

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 8 (1995)

Artikel: Where is the Simplon pass?
Autor: Rehder, Robert
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99912>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 12.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Where is the Simplon Pass?

Robert Rehder

This is Wordsworth's question (so he tells us) as he climbs up the northern slopes of the Alps from Brig on his way to Italy in the summer of 1790. What is remarkable about his account is that when his question is answered and he retraces his steps and finds the pass, he is profoundly sad. This is also our question when we try to locate the passage (VI.477-580) in the context of the autobiographical poem and in Wordsworth's poetry as a whole.

The first reference to the events in this passage is in Wordsworth's long letter to his sister written only a few weeks later (6 and 16 September 1790):

At Brig we quitted the Valais and passed the Alps at the Sempion [sic] in order to visit part of Italy. The impressions of three hours of our walk among the Alps will never be effaced.¹

To judge from the poem, this probably refers to the descent as that is where the landscape is most vividly described, but the moment of crossing may be included; it is impossible to be certain, because Wordsworth does not say. What is interesting is that he separates a period of three hours out of the day as especially remarkable. This is typical of the spirit of connoisseurship in which Wordsworth makes his continental tour. His letter shows him as a collector of landscapes. At Lake Como, "every new picture was purchased by the loss of an other which we would never have been tired of gazing at."² He is interested in the composition of the scene; comparing, judging views; absorbed in the play of light and shadow; noting shades and colours. He sees with the categories of his time (*objects, forms, picture, scene, beautiful, sublime, picturesque*) such that he is constantly abstracting a part from the

¹ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth the Early Years 1787-1805*, Second Edition, revised by C.L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967), [WL], 33.

² WL, 34.

whole. This is a greedy looking. He attempts to take possession of the landscape:

... I regretted the inability of my memory to retain a more strong impression of the beautiful forms before me, and again and again in quitting a fortunate station have I returned to it with the most eager avidity, with the hope of bearing away a more lively picture.³

The word *station* is part of the technical vocabulary of the picturesque and recurs frequently in the guide books of this time. Thomas West in his *A Guide to the Lakes: Dedicated to the Lovers of Landscape Studies ...* (1778) declares:

The design of the following sheets is to encourage the taste of visiting the lakes, ... and for that purpose are here collected ... all the select stations, and points of view, noticed by those who have made the tour of the lakes, verified by repeated observations, with remarks on the principal objects as they appear from different stations ...⁴

Wordsworth reacts against this way of looking in the autobiographical poem (XI.146-163), which “Although a strong infection of the age, / Was never much my habit.” His letter to Dorothy offers proof to the contrary, but perhaps he means that he was less taken up with it than many others.

As he relates his itinerary to his sister, Wordsworth returns twice to the moments in the Alps. On the shores of Lake Como, he finds it “impossible not to contrast that repose that complacency of Spirit, produced by these lovely scenes, with the sensations I had experienced two or three days before, in passing the Alps.” He imagines the happiness of living by Como if his friends were there with him:

Among the more awful scenes of the Alps, I had not a thought of man, or a single created being; my whole soul was turned to him who produced the terrible majesty before me.⁵

³ WL, 35-6.

⁴ Thomas West, *A Guide to the Lakes* (London, 1778), 2-3.

⁵ WL, 34.

The absence of any “thought of man” as well as the awfulness and “terrible majesty” appears to confirm the conjecture that the uneffaceable three hours are those of the descent described in Book Sixth. More surprising is the statement that “his whole soul was turned” to the idea of a creator, because neither in his letter nor in VI.477-580 does he use the word, *God*, and the passage does not represent what is called a religious experience in the ordinary sense of that term. I would argue that none of the intense experiences in the autobiographical poem are religious in this sense and that most of the religious references in the poem (at least in the 1805 text) are metaphoric and only partially believed.

Wordsworth contradicts himself in his letter. He did think of man: his father. For him the awful and terrible scenes of the Alps demand a creator of unusual power, *God*, who is everybody’s father. As our notions of *God* derive from our fantasies about our fathers, “him who produced the terrible majesty before me” is a way of approaching at a remove the elder John Wordsworth. The notion of a creator is treated in a highly abstract and largely depersonalized way in VI.549-572. Nothing is asserted explicitly. The displacement suggests repression as does the fact that the imagination is compared to an “unfathered vapour” (VI.527). Wordsworth thinks of the Alps as he later thinks of Snowdon and the surrounding mountains as “The perfect image of a mighty mind” (XIII.69). Half-consciously, he is asking: where does this come from? who made it? which involves the unconscious questions: who am I? and where do I come from? The scene as he descends resembles “the workings of one mind” (VI.568). He is as if the witness to the processes of creation. This helps us to understand why the events on the Simplon road cause him to evoke the imagination.

