of nature offered tranquil restoration to his mind ‘in lonely rooms and ‘mid the din/ Of towns and cities’. The rural beauties

³ See Harold Bloom. *The Visionary Company*, p. 156

⁴ The books in question are probably Godwin’s *Political Justice* (1793) and William Paley’s *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785).

are set against 'the heavy and the weary weight/Of all this unintelligible world'. Book VII of *The Prelude* with its description of London as a kind of hydra-humanity is taken as exemplary for the kind of attitude Wordsworth takes to the metropolis. As he spent most of the 1790s in London and Paris, Wordsworth was himself a part of the demographic shift from the country to the city, the consequences of which he lamented in his famous Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). There he talked about 'the increasing accumulation of men in the cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies'. Yet, Wordsworth could lament this very fact from the safe position of a middle-class observer – the one who did not have to earn money for his subsistence (Kenneth R. Johnston says that he refused to take up a paying profession, 177) and who was 'entirely a liability in the family's scrupulous account books'. He actually stayed four months in London after completing his three-months picturesque-sublime tour in the Alps. So, his sensibility for nature was overpowered by his sensibility for the city. Furthermore, he lived in the old central hub of the City where the Royal Exchange and the Bank of England faced each other, and was acquainted with stock traders and commodity buyers as well as prostitutes and their pimps from the nearby Love Lane, whom he encountered on a daily basis. It was the place where the commercial charters were drawn up and where one could hear Blake's 'youthful Harlot's curse' (London). Wordsworth's poem 'Poor Susan' did not arise out of his 'observation of the affecting music of these birds hanging in this way in the London streets during the freshness and stillness of the Spring morning', as his late note to the poem states, but out of 'the contrast between a fresh spring morning when he set out light-heartedly for his day's walk, and a tired prostitute he met returning home: a country thrush turned city rook'. (Johnston: 180).

Furthermore, in 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge', his attitude to the city is largely positive and the poet encounters the sublime in the cityscape as much as in the rural landscape. The poet responds to the city with a combination of deep excitement (with repetitive negatives) and calm, characteristic of his "gentle shock of mild surprise" (cf. Hillis Miller, 1985: 71). The entire image of London bathed in the morning sun insists on the congruence of rather than difference between the rural and the urban environment. The city's 'ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie/ Open unto the fields' (6-7) – the communication between the two environments is literally established and the aesthetic category of the sublime applies to both environments. The aesthetic category of the sublime is important not only because it marks a break with neo-classical aesthetic values but also because, in Tom Furniss's words, it acts as a vehicle of romantic individualism (in psychological responses to nature in its vast and incomprehensible aspects) and a means of authenticating the political and economic project of the middle-classes.

The word 'sublime' is used twice in 'Tintern Abbey': the first time in the context of the poet's aesthetic contemplation when he sees 'into the life of things' and the second time when his mind is connected to the universe through 'the presence that disturbs me with the joy/ Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused'. In other words, Wordsworth finds

comfort in contemplation about the sublime potentialities of his mind in order to avoid the painful and terrifying experience of having to write about poverty, hunger and the desolate aspects of landscape that surround him. Thus, Bloom was wrong in saying that 'Tintern Abbey' was not a celebration but a lament: it is about Wordsworth's fear of being stuck in the 2nd phase of the Kantian sublime (a sudden crisis is triggered by encountering a phenomenon which catches us unprepared – in this case the real social scene in the background of Tintern Abbey) and his entrance into the third, victorious phase of the Kantian sublime – the victorious phase in which the mind goes through the crisis (triggered by the scenery around him) and re-establishes itself stronger than before. 'Tintern Abbey' thus confirms the ideological burden sustained in the sublime: we might hear in the background of the Romantic sublime the grand confidence of the rising capitalist economy and individual ambition which is not experienced in sympathy but in competition against other human beings⁵. The poet's strength of the mind could thus be called a 'kind of spiritual capitalism', enjoying a pursuit of infinitude of the private self. Bloom is surely right when he says that 'the deep reverberations of this seminal poem hint distinctly at how troubled (the poet) is' (146). Numerous phrases in the poem back up his argument but the strongest one is the syntagm 'sad perplexity' (60). Yet, his explanation of the reason why the poet is troubled seems to be unsatisfactory – it's not the betrayal of nature that he fears but the loss of life of security and ease (nature is just a trope for his attempt to transcend 'a corrupting appropriation by the world of politics and money' (McGann)).

