

"IMAGES OF OTHER WORLDS":  
STRUCTURE AND VISION IN WORDSWORTH'S  
DESCRIPTIVE SKETCHES (1793)

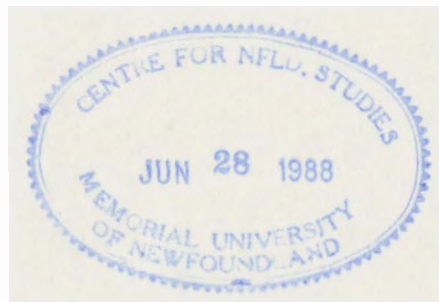
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JANET MILLER PITT





"IMAGES OF OTHER WORLDS": STRUCTURE  
AND VISION IN WORDSWORTH'S  
DESCRIPTIVE SKETCHES (1793)

BY

© Janet Miller Pitt, B.A.

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## ABSTRACT

Wordsworth's Descriptive Sketches (1793) is an early, exploratory poetical autobiography written when he was beginning the quest for his true poetic vocation. By examining the poet's reordering of the events of his 1790 Alpine tour, which the poem commemorates, and by analysing the modifications Wordsworth makes to his chosen genre, this thesis shows how Descriptive Sketches maps the travels of a youthful mind in its imaginative and spiritual journey to find a unique poetic persona and voice. Wordsworth's use of the narrative structure of the journey and his modifications to the genre of loco-descriptive poetry are shown to be closely intertwined with his transformation of, and movement from, his eighteenth-century literary origins in order to achieve the imaginative and intellectual autonomy characteristic of such later works as "Tintern Abbey" and The Prelude.

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I dedicate this thesis to four teachers without whose example and guidance I would not have found the way: my late father James Miller and late grandfather Aquila Miller, and my husband Robert Pitt and father-in-law Dr. David Pitt. "Enough, if something from our hands have power / To live, and act, and serve the future hour."

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## CHAPTER 1

### A SPOT OF HOLY GROUND:

#### AN APPROACH TO DESCRIPTIVE SKETCHES

But if the definition sought for be that of a legitimate poem, I answer, it must be one, the parts of which mutually support and explain each other; all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Chap. XIV

From the full title at its publication in 1793, Wordsworth's Descriptive Sketches. In Verse Taken During A Pedestrian Tour In the Italian, Grison, Swiss and Savoyard Alps suggests a type of poem well known to its eighteenth-century audience - the "loco-descriptive" or topographical poem. This poetic form, described by Dr. Johnson as "local poetry, of which the fundamental object is some particular landscape ... with the addition of ... historical retrospection or incidental meditation",<sup>1</sup> was a flourishing genre from its establishment in English poetry by Sir John Denham's Cooper's Hill (1642).<sup>2</sup> Such poems were usually autobiographical and descriptive set pieces based upon actual journeys and were often read in conjunction with prose travel guides and journals to heighten the effect of the description of a sequence of well-known scenes. Wordsworth had been familiar with such travel literature in poetry and prose since his schooldays at Hawkshead and had completed a pedestrian tour of the Alps in 1790. Thus a poem in the popular tradition of travel literature would have been an understandable choice for his first public outing as a poet.

The contemporary critical response to Descriptive Sketches and its subsequent critical treatment have been largely unsympathetic and concerned with the poem's obvious faults in syntax and style.<sup>3</sup> A recent editor, Eric

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Birdsall, has suggested that this is in part because the poem has been viewed persistently as a poor and conventional attempt at the loco-descriptive genre, and in part because Wordsworth seems mastered by, rather than master of, the verse form and style he has chosen.<sup>4</sup> Birdsall suggests that Descriptive Sketches remains "still largely misunderstood and unappreciated" because the poem has received little critical discussion "of what it is and is not".<sup>5</sup>

What Descriptive Sketches is not, Birdsall notes, is a biographical or descriptive poem in the conventional sense, although it does derive from an actual tour of the Alps and does occasionally describe well-known places. As a comparison of the poem with the events of the journey itself reveals, the poem does not record the events of the trip or describe specific scenic places according to a prevailing style such as the picturesque.<sup>6</sup>

Birdsall suggests that Wordsworth deliberately eschewed the picturesque because of its inadequacy as a descriptive mode. Citing Wordsworth's important footnote published with the poem in 1793, Birdsall notes that Wordsworth called the poem Descriptive Sketches not Picturesque Sketches because he did not, as he says, wish "to make a picture of the scene" of the Alpine sunset to which the footnote was appended.<sup>7</sup> The Alpine sunset, Wordsworth says, had triggered a flow of ideas which had become formatively and inextricably interwoven with his poetic memory of the scene.