There are two important lessons to be learned from this. First, the landscape in Wordsworth cannot always be interpreted as mother nature. The Alps after he crosses the Simplon pass are seen as belonging to the father. A similar identification appears to be at work in the episode of the stolen boat (I.372-426) when he imagines himself pursued by “a huge cliff.” Second, the imagination is associated with the father. It is seen as a masculine power. When he comes to compose the 1805 version of crossing the Alps, Wordsworth interrupts the story near the pass to imagine the imagination and to put himself into the poem as a creator, taking the place of the father.

Wordsworth in his letter to Dorothy mentions the Alps one more time. Writing as he is about to leave Switzerland, he declares:

We are now ... upon the point of quitting the most sublime and beautiful parts and you cannot imagine the melancholy regret which I feel at the Idea. I am a perfect Enthusiast in my admiration of Nature in all her various forms; and I have looked upon and as it were conversed with the objects which this country has presented to my view so long, and with such encreasing [sic] pleasure, that the idea of parting from them oppresses me with a sadness similar to what I have always felt in quitting a beloved friend.⁶

The Alps are in every way the high point of his trip. Leaving them is a separation. He is melancholy, regretful, oppressed, sad. The relation is personal. They are to him as a “beloved friend.”

Wordsworth wrote up the experiences of his tour into a poem, *Descriptive Sketches*, published in 1793. He did not start until over a year after his return. Most of the poem appears to have been drafted between early December 1791 and autumn 1792, when he was living in France.⁷ As the title suggests, a major purpose was to attempt to conserve as many of the images from his journey as he could, but in so doing he depersonalizes the experiences. They are completely removed from the context of his own life. The poem is a succession of scenes and stories of fictitious persons. There is no continuous or connected narrative and the prevailing melancholy tone, as de Selincourt observes, reflects the poet’s “state of mind at the time of ... composition” rather than “the spirit in which the tour was actually made.”⁸ Strangest of all perhaps is that the poem skips from the Grande Chartreuse (53-79) to Lake Como (81-162). Chamonix and Mount Blanc, which becomes “that mountain nam’d of white” (690), are transferred to the end of the poem (680-701) and nothing of the poet’s reaction as recorded in the autobiographical poem appears here. There is no mention of the Rhône Valley and crossing the Alps. The “three hours that can never be effaced” are omitted, except perhaps in two instances.

Some of the descriptive language used in Book Sixth (558-565) appears in the account of the valley of the Reuss. The quiet streams of Urseren’s “open vale serene”:

⁶ WL. 35.

⁷ William Wordsworth, *Descriptive Sketches*, ed. Eric Birdsall with Paul Zall (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), [DS], 8. The text of the poem is cited from this edition.

⁸ William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), [PW], I, 325.

Plunge with the Russ embrown'd by Terror's breath,
 Where danger roofs the narrow walks of death;
 By floods that thundering from their dizzy height,
 Swell more gigantic on the stedfast sight;
 Black drizzling craggs, that beaten by the din,
 Vibrate as if a voice complained within;

(245-250)

These lines are dropped in the 1849 version of *Descriptive Sketches*, probably because they had by then become part of the autobiographical poem (and a version of VI.553-72 had been published in 1845 as "The Simplon Pass"). The lines that Wordsworth added, probably between autumn 1793 and spring 1794, in a copy of the 1793 edition of *Descriptive Sketches* (now in the Huntington Library) to the episode of the chamois hunter and the family "unfathered" by his death foreshadow *both* the passage on the imagination and that of the descent:

... the night descends
Black
 Infernal glooms the cliffs have overlaid
 And scarce the glimmering cataracts pierce the shade
 In huge grey volumes seas of *vapour* force
 Between the blackened *rocks* their dreadful course
 Roll on their mighty waste without a breath
 O'er precipice and flood – a world of death
 While tracking their deaf *progress* lightnings break
 In still disastrous glimpses pale and weak
 The deluge like the Vapours round him close
 And cold and hunger are his least of woes.
Lost in the abyss he hears presageful sighs
 On all sides, mixed with long resounding cries⁹

The italicized words occur in VI.525-572. *Flood* and *abyss* occur in the 1850 version (1850, VI.614 and 594). Other words are very close, *glooms* to *gloomy* (VI.554), *cataracts* to *waterfalls* (VI.568) and *lightnings* to *flashes* (VI.535), and there are other similarities in the mood and the ideas, such as the landscape speaking and that of a traveller being lost and enclosed in "seas of vapour."

The similarities between the first passage (245-250) and the autobiographical poem have been regularly noted. De Selincourt points to them in his edition of *Descriptive Sketches*, although not in his edition of

⁹ DS, 174.5; for the date, see 12-15.