The poem thus also gives voice to his troubled relationship with politics. It is true that he called himself 'a democrat', willing to spend 12 hours of thinking about politics for 1 hour of thinking about poetry, to paraphrase Wordsworth himself, but his own involvement in 'the nexus of historical relations' (McGann's term) largely remains a sort of blind spot that has puzzled the critics for several decades. Though he was one of the members of the London Corresponding Society and he travelled to France four times in the aftermath of the French Revolution registering his experiences in the famous Books IX, X and XI of *The Prelude*, we still know very little about his active involvement in the revolution. 'Tintern Abbey' registers his change between 1793 and 1798, the change triggered by England declaring war on France and consequently a new light shed on the consequences of the French Revolution.

In addition, in March 1793, Wordsworth returned from France and wrote a pamphlet against Richard Watson, the Bishop of Llandaff, as a response to Watson's published protest deploring the execution of Louis XVI. In this important, unfinished letter⁶ Wordsworth reveals himself as a fervent republican finding sympathy and excuses for the outburst of violence:

⁵ cf. Tom Furniss, 31

⁶ It is in fact the first full-fledged exposition of his intellectual, moral and political views and his most explicit statement about public affairs until *The Convention of Cintra* (1809) important for the reason that we see how Wordsworth changed his political views.

“You say, ‘I fly with terror and abhorrence even from the altar of liberty when I see it stained with the blood of the aged, of the innocent, of the defenceless sex, of the ministers of religion, and of the faithful adherents of a fallen monarch.’ What! Have you so little knowledge of the nature of man as to be ignorant, that a time of revolution is not the season of true Liberty? Alas! The obstinacy and perversion of men is such that she is too often obliged to borrow the very arms of despotism to overthrow him, and in order to reign in peace must establish herself by violence. She deplors such stern necessity, but the safety of the people, her supreme law, is her consolation”.⁷

It is clear that Wordsworth puts the revolution in the Franco-British context and treats it as an extension of the French conflict. He attacks both Richard Watson and his political father Edmund Burke for the status quo they want to preserve in England. They both wanted to exclude people from the ability to act and react and this “discussion of the relation of the free intellectual inquiry and social progress lies at the ideological center of the Letter to Llandaff”⁸. Yet, Wordsworth is never explicit about his revolutionary allegiances and this letter, which remained unpublished, questions rather than asserts Wordsworth’s involvement in the French Revolution. In 1798, he hears ‘the still, sad music of humanity,/ Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power/ To chasten and subdue’ because of his own self-imposed impotence against important political events. Furthermore, we know that his radical youthful enthusiasm soon turned into a conservative nationalism.⁹ The ‘politics’ of Wordsworth was supported by the most brilliant critic of the age, William Hazlitt, who writes in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825):

“It is one of the innovations of the time. It partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments.

However, it was written too late to have any significant influence on the political debate of his contemporaries. Thus, it remains nothing but a late reaction to the events taking place in France and England. (See Chandler, James K.. *Wordsworth’s Second Nature - A Study of the Poetry and Politics*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 12). Wordsworth chose not to publish the letter and was fortunate to decide that as another man who wrote his own *Reply to the Bishop of Llandaff*, Gilbert Wakefield, went to prison for two years for seditious libel after having published it. (See Richard Gravid. “Helen Maria Williams: Wordsworth’s Revolutionary Anima” in *The Wordsworth Circle*; Winter 2009; 40, 1. p. 63)