Wordsworth's description of that event is not an attempt to render a pictorial equivalent of the geography but rather to describe the psychological and emotional impact of that geography on the poet.

Indeed, Descriptive Sketches combines imaginative, social and political matters with the biographical materials of the 1790 tour in nearly every scene of the poem. The geography within the poem thus represents a mental topography, and the journey it describes is the poet's imaginative exploration of his state of mind. Wordsworth's stance in Descriptive Sketches is established by what Birdsall has called the "subjunctive mood" of the poem's opening lines:

Were there, below, a spot of holy ground,  
By Pain and her sad family unfound,  
Sure Nature's GOD that spot to man had giv'n,  
Where murmuring rivers join the song of ev'n;  
Where falls the purple morning far and wide  
In flakes of light upon the mountain-side;  
Where summer Suns in ocean sink to rest,  
Or moonlight Upland lifts her hoary breast;  
Where Silence, on her night of wing, o'er-broods  
Unfathom'd dells and undiscover'd woods;  
Where rocks and groves the power of water shakes  
In cataracts or sleeps in quiet lakes.

(ll. 1-12)

The poet's state of mind, Birdsall concludes, is the search for an earthly utopia, a search which the poet believes to be futile since there is no "spot of holy ground". The



episodic structure of the remaining sketches, he maintains, traces a cyclic pattern of hope leading to despair and, despite the hope offered by the French Revolution in the well-known apostrophe in lines 740-91, Wordsworth concludes the poem (ll. 792-809) with a supplication for the promise of the revolution rather than the certainty of its achievement.<sup>8</sup>

While Wordsworth's concerns in Descriptive Sketches were certainly more social and political than topographical, an alternative reading of the opening (ll. 1-12) offers a different view of the poet's aim in the poem and the structure of the scenes which follow this opening sketch. "Were there below ..." may be read as implying that if there were, here below, on earth, a "spot of holy ground" it would look like the landscape described in the ensuing lines (3-12). With its variety of geographical features, seasons, times, moods and points of view, this landscape cannot be any single place which Wordsworth viewed on his tour or, for that matter, any single place at all. Many loco-descriptive poems described the search for the "perfect prospect"; Wordsworth presents such a prospect by creating it in the description itself.

Like "Tintern Abbey" where "Thoughts connect / The landscape with the quiet of the sky" (ll. 7-8),<sup>9</sup> the extended, synoptic view of the first scene in Descriptive Sketches exists only in the language of the poem and in the

mind of the poet. In a series of carefully linked antitheses, and through the dynamic animism of the language, the poet imaginatively blends subject and object, man and nature, heaven and earth in order to create an imaginative scene from the mass of topographical detail of the tour. In the variety of description - hills, mountains, lowlands, uplands, rivers, lakes, woods and dells - the landscape is also many places contained in one grand prospect. The description of the landscape, however, simultaneously presents day and night ("Where summer Suns in ocean sink to rest, / Or moonlight Upland lifts her hoary breast"; ll. 7-8) and places seen yet unseen ("Where Silence, on her night of wing, O'erbroods / Unfathom'd dells and undiscover'd woods" ll. 9-10). The use of active verbs such as "falls", "sinks", "lifts", "shake" and "join" animates the scene and the persistent personification connects nature and man, observer and observed. The object of poetic description in Descriptive Sketches (ll. 1-12) is not, as Coleridge observed about poetry in general, "merely to facilitate the recollection of any given facts or observations".<sup>10</sup> The process of poetry, Coleridge states, moves beyond enumeration or mere imitation of nature to create imaginatively a new image of nature which blends and synthesizes the external world with the "images, thoughts and emotions of the poet's own mind". The ideal poet is one who

diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name imagination. This power...reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order ...."11

Wordsworth begins the poem by breaking any implied contract with the reader of loco-descriptive poetry to pursue his journey in literal or simply descriptive terms because the ideal landscape he describes is manifestly unrealizable. Rather the condition of the journey as an imaginative work, blending "scene" and unseen, is established at the outset, before the first step is taken. Thus, in that soon-to-be-familiar Wordsworthian tradition of presenting both what the senses "half create, / And what perceive" ("Tintern Abbey", ll. 107-8), the scene represents the whole, extended experience of the journey - and other matter only imagined - compressed into a single, sustained and united view.