The Prelude). The Norton editors refer to the whole verse paragraph (242-262), although the final lines on the “kneeling peasant” have no counterpart in the account of crossing the Alps. Maxwell (1973) observes that line 130 (“Thy torrents shooting from the clear-blue sky”) is virtually the same as VI.561 and refers to 249-250 and the same indications are given by Owen (1985). Reed (1991) mentions 130 and 247-256. The similarities between the additions to the Huntington copy of *Descriptive Sketches* and the account of crossing the Alps appear to have been overlooked. They are important for two reasons: (1) MS WW (DC MS 43), as will be discussed below, shows that the address to the imagination as it stands was a second thought, that Wordsworth in his first draft of the passage compared his deception to entering a dark cave. The additions in the Huntington copy suggest that in rejecting the metaphor of the cave, Wordsworth was returning to older material, and demonstrate, moreover, the unity VI.525-575. Although the address to the imagination interrupts the narrative, it nonetheless draws on the same complex of material as the description of the descent. The idea of being engulfed and lost in the fog is in Wordsworth’s 1793 revisions to *Descriptive Sketches*. The gloomy threatening landscape contains many of the same elements as his later description of the Gondo gorge. (2) The additions show that buried in the address to the imagination is the thought of a dead father.

After the revision of *Descriptive Sketches* in 1794, there is no evidence that Wordsworth attempted to write anything about his continental walking tour until 1804. The uneffaceable three hours in the Alps, so it would appear, had to wait another ten years – fourteen years after the events – before he put them into poetry. Wordsworth, however, when he published “The Simplon Pass” in 1845 noted that it was “Composed in 1799,” a fact which is often overlooked. The surviving MSS offer no support for this statement, but certainly many MSS have been lost and it is very possible that the experience re-emerged when he began to think deeply about his own past – in this case the experience would have lain fallow another five years, nine years after the events themselves, and Wordsworth chose to omit or had not discovered the relation between his disillusionment and his impressions of the ravine of Gondo.¹⁰

Although the separation of any group of lines from the totality of the poem is at a certain point arbitrary and Wordsworth often works to unify the

¹⁰ PW, II.212-13; Mark Reed, *Wordsworth, the Chronology of the Early Years, 1770-1799* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 261.

poem across the separations of the verse paragraphs, for the purposes of discussion the account of crossing the Alps may be divided into four parts:

(A) After an excursion to Chamonix, Wordsworth relates how he and his friend, Robert Jones, walked down the valley of the Rhône lost in their own thoughts. On their way to Simplon, none of the landscape is allowed to intrude. The poet's focus like that of his protagonists is on the inner world. They abounded:

In dreams and fiction pensively
composed:
Dejection taken up for pleasure's sake,
And gilded sympathies, the willow wreath,
Even among those solitudes sublime,
And sober poesies of funereal flowers,
Culled from the gardens of the Lady Sorrow,
Did sweeten many a meditative hour.

(VI.481-487)

They are full of thoughts of fictitious sadness, unrequited love and death. This is a state of mind that they have invented for themselves. Its artificiality is stressed: *composed*, *gilded*, *wreath*, *poesies*, *garden*. Sorrow is a woman. They are deliberately sad, dejection is "taken up for pleasure's sake." Their melancholy is sweet and disengages them for their surroundings, and yet:

By simple strains
Of feeling, the pure breath of real life,
We were not left untouched. With such a book
Before our eyes we could not choose but read ...

(VI.471-474)

Wordsworth's negative marks their separation from the world as does the metaphor of the book. The whole passage is literary. They have learned to feel from reading books. Wordsworth is self-mocking, but nonetheless remains within the poetic conventions. They approach the Alps in a mood of unreality.

(B) Climbing up the road to the Simplon pass, they lose their way. They continue to go up when they should go down and on talking to a peasant discover that they have crossed the Alps without knowing it. The emphasis is on the circumstances of mistaking the path. There is no description of the Alps whatsoever, no scenery, no views. Only the emotions that the two friends have when they go wrong are recorded: "scruple," "eagerness," "surprise," "anxiety," "doubts," "perplexed," "Hard of belief." Nothing at

all is said about their feelings upon finding that they were on the other side of the Simplon pass. Thinking about it, Wordsworth decided that this was leaving matters too open, so he revised to make clear their disappointment. They did not simply find it difficult to believe the peasant, they did not want to believe him. His words caused them grief and even then their illusions were still intact:

Loth to believe what we so grieved to hear,
For still we had hopes that pointed to the clouds,
(1850, VI.586-587)

Also, to leave no doubt as to what was the decisive event, in his final version he italicizes “*that we had crossed the Alps*” (1850, VI.591). All of this is only implicit in the 1805 version.