⁷ Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, p. 142

⁸ James K. Chandler: *Wordsworth’s Second Nature-A Study of the Poetry and Politics*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 23

⁹ See for instance his poem ‘View from the Top of Black Comb’ where he glorifies England and the ground that the British crown commands. In the final lines his native landscape is ‘A revelation infinite it seems;/ Display august of man’s inheritance,/ Of Britain’s calm felicity and power!’ (ll.32-34)

His muse (it cannot be denied and without this we cannot explain its character at all) is a leveling one. It proceeds on a principle of equality, and strives to reduce all things to the same standard."¹⁰

However, my contention is that Wordsworth's 'principle of equality' works only from his middle-class position of safety. Living on the labour of others (in this case his family money) he had time and ease to pursue more 'cultivated' desires.

The issue of 'cultivated desires' brings us closer to Shelley's position in the writing of 'Mont Blanc' and my contention that Wordsworth was Shelley's teacher in the middle-class experience of the sublime. 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Mont Blanc' deserve to be read together, not only from the point of view of seminal Romantic 'nature' poems, but from the idea that Shelley inherits the discourse on the sublime from Wordsworth with a particular political and social potential. When Shelley decided to go to the Alps, one of the reasons for his doing so, was to do exactly as Wordsworth had done before him – Wordsworth's take on the Alps was a part of his desire to satisfy his radical youthful enthusiasm, his sympathies for the French Revolution. However, he was by no means an exception. In the mid- to late eighteenth century, the Alps became a substantial spot to ascend and they entered the Grand Tour circuit as an essential experience to complete a gentleman. In this cultural journey, the final outcomes of such personality building depended on visiting Italy, "as the place of artistic accomplishment"¹¹ and Switzerland as a place of "natural perfection"¹². "The former took its measurement from Rome, the latter from the Alps"¹³. The ascent of the Alps sealed off a fashion and it became the crucial place to experience the sublime. In its encounter with the natural sublime, the human mind supposedly changed: it could realize either its own inadequacy in the face of nature's wilderness and enormity or it could recognize its own hidden potentials against this massive and indifferent nature.

Wordsworth would register his experience of the Alps in Book VI of *The Prelude*, being disappointed at the summit of Mont Blanc as a 'soulless image on the eye' (454). His imaginative anticipation of the Alps was far stronger than the actual experience. Even more so, because at some point before reaching the top, the guide simply informed him that '(they) had crossed the Alps' (524). As the

¹⁰ Hazlitt, William. "Mr. Worsworth" in *Twenty-two Essays of William Hazlitt selected by Arthur Beatty*. London, Bombay and Sydney: George G. Harrap & Co.Ltd., 1920, p. 249. In 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' Hazlitt speaks of Wordsworth and Coleridge after having visited them in 1798.

¹¹ Mihaela Irimia. *Are these the Alps which I see before me, or are they but some mountains of the mind?* in Michael Meyer (ed.) *Sudien Zur Englischen Romantik 8: Romantic Explorations*, p. 23

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

sublime experience does not happen in relation to nature, Wordsworth decides to write an apotheosis to his own imaginative capacities:

'Imagination! – lifting up itself
Before the eye and progress of my song
Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,
In all the might of its endowments, came
Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,
Halted without a struggle to break through
And now, recovering, to my soul I say
'I recognise thy glory'. (...)
(Book VI, 525-532)

Again, we are faced with Wordsworth's building up of his exemplary subjectivity, based on his firm belief in the power of his own mind.

