

Imagination in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Book 6: Cambridge and the Alps

A dynamic, active and practically sanctified concept, Imagination occupied a crucial and tremendous place for Romantic writers. In *The Prelude*, Book 6, William Wordsworth pays a rather lengthy tribute to Imagination, though this same eulogy has also caused numerous problems of interpretation.¹ I claim Wordsworth's Imagination passage reconciles the human mind, and hence the Imagination which springs from it, and (a not so blissful) reality. Though it originally seems as if Imagination stems from disappointment in reality, Wordsworth later demonstrates Imagination can also rescue him from reality as well; indeed, his descriptions of Gondo Ravine itself are colored by what he imagines, suggesting Imagination is a form of salvation used not only as consolation for his lost opportunity of crossing the Alps but also as redemption during the very acts of remembering and writing. Straying from Alan Liu's New Historicist argument that Napoleon is mirrored by Imagination, I will also show Wordsworth uses directionalities of Imagination (upward) and reality (downward) to finally create their continuous unification through Nature.

Wordsworth begins the passage with an account of his travels on the "steep and rugged" Simplon Pass. He and his companion are "following a band of muleteers," but the group leaves them after lunch. Left on their own, they lose their way, eventually determining to climb "the only track now visible...[the] conspicuous invitation to ascend a lofty mountain." They soon realize, however, that they have "failed to overtake [their] comrades gone before," and the peasant they meet delivers the unfortunate news that they have taken a wrong turn and must descend the mountain. For the poet, these words are unbearable because they mean he has

¹ David S. Miall. "The Alps Deferred: Wordsworth at the Simplon Pass."

“missed one of the most highly anticipated spiritual moments of his tour: being on top of the Alps.”² At the end of the first stanza, Wordsworth laments –

For still we had hopes that pointed to the clouds,
We questioned him again, and yet again:
But every word that from the peasant’s lips
Came in reply, translated by our feelings,
Ended in this, - that we had crossed the Alps!

And so this introduction concludes unhappily with Wordsworth despairing at his lost opportunity. Yet here also is when he chooses to insert, rather abruptly, his stanza on Imagination, “the Power so called through sad incompetence of human speech,” referring perhaps to the inability of language to capture the intricacies of the mind (and any sublime experience born from it) but also, on a superficial level, the dejection wrought by the peasant’s words. In either case, Imagination rushes to fill the void left by Wordsworth’s dashed hopes and in so doing, paradoxically re-provides a “hope that can never die, effort, and expectation, and desire, and something evermore about to be.” This rushing is uncalled for and sudden, just as this stanza interrupts and irrupts the whole passage – in fact, this rushing does not need to be called forth because it is completely natural. Although he was once lost, he now “recognise[s] [Imagination’s] glory” and “strength of usurpation, when the light of sense goes out,” that is, when Imagination, the “invisible world,” overtakes actuality. In short, Imagination, which has its roots in despondency from reality, gives Wordsworth the outlet to see what he has yearned for, while, ironically and simultaneously, creates such noble, imagined hopes in the first place. Imagination is, at once, the source of his misery and salvation.

However, Wordsworth appears to stress the latter connection more strongly in this passage, especially since Imagination is so often linked with *upwards*, an ascension and transcendence to the clouds and open Heavens (in practically a divine sense), while reality is

² Zahler, Simone. “The Four Conceptions of the Simplon Road in William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*.”

grounded, dragged *downwards*. This is presented simplistically through the physical journey of Simplon Pass: Imagination and Wordsworth's aspirations are associated with "ascend[ing] a *lofty* mountain" and "hopes that pointed to the *clouds*," while reality is linked with the "beaten *downward* way" and their need to "descend." If "down" is where "all [is] plain to sight," then, in contrast, the soul experiencing the awesome power of Imagination needs no visible confirmation, "seeks for no trophies, struggles for no spoils that may attest her prowess" and Imagination itself is an "unfathered vapour," intangible and liberated (from God maybe?), *arising* from the confined "abyss" of the human mind, the deep and heavy gravities of reality.

The salvation provided by Imagination transfers to the third and final stanza, when Imagination (naturally?) works its way into the natural world, and the natural world mirrors Imagination. Here, the associations of Imagination and reality are aligned and then integrated. Wordsworth's ultimate salvation is this merging found in Nature, Imagination coloring the reality he observes as he unexpectedly stumbles into a beautiful and sublime experience while crossing the Gondo Ravine. From a directional perspective, "upward" and "downward" are brought side-by-side, tripping one after another in the first half of this stanza: "*Downwards* we hurried fast, and...entered a narrow *chasm*," where "the *immeasurable height* of woods decaying, never to be, the stationary blasts of *waterfalls*...the *torrents* shooting from the clear blue *sky*" (emphasis added). Even within these lines, Imagination asserts itself, warping motion and time, the "stationary" waterfall, "never-decaying" woods, before the poem transitions and Imagination seamlessly enters into all aspects of Nature, as Wordsworth writes –

Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
As if a voice were in them...
The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light –
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree...

Imagination and the natural world are now interrelated, the “types and symbols of Eternity, of first, and last, and midst, and without end,” components of an endless, now direction-less cycle. Wordsworth’s choice of “Apocalypse,” which I define here in the Biblical sense as a newer, better world replacing an old world,³ further emphasizes the idea that Imagination and its abilities can transform reality to provide a more desirable experience.

Lastly, there is evidence to suggest that Wordsworth struggles to retain the imagery and experience of the old Simplon Pass (before the establishment of the Napoleonic Road) in his 1850 revision of *The Prelude* by focusing on the narrow, steeper mule track.⁴ Thus, the poem presented to us here is probably not an accurate depiction of what Wordsworth must have seen during his most recent visit to Simplon Pass. Similarly, “Many scholars question the accuracy of some details in [the Gondo Ravine] passage since in *Descriptive Sketches* come of the same descriptions are located in other places.”⁵ Consequently, this passage must include several instances in which Wordsworth *imagined* landscape. Yet Imagination, in the acts of remembering and writing, provides freedom and salvation for the poet. In her essay on “Tintern Abbey,” Marjorie Levinson suggests the mind, especially memory, is a “barricade to resist the violence of historical change and contradiction.”⁶ In keeping with her reasoning, I argue Wordsworth also clings to the subliminal experiences of the past and his imagined experiences and hopes of the Alps in his Imagination passage. Imagination is an excuse, but it is an exalted and necessary one. While writing, the poet overlooks parts of reality and uses Imagination to save what he cherishes most, a part of which is, of course, Imagination itself.

³ M.H. Abrams. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*.

⁴ Zahler, Simone. “The Four Conceptions of the Simplon Road in William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*.”

⁵ Zahler, Simone. “The Four Conceptions of the Simplon Road in William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*.”

⁶ Marjorie Levinson. “Insight and Oversight: Reading ‘Tintern Abbey’.”