(C) The next verse paragraph represents apparently a complete change of subject and of mood. The story of crossing the Alps is abruptly interrupted by an address to the imagination that without warning engulfs the poet like a vapour and blocks the progress of his song. The idea of the imagination halting the poem is strange, as is that of the poet fighting “to break through.” He is suddenly at the mercy of a power that he cannot control and that he does not understand. The effect is so overwhelming that he loses contact with the world: he is “lost.” Part of the strangeness is that something that is obviously internal is treated as if it is external. The poet projects some of his feelings outside of himself so that they are less threatening and that he can face them with all his conscious self. The threat of the imagination is perhaps that it can change anything and everything, working with so little reference to the world that the poet is afraid of being permanently lost, its shapelessness causing the poet to fear for the limits of his self. This power is so far from being able to be named that Wordsworth in his final version of the event calls into question the idea of definition. The term *imagination* is used “through sad incompetence of human speech” (1850, VI.594). Also, perhaps, the imagination is threatening because it is the power responsible for disturbing unconscious fantasies. The whole passage (VI.477-580) shows Wordsworth’s difficulty in separating the inner and outer worlds and in moving from one to the other – a recurrent subject in Wordsworth’s major poems. The tenses at this point are complicated. *Lifting up itself* seems to be in the present, but *came / Athwart, was lost* and *halted* place the moment definitively in the past, then *now, recovering, to my soul I say* brings us back to the present, so as to indicate the lapse of time between his being lost and his recovery. He marks a distance in time between his experiences in the

Alps and the moment of composition, but the address to the imagination obviously applies to both.

(D) Wordsworth runs over the next verse paragraph to complete the story of the crossing of the Alps. The descent begins in a mood of disillusionment and melancholy. Only here, does the poet specify the strong effect of the peasant's words and, by implication, the expectation of the ascent. With the address to the imagination, Wordsworth changes the story: expectation is followed by fulfilment instead of disillusionment, a defeat becomes a triumph and he goes on to build to a second moment of discovery. The poet states that the slackening was "soon dislodged," as if the hurry of their downward start enabled them to recover their mood, but the scene is gloomy and forlorn – with hints of sickness, madness and death. The description in which the landscape dominates everything else is full of dramatic and paradoxical action. Wordsworth both asserts the on-goingness of the earth as well as foreseeing its end, and then closes with a vision of an endless future.

The whole passage becomes clearer if we return to the poet's first sight of Mount Blanc:

That day we first
Beheld the summit of Mount Blanc, and grieved
To have a soulless image on the eye
Which had usurped upon a living thought
That never more could be.

(VI.452-456)

This is another instance of disappointed expectations. Wordsworth and Jones are impressed by the mountain. They are *grieved* exactly as they are in Wordsworth's revised text (1850, VI.585) at the peasant's words near the Simplon pass, only in this case the *usurpation* is by the mountain instead of the imagination. They mourn the loss of their fantasy and this loss is permanent. Now that they have seen Mount Blanc, their imagined view "never more could be," it must give place to the reality. The poet, nonetheless, values the image he has made more than the world. Mount Blanc is "soulless," his thought is "living." This view is somewhat modified by what follows:

The wondrous Vale
Of Chamouny did, on the following dawn,
With its dumb cataracts and streams of ice –
A motionless array of mighty waves,

Five rivers broad and vast – make rich amends,
And reconciled us to realities.

(VI.456-461)

Chamonix compensates them for Mount Blanc. The two travellers are “reconciled ... to realities” by its wonders, but “amends” are clearly called for. The return to reality is neither simple nor evident, and the implication is that a more ordinary place might not have had the same effect.

MS WW (DC MS 43) is the remains of a pocket note book that Wordsworth used between February and early April 1804 and in which he roughed out what appears to be the first version of the story of crossing the Alps. The major difference between these jottings and the final version is that after speaking to the peasant, it is for the poet as if he passed from the light of day into the darkness of a cave and Wordsworth uses four of the small pages to draft a passage that later becomes part of Book Eighth. Only then does Wordsworth, in a virtually illegible scribble, set down the start of what became the address to the imagination.¹¹

MS WW shows us that being told he had crossed the Alps without knowing it was for the poet like passing into a dark cave where everything he sees is fluid and fantastic, until his eyes become accustomed to the darkness. This idea of being a disoriented or lost traveller is present both in the first and the last versions of the episode. All versions (MS WW, 1805 and 1850) have the image of the imagination enclosing and isolating the poet. The idea of seeing in the dark that in MS WW is the ordinary action of adjustment becomes in 1805 the extraordinary power of seeing the “invisible world.”

On the Simplon road as at Mount Blanc expectation is not fulfilled and consequently the poet withdraws into the inner world. He is disappointed by Mount Blanc, but he misses the Simplon pass, that is, although he sees it, he misses the consciousness of his first impression. On his own evidence, he is

¹¹ The fullest description of MS WW (DC MS 43) is Mark Reed's edition in two volumes of Wordsworth's *The Thirteen-Book Prelude* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), [TBP], I.19-22. He prints photographs of the MS (I.329-366) and a transcription (II.237-261). My citations represent my reading of the MS. I have followed Reed's numbering of the folios and have given the references to his photographs and transcription after each citation. I would like to thank the trustees for permission to work in the Wordsworth Library and examine the MS (which is their property and quoted with their permission), Jeff Cowton and Sally Woodhead for their courtesy and help during my visit to Grasmere and Robert Woof who helped me to struggle with some of the readings. I am particularly grateful to Mark Reed who very generously sent me photocopies of his transcription (II.252-7) in advance of the publication of his edition.