Shelley's reaction at first having seen Mt. Blanc is well-known: 'the immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of ecstatic wonder, not unallied to madness' (Letters, i). The last part of the sentence echoes Wordsworth's description of poetry as a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and also an expected reaction to the natural sublime in terms of a strong affective response and a psychological reaction to it (also inherent in empiricist philosophy¹⁴). However, an interesting biographical detail has to be added – the actual scene of the poem – the place where Shelley stood when he was inspired to write it (and this time it matters unlike in Wordsworth's case in relation to 'Tintern Abbey') – is on a bridge over the Arve River in the Valley of Chamonix in Savoy (now southeastern France, not far from Geneva)¹⁵. All Shelley sees is the rushing river and the Arve Valley, he hears the falling of the streams melting off the glacier, Mer de Glace, above. It is this image that serves as a trigger to poet's imagination and not Mt. Blanc itself. The psycho-natural parallelism between Shelley's mind and Mt. Blanc with its initial 'the everlasting universe of things/ Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves' (ll.1-2) is reminiscent of Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* where he states that 'there exists in the mind of man/ a motion and a spirit (...) that rolls through all things' (ll.99-102). Shelley's poem has also long been regarded as an answer to Coleridge's *Hymn Before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni* where the poet openly credits God for the sublime in nature. As in 'Tintern Abbey' with Wordsworth's troubled thoughts and 'sad perplexity', Shelley's poem voices a sceptical liaison between mind and nature as it is dotted with uncertainties (some say (...), 7 questions are uttered). Furthermore, as numerous critics have pointed out, it is clearly a rejection of the religious construction of natural grandeur¹⁶. In empiricist phrasing, the

¹⁴ Cf. Cian Duffy. *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime*, p. 90

¹⁵ See footnote to Mt. Blanc in Shelley's *Poetry and Prose* edited by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, p. 89

¹⁶ Cf. Duffy. *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime*, p. 90

human mind 'passively/Now renders and receives fast influencings,/Holding an unremitting interchange' (ll. 37-39) with the outside world. The mountain stands there as 'a brute physical existence', to use Frances Ferguson's term¹⁷:

Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,
Mont Blanc appears, - still, snowy, and serene –
Its subject mountains their unearthly forms
Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between
Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,
Blue as the overhanging heaven, that spread
And wind among the accumulated steeps;
A desert peopled by the storms alone,
Save when the eagle brings some hunter's bone,
And the wolf tracks her there – how hideously
Its shapes are heaped around! rude, bare, and high,
Ghastly, and scarred, and riven. (...)
(60-71)

Described in such terms, the Alps really seem like an untamable wilderness and the poet is the one 'who still looks on the landscapes of infinity, but who expresses the possibility (...) that they do not 'look at us in return''¹⁸. Yet, what the human mind confronts here is not just a vacancy – the vocabulary of the sublime couched in the description the Alps is, just like in Wordsworth, a vehicle for individualism and a means of authenticating the political and economic project of the aristocracy of mind (in Shelley's case). Being at once eternal and unfathomable, the mountain still has a 'mysterious tongue' (76), a voice able 'to repeal/Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood/By all, but which the wise, and great and good/ Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.' (ll. 80-3). Shelley's mind is again capable of making the leap into the 3rd, safe phase of the sublime where it appropriates to itself the power of that towards which it had trembled. Thus, the poet's reaction to Mt. Blanc is only an extension of Shelley's belief in the vatic power of his own mind – his own 'cultivated imagination'. In fact, the idea that Shelley's poetry promotes 'democracy' and 'philanthropy' is rendered problematic.

If at first sight the poem's idea might be summed up by using the language of his *Defense of Poetry* where he claims that necessarily 'the poet must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own', at the second, it might be read as Shelley's advocating of a kind of 'spiritual capitalism' (Tom Furniss's term), where the Romantic sublime is seen as a pursuit of the infinitude of the private self. One must not forget that Shelley's radicalism was strongly tinged with the fear of the masses.

¹⁷ Frances Ferguson. 'Shelley's Mont Blanc: What the Mountain Said' in *Shelley* edited by Michael O'Neill

¹⁸ Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime*, p. 24

Though in his letters he would talk about 'inequality poisoning every human interaction' (Jones, Letters I, 120) yet, to paraphrase Michael Henry Scrivener, his opposition to industrialism grew on narrowly aesthetic grounds. (53) There were at least two cases to confirm his 'fictional' radicalism.