As "Nature's GOD" (l. 3) has created nature, the poet creates this scene as an artifact of his mind, the image of another world for which Nature has provided the raw elements. Wordsworth thus begins Descriptive Sketches by displacing nature itself as the subject of his description

and proposing instead a different subject which does not depend on the "nature" of literal reality although, as Sidney says poetry should, it necessarily begins with it.<sup>12</sup> Descriptive Sketches begins by describing the need or desire for a kind of unfallen world from which fallen man, like Adam, is forever excluded. Yet the poet undertakes the creation of an Edenic world, the description in lines 3-12, demonstrating the possibilities of the poet's own god-like power.

The nature of this second creation is an ideal image of the mind's relationship to the external world. The poet's image of nature is at once true to visible reality, and expressive of the sublime power of the mind to create and to sustain hope for a "spot of holy ground". Descriptive Sketches begins, then, with a plea for - and demonstration of - the special powers of the poet and shows his special potency in breaching the duality of man and nature. The first scene is a convincing show, pregnant with implications for the role of the poet, of the powers of the imaginative mind.

In Descriptive Sketches Wordsworth is highly conscious of the power of the poet and his responsibility to the reader; he feels that the poet must act upon the reader as nature has acted upon the poet.<sup>13</sup> Experiential links must be forged with the reader as the means of showing how the



poet, through natural agencies, has come to see and perceive imaginatively. To objectify this aesthetic experience, a structural metaphor is needed, like the events of the poet's original journey, but one which invests the original experience with the emotional and imaginative qualities he has experienced as a consequence of, and in conjunction with, writing of his experience in the Alps. The metaphor of the journey allowed for a sequence of images arranged along a spatial and temporal course which showed the dynamic relationship of man to nature. The traveller and his journey in the poem are not identical to Wordsworth and his journey in the Alps; the geography of the poem reflects the progress of the inner man where the physical nature of things and events is subordinate to mental order and the nature of imaginative thought.

In the poem, Wordsworth does not simply reproduce the itinerary which typified eighteenth century loco-descriptive verse. His Alpine journey of 1790 is only the beginning of the imaginative process which he seeks to convey. As he demonstrates in his opening sketch, the experience of nature he presents depends as much upon the observer as the observed. Wordsworth's Alpine tour and the ideas which in his mind have come to be associated with the event are the basis of a new type of poetic description which attempts to embody what Wordsworth would later describe as the power "Both of the object seen, and eye that sees" (The Prelude,

1805, XII, l. 379).<sup>14</sup> Wordsworth vividly establishes this point of view in the opening sketch, which may be seen as the epitome of the process he attempts to describe in the whole poem: although he observed mountains, cliffs, waterfalls, sky, people and events, as a poet he wishes to present the thoughts, feelings and knowledge created by such experience in a new and broader perspective which will have the power to move "even the most impassive imaginations".<sup>15</sup>

Taken together, the individual scenes which follow the opening view (ll. 1-12) may be seen as a second journey based upon, but not exactly, the scenes, events and people of the original tour. As this thesis will show, the journey presented in the poem describes the developing relationship between nature and a fictional character/narrator who is analagous to - but not the same as - the poet in the original experience. The narrator's progress is related as a series of significant, personal events set against a natural and social backdrop which are the scenes of the original tour, but described in association with elevated thoughts, moral and political reflection and transformed by imagination. The object of the poetic journey is to organize all the elements and dimensions of the poet's experience of the tour and his memory of those experiences and feelings at the time of writing, toward the same end or destination: to "move"<sup>16</sup> the reader as the poet himself has been moved.

His modification and adaptation of the conventions of eighteenth-century loco-descriptive journey poetry were required to accomplish this purpose, because, unlike his eighteenth-century predecessors, the poet's own powerful psychological response to the Alps, rather than literal transcription, becomes the basis of organization for the poem. Thus Descriptive Sketches reflects what Wordsworth had come to believe in retrospect had actually happened to him (or rather to his imagination) and what he had, in turn become - a thinking, feeling and creative soul. As he proposes in