twice on the highest point of the pass. He thinks back to exactly where it was and has no difficulty in picturing it ("That to the place which had perplexed us first / We must descend, and there should find the road / Which in the stony channel of the stream / Lay a few steps, and then along its banks – " VI.514-517), but this retrospective identification is of no use to him. *He wants the original awareness of the first moment as it happens.* This suggests that the expectation may have been greater than at Mount Blanc, but also that it was of a different kind, a search for origins. When he sees Mount Blanc, Wordsworth knows what he is looking at and it is a matter of his total rather than his first impression. Above Simplon, neither is the case. The one is the experience of a clearly-defined object, the other, of an unknown moment of transition or change. This seems to be confirmed by Wordsworth's employment of the word *crossed* in MS WW for going over the pass: "the / Alps were [? crossd]" and for his encounter with the imagination: "Imagination crosd / me here."¹² Mount Blanc did not involve the crossing of a boundary and was not in any sense a rite of passage.

The poet's resistance to reality is noted both at Mount Blanc and during his journey down the Rhône valley. The account of going over the Alps is more personal and more introspective. According to the 1850 text, the poet's dejection has its "source" (1850, VI.560) in the "stern mood" and "under-thirst" which he assigns exclusively to himself. Hearing that he "had crossed the Alps" is a shock. In MS WW his sudden loss of the external world, his metaphoric blacking out, appears involuntary. He is plunged into a world of moving shapes completely uncertain of his perceptions and unable to separate the solid from the shadow. He does not know whether he "sees / or thinks / He sees ..." This uncertainty is made greater by the fact that Wordsworth does not locate himself in one place but two: "The Grottoe of Antiparos or the / den / Of Yordas," the first, a place he has never been, the other, one that he has visited.¹³ Thus, he is at once in an imagined and a real place. This is his constant predicament in the autobiographical poem, divided between an imagined real and the actual world.

Crossing the Alps without knowing it disorients the poet. For a moment he does not know where he is. His perceptions are confused. He has as if returned to an amorphous state. The metaphor of the cave in MS WW makes his recovery a matter of re-establishing contact with the world and re-organizing his perceptions. His recovery in the address to the imagination

¹² MS WW, f. 26r; TBP, I.357, II.255 (the article is omitted in the transcription) and f. 28r; TBP, I.361, II.257.

¹³ MS WW, f. 26r; TBP, I.357, II.255.

involves the recognition of something other than himself and the engagement of a dialogue with it – and a recognition of the mind's power of fantasizing, wishing and imagining (in MS WW, f. 28r, Wordsworth first presents this as an encounter, the address and dialogue are a later formulation). Wordsworth celebrates the imagination as a means of escaping from the finite limits of the visible world. The unfulfilled expectation becomes permanent expectation, expectation that cannot be disappointed and the imagination becomes a means of wish fulfillment as if to prevent an experience like that of missing the Simplon pass from ever happening again. For Wordsworth, the imagination defines our human nature in that it makes us live for the future by providing "hope that can never die." Infinitude as "Our destiny" and "home," "never die" and "ever more about to be" echoed by "first, and last, and midst, and without end" at the close of the next verse paragraph, seem almost to suggest that the possession of imagination might make us personally immortal. This language leaves no doubt but that Wordsworth found in the imagination intimations of immortality and allows us to suppose that his refusal of the reality of the visible world was part of his desire to escape death. As Onorato comments: "The sense of eternity in Wordsworth resembles the narcissism of infancy before differentiation of the 'self' and 'other' which is the beginning of a life in time."¹⁴

Wordsworth describes in Book Twelfth the road that went up Hay Hill that he could see from the garden of his father's house at Cockermouth. This, he says, "had power / O'er my imagination since the dawn / Of childhood,"

When its disappearing line
 Seen daily afar off, on one bare steep
 Beyond the limits which my feet had trod,
 Was like a guide into eternity ...

(XII.146-151)

The image of this road was perhaps one of the reasons that Wordsworth wanted to keep climbing upward in the Alps.

Unfathered is also an effort by the poet to remove the imagination, and by implication himself, from the process of birth and death. It presents the

¹⁴ Richard Onorato, *The Character of the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 149. For a more general discussion of Wordsworth's imagination and a comparison with Coleridge's ideas on the subject, see my "Wordsworth's Imagination" forthcoming in *The Wordsworth Circle*. In the interests of completeness and clarity I have repeated here some sentences from that essay.

imagination as an impersonal power having no origin. At the same time, it seems virtually an act of murder or castration, of the destruction of the father, as if he was obstacle to the poet's entry into the world and that the struggle to break through was against him, and, at the same time, as if the imagination was vague and included nothing of reality because it was unfathered. (MS WW records the poet struggling, 1805 and 1850 show him "Halted without a struggle.") This refusal of reality is also involved, it would appear in the mind's contentment "in thoughts / That are their own perfection and reward," that is, that need no confirmation by the world.

Wordsworth, however, did not discard the cave. He moved it to Book Eighth (711-741) and revised the description so that the process of adjustment is more complex and that the "perfect view" (VIII.726) achieved at its conclusion is only momentary. The scene comes into focus only to dissolve again into an endless succession of images, a "picture of the world" (VIII.737) that respects neither time nor space. The shapes re-form almost randomly, things become persons and there is a movement from landscape to history, but no coherent story develops and the "spectacle" (VIII.741) proceeds without any conclusion. The episode provides an excellent example of how we half create and half perceive, and of the steady pressure of fantasy, or it might be said, of the imagination upon perception. Wordsworth, nevertheless, does not use it as an example of the imagination, and is content merely to present the phenomenon as a thing in itself.

This is the more remarkable because the episode to which the cave passage has been moved is of the same kind as crossing the Alps, except that it is one of fulfillment rather disillusionment. The moment is that of the poet's entry into London on the top of a stage coach (VIII.678-751), probably in 1788, curiously displaced in the narrative of his own life.¹⁵ Occurring two years before his walking tour with Jones, it belongs chronologically to Book Fourth or Book Sixth, or to Book Seventh which recounts his residence in London. Instead Wordsworth withholds it until Book Eighth, so that it becomes a major episode in his argument about how love of nature leads to love of man. This movement from nature to man is for the poet a change from a move or less undifferentiated identification with nature to a new definition of himself as an individual in a real world with its own distinct history. This is the boundary that he crosses both in the Alps and in London.

The entry in London includes many of the same elements as crossing the Alps. The idea of sternness is present in both instances, London is a

¹⁵ For the date of Wordsworth's first visit to London, see Reed, 81.

“Preceptress stern” (VIII.678), and the movement from the relatively frivolous to the more serious is expressed in terms of flower metaphors. As they approach the Simplon pass, the two friends are “taken up” with “the willow wreath, / And sober posies” from the “gardens of the Lady Sorrow.” Addressing London, the poet states in Book Eighth that his verse had “played only with the flowers / Enwrought upon thy mantle” (VIII.680-81). He also re-employs *harbour* as a verb to denote hidden significance: “Some inner meanings which might harbour there” (VIII.685). Wordsworth, in both instances, does not completely surrender to this mood of superficial playfulness. As he climbs up into the Alps, there is “something of stern mood, an under-thirst / Of vigour” (VI.489-90). Remembering his entry into London, he says:

Yet did I not give way to this light mood
Wholly beguiled, as one incapable
Of higher things, and ignorant that high
things
Were round me. (VIII. 686-89)

Then he moves in a similarly abrupt way directly into the experience:

Never shall I forget the hour,
The moment rather say, when, having thridded
The labyrinth of suburban villages,
At length I did unto myself first seem
To enter the great city. On the roof
Of an itinerant vehicle I sate,
With vulgar men about me, vulgar forms
Of houses, pavement, streets, of men and things,
Mean shapes on every side; but, at the time,
When to myself it fairly might be said
(The very moment that I seemed to know)
"The threshold now is overpast," great God!
That aught *external* to the living mind
Should have such mighty sway, yet so it was:
A weight of ages did at once descend
Upon my heart – no thought embodied, no
Distinct remembrances, but weight and power,
Power growing with the weight. Alas, I feel
That I am trifling. 'Twas a moment's pause:
All that took place within me came and went
As in a moment, and I only now
Remember that it was a thing divine.

Here, as on the Simplon pass, it is a question of crossing a more-or-less imaginary boundary and of being aware of that crossing. The expectation is muted in both episodes. There is less sadness in the London experience. Unlike the Alps, Wordsworth insists on the contrast between his surroundings ("vulgar men," "vulgar forms," "mean shapes on every side") and the exalted sublimity of his emotions.

The great difference between the Alps and London is that London is a success. The poet is conscious of the moment of transition. The Alps are both a real (the watershed) and an imaginary boundary. London has only a man-made boundary. For Wordsworth the boundary is not only imaginary, in the sense that it is invisible and corresponds to no physical features, but it also appears to be one imagined or invented by the poet. His decision that he has crossed it is an approximation, a matter of probabilities. He states: "A Length *I did unto myself first seem* / To enter the great city" (VIII.692-3) and "When *to myself it fairly might be said* / (The very moment that I *seemed* to know.)" (VIII.698-9) (my italics). The contrast is so great between outside and inside, and between the immensity of his emotion and the extreme brevity of the instant, that the poet feels that he is "trifling" (VIII.707). He has difficulty believing his own report. The boundary is represented in both episodes by a single short sentence: noted as indirect speech on the mountain side, set off by a dash (and italicized in 1850): " – that we had crossed the Alps," as the poet talking to himself in the city: "The threshold now is overpast."

The poet is overwhelmed by his experience. The shock is not as in the Alps from being unable to mark the boundary, but from the apprehension of the external world. London is a blow to his omnipotence. He finds it incredible that something outside of his own mind should so impose itself upon him, "Should have such mighty sway" (VIII.702). The question is why the countryside and the villages on the way to London did not strike Wordsworth as "external to the living mind" (VIII.701). The answer is probably that London with so many more people, so full of life, is perceived as radically different, something totally other, another living body (as in "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802"). His shock reveals Wordsworth's extraordinary capacity to ignore reality, and the degree to which he is turned inward and preoccupied with his own feelings.¹⁶ At times the world barely seems to exist for him. This helps us to

¹⁶ On Wordsworth's self-absorption and separation from the world, see Robert Rehder, *Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), [WBMP], 146-7.

understand with what disturbing and disrupting force, nature enters into his inner world, and why, most of the time, it is greeted as a saviour and a revelation; moreover, it helps us to understand that, for Wordsworth, nature is often more or less imaginary. He is so overwhelmed by London that he is reduced to swearing by “great God!” (an oath that he eliminates, presumably as blasphemous, from the 1850 version). It does not appear that he attributes the experience to God or that for him it is in any sense religious. *Divine* in this context seems to be an adjective denoting inexpressible secular power. The word is the sign of his wonder and indecision, a reflex like that of saying to his soul: “I recognize thy glory.”

The power here, unlike the Alps, is historical. “A weight of ages,” he says, “did at once descend / Upon my heart” (VIII.703-4). This, in its context, appears to be the sudden awareness of London’s long history, but may also be interpreted as the poet’s entry into time, as his discovery of his temporality – that he is a newcomer in a changing world wholly beyond his control. He is literally depressed, pushed down, by the weight of the past. The sensation is extremely primitive, a micromoment of amorphousness. What he experiences is formless, indeterminate and indeterminable: “no thought embodied, no / Distinct remembrances” (VIII.704-5). *Remembrances* suggests that this moment has enabled the poet to make contact with his own remote past. As this is his first visit to London, he can have no memories of it, instead he recovers indistinct remembrances, some long ago experience that is somehow analogous to his entry into London.

The moment intensifies and vanishes. Wordsworth insists on its brevity, its fleeting nature, and “only now,” he says, does he “Remember that it was a thing divine” (VIII.709-710). His sense is of having passed a threshold, of being definitely, finally, inside. A “labyrinth” (VIII.670) can be a building and a “threshold” (VIII.700) is a part of a building. The idea is continued in the image of the cave, and a few lines later Wordsworth compares London to a single building, an “emporium” (VIII.749), “home” (VIII.750) and “residence” (VIII.751). It is as if the poet has penetrated some sacred structure or body. Both labyrinth and cave are ordinary metaphors for the mystery of birth. (London as a “fountain” [VIII.747] is another metaphor of origins.) The cave seems almost the visible form of the “weight of ages” that descends upon the poet’s heart. This “weight and power” seem at once a force opposing him and the “weight and power” he gains from his new knowledge. This realization is not embodied in anything so definite as a thought, rather it is a feeling of intensity that mounts only to disappear as quickly as it has come, and not fully realized until the “now” of the poem’s

composition when it is recognized as “a thing divine.” This “now” allows Wordsworth to build into the poem the illusion of spontaneity, a fictitious present that gives us the impression of being there as the poet’s experiences happen.

The poet uses the image of the cave to interpret the entry into “the great city” (VIII.693). London appears to threaten the autonomy of the poet’s mind. He feels at the mercy of external forces, unpredictable and impossible to resist, forces outside the self (although also internal). This is experienced as a loss of control. The poet’s emotion is remarkable for its unfocused power. The episode in the cave shows us order being established. Seeing clearly is difficult, first, because of the time required for the mechanism of the eye to adjust to the light, and, second, because of the mind’s need to interpret, to create meaning by turning everything into something else. The result is a picture of confusing change. The poet sees the scene before him “in perfect view” only for a moment:

But let him pause awhile and look again,
 And a new quickening shall succeed, at first
 Beginning timidly, then creeping fast
 Through all which he beholds: the senseless mass,
 In its projections, wrinkles, cavities,
 Though all its surface, with all colours streaming,
 Like a magician’s airy pageant, parts,
 Unites, embodying everywhere some pressure
 Or image, recognised or new, some type
 Or picture of the world – forests and lakes,
 Ships, rivers, towers, the warrior clad in mail,
 The prancing steed, the pilgrim with his staff;
 The mitred bishop and the throned king –
 A spectacle to which there is no end.

(VIII.728-741)

The scene when it comes to rest is “Exposed and lifeless as a written book,” but instead of reading what is there, the poet reads into what he sees. “The senseless mass” is animated by his fantasies, by the mind’s urge to organize what it sees so as to make a comprehensible world. The process appears as automatic as the adjustment of the eyes to the dark. Again, everything happens independently of any decision or act of will, and the process is endless. Things are interpreted in terms of what is known. The surface of the cave becomes a world. As soon as there is a setting (“forests and lakes”), the mind’s urge is to turn everything into a story:

the warrior clad in mail,
 The prancing steed, the pilgrim with his staff,
 The mitred bishop and the thronèd king –
 (VIII.738-741)

The choice of these figures, such as will emerge from the historical novels of Scott, is an acknowledgement of the imaginary nature of the vision, as is the reference to “a magician’s airy pageant” which echoes Prospero’s speech at the end of *The Tempest*. All of this is the stuff of romance. What Wordsworth’s own daydreams were like we do not know, but when he represents fantasy it often has this archaic, literary quality.

On the Simplon pass Wordsworth was unaware exactly when he had crossed the Alps. He did not miss the realization by very much, the amount of time, measured in hours or minutes was relatively short, what mattered was that he did miss it. The loss was an imaginative one, never fully stated or explained, a loss of consciousness that is of the greatest significance to the poet and of lasting effect, although he is unable to say what it signifies. The strangeness of this moment is that the event itself, the particular circumstances are not of any special importance. Crossing a range of mountains is ordinarily not one of the major turning points in a person’s life, such as the first sexual experience, starting to work, marriage, the birth of children, success, failure – all of which are markedly absent from Wordsworth’s account of his own life, which is part of its originality. The entry into London, like the crossing of the Alps, is followed by “a melancholy slackening” (1850, VI.617), “a blank” – corresponding to the unfocused nature of the emotion – “sense of greatness passed away” (VIII.744). As the crossing experienced produces the same result as the crossing missed, there is obviously a deeper pattern. Depression appears as the aftermath of the difficulty of self-definition and of moving from fantasy to reality, from the inner world to the outer.

Because of his London experiences, Wordsworth states that:

The human nature unto which I felt
 That I belonged, and which I loved and reverenced,
 Was not a punctual presence, but a spirit
 Living in time and space, and far diffused.
 In this my joy, in this my dignity
 Consisted ...

(VIII.761-766)

This is the same basic idea as that expressed in “Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” (93-110), the same cadence and the same structure. He mentions in both passages a *presence* and a *spirit* living or dwelling not in one place but diffused throughout the visible world. “Living in time and space, and far diffused” is a compression of the longer catalogue in the earlier poem of the light of setting suns, ocean, air, sky and mind of man, and the conclusion similarly simplifies and compresses his recognition that in nature and the language of the sense he finds “the anchor of my purest thoughts ... and soul / Of all my moral being.” In both cases he has “the joy / Of elevated thoughts.”

Wordsworth’s poetry is his attempt constantly to rediscover and relive this experience that secures the unity of the inner and the outer worlds. The moment is one in which the poet becomes aware of the entire world as informed by a single all-pervasive presence that cannot be located in any one object. This presence is evidence that he is not alone. The experience is of a unifying otherness. It provides that Archimedean point outside himself necessary to convince himself of the existence of the world and, consequently, of the reality of his own life, at the same time as providing a center or core, because it is at once within, “far more deeply interfused,” and without, “far diffused” in the light, ocean and air.¹⁷ To feel the coherence of the world is to apprehend it as meaningful. The world feels whole if the person feels whole. This wholeness appears to depend both on establishing an origin for and setting limits to consciousness and the world.

The two experiences of crossing represent Wordsworth’s efforts to remember the initial establishment of these limits. His insistence on the mind’s omnicompetence suggests, as does missing the experience of the Simplon pass and the problematic nature of the London boundary, that these primary acts of self-definition were incomplete or somehow troubled. Wordsworth’s concern with the process of his relation to nature and with “the Love of Nature Leading to Love of Man,” along with what I have called his resistance to reality, as well as his self-absorption generally, are all elements in this struggle for self-differentiation and self-integration.

London does what neither Mount Blanc nor the Simplon pass could do: it brings back the force of his first consciousness of reality, and the metaphor of the cave, in its new location can be interpreted as a restatement of this

¹⁷ “Archimedes said that he could move the world if he had a point whereon to rest his machine. Who has not felt the same aspirations as regards the world of his own mind?” *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. Jared Curtis (London, Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 61-2. See also WBMP, especially 146-177.

experience. Only gradually does the poet in the darkness of his own thoughts perceive anything of his surroundings, then briefly, all at once, they are perfectly clear and can be read like a book, after this his fantasies take over again and he returns to the day-dream of his existence. The entry into London celebrates the first act of making contact and taking possession of the world. Perhaps it is the discovery that there are two things: our self and the world that is the first act of consciousness, certainly it is their interaction that engages the dynamic of increasing consciousness. Here, as in all his greatest poems, Wordsworth searches for and finds the origins of consciousness.

Wordsworth's autobiographical poem is quoted from the Norton Critical Edition, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979). His other poems, except for *Descriptive Sketches* (see footnote 7), are cited from *The Poems, Volume One*, ed. John Hayden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).