Firstly, it is perhaps less known that this admirable young genius ended up being a fictional radical because his true radical activities failed. Shelley was 19 when he travelled to Ireland to help the Irish poor. Spending several months in Dublin he wrote *An Address, to the Irish People*, a pamphlet printed in fifteen hundred copies and distributed all over the country. His intended audience were the uneducated poor and Shelley pointed out that the pamphlet met his

'intention...to awaken in the minds of the Irish poor a knowledge of their real state, summarily pointing out the evils of that state, and suggesting rational means of remedy – Catholic Emancipation and a Repeal of the Union Act.'

(Bieri, 200)

Delivering his one hour speech in Dublin's Fishamble Theater, the crowds hissed at him when he spoke of religion. In fact, Shelley made a strategic mistake by invoking religious toleration, Catholic persecutions including Inquisition and the massacre of French Huguenots, not realizing Catholicism's importance to Irish nationalistic feeling. Described by the Irish newspapers as 'the modern Apollonius who travels but for the improvement of the human race (...) a poet, and his very prose so full of poetic fire, so vivid, so redundant', Shelley in the end decided to leave Dublin, never to return again. In a letter to William Godwin, he spoke of the Dublin's poor as 'the meanest and most miserable of all...one mass of animated filth!', finding impoverished Dubliners had an intellectual level akin to that of an oyster (Letter to WG, 8 March, 1812; Jones, Letters I: 267-8). It is clear that from the very beginning of his 'revolutionary activities', his aristocratic sensibilities interfered with sympathizing with the masses. Though Shelley's anarchism differs from Godwin's in several important aspects¹⁹, both men shared their fear of the masses – the very fear that Godwin's daughter, Mary Shelley, would articulate in creating a monstrous creature ('a man of no property, no possessions', *Frankenstein*) rejected by the society. As Godwin would say 'one must learn to put off 'self',

¹⁹ The key disagreement between Shelley and Godwin is their respective interpretation of what went wrong with the French Revolution: in Godwin's view, the only acceptable means of advancing social progress is individual discussion and hostility to associations is a 'pillar' of *Political Justice* (1793). The revolution failed because the poor were made aware of their oppression and this means revolutionary chaos; for Shelley, the revolution failed because there were not enough philosophical reformers-revolutionary intellectuals with high and pure ideals and the few that existed were not well organized. Shelley's anarchism is also millennial, unlike Godwin's: he imagined the Golden Age as the triumph of the human mind 'the omnipotence of mind over matter'. (Unlike Godwin, Shelley advocated the existence of 'associations' for political purposes, see Michael Scrivener, 47-49)

and to contribute by a quiet, but incessant activity, like a rill of water, to irrigate and fertilize the intellectual soil'. (Jones, Letters I; 270) The idea of a peaceful revolution and possibility of establishing communication is most persistent in Shelley's poetry. Thus in *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819) written on the occasion of Peterloo Massacre²⁰ near Manchester, the final lines have often been quoted as a socialist manifesto ('ye are many, they are few') and in fact they oppose any violent response to aggressor. Some previous lines clearly state this fact:

'And if the tyrants dare/ Let them ride among you there
Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew - /What they like, that let them do.
With folded arms and steady eyes,/ And little fear and less surprise,
Look upon them as they slay,/Till their rage has died away'
(340-347)

As a belated expression of Shelley's anxiety (he heard the news about the massacre 7 days after it happened while in Livorno, Italy) the poem mentions the Bank of England and the Tower of London as the strongholds of institutional power and names all the dignitaries responsible for the massacre. However, while the poet was 'lying in sleep in Italy' (1) and bound to 'walk in the visions of Poesy' (4), a woman and her child were trampled to death by the cavalry unleashed to the crowd after hearing the oratory of Henry Hunt, declaring the need for universal suffrage, liberty and political rights.

In the second case, he never saw any philosophical value in the Luddite uprisings. In Michael Scrivener's words: 'Taking a close look at his comments on the Luddites and other manufacturers, one discovers that Shelley associates town laborers with filth, disease, hunger, starvation and ugliness' (52). Shortly before going to Ireland, he writes a letter to a friend (Elizabeth Hitchener) from the Lake District to describe the manufacturers of Keswick in these terms:

'tho the face of the country is lovely, the people are detestable. The manufactuers with their contamination have crept into the peaceful vale and deformed the loveliness of Nature with human taint. The debauched servants of the great families who resort, contribute to the total extinction of morality. Keswick seems more like a suburb of London than a village of Cumberland.' (Scrivener 53)

Shelley's response to manufacturers' ugliness not only lacks imaginative sympathy and understanding, but as Scrivener has pointed out, it is written 'from

²⁰ The Peterloo Massacre (or Battle of Peterloo) occurred at St Peter's Field, Manchester, England, on 16 August 1819, when a group of workers with their wives and children agitated for parliamentary reform and organised a demonstration to be addressed by the well-known radical orator Henry Hunt. When the cavalry was charged into a crowd of 80 000 people, fifteen were killed and 700 were injured. The massacre was given the name Peterloo in ironic comparison to the Battle of Waterloo.

the narrow perspective of an aristocrat who assumes that a beautiful prospect is his birthright' (53). His idea of 'philanthropist' that he entered next to his name in the hotel registers in Chamonix is therefore connected to his belief in 'cultivated imagination' as Cian Duffy would have it, but with an important qualification: being an aristocrat by birth, Shelley was unable to make the final leap and to radically put himself in the poor man's shoes.

By taking exemplary 'nature' poems by Wordsworth and Shelley, namely 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Mont Blanc', this paper argues that these poems occlude their involvement in historical relations and show that they cannot be read without taking into account the forces of politics. Wordsworth's principle of equality works only from the position of his middle-class safety and both his ethics and aesthetics are tinged with this safe class position. Shelley's idea of 'cultivated imagination' can in turn be related to the idea of 'spiritual capitalism (Furniss) and thus connected to Wordsworth's 'egotistical sublime' (Keats). Rather than asserting their radical potential both poems question the idea of changing the world by means of poetry: even if the middle-classes would finally see the poor in a different light, it would only lead them to the assertion of their middle-class selfhood, which is exactly the position proposed by the two poems.

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Odsutnost politike u pjesmama 'Tintern Abbey' i 'Mont Blanc'

Ovaj se rad bavi komparativnom analizom dviju kanonskih pjesama engleskih romantičara Williama Wordswortha i P. B. Shelleyja. Takva je analiza opravdana činjenicom da je riječ o dvije najpoznatije 'pjesme o prirodi': Wordsworthovoj 'Opatiji Tintern' i Shelleyjevoj pjesmi o najvišem alpskom vrhu 'Mt. Blanc' te je Shelleyjeva pjesma odgovor pjesmi 'Opatija Tintern' u kojoj se Shelley uvelike oslanja na svog literarnog oca, Wordswortha. Obje su pjesme do sada bile čitane kao utjelovljenja radikalnog potencijala, a ovo se čitanje od toga želi odmaknuti naglašavajući ideju prirode kao praznog označitelja koji propitkuje, ali ne ustanovljuje takav potencijal. Takvo se čitanje nastavlja na novo historistička čitanja koja tvrde da romantičke pjesme nastoje prikriti svoju upletenost u povijesni kontekst, a od njih ide i korak dalje postavljajući tezu da su one upravo oblikovane političkim okolnostima u kojima su nastale.

Ključne riječi: Wordsworth, Shelley, Tintern Abbey, Mont Blanc, novi historizam, politika

Acknowledgements: Research for this essay was supported by the Croatian Science Foundation funding of project 'A Cultural History of Capitalism: Britain, America, Croatia'" (the main researcher: Professor Tatjana Jukić, English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia, 2014-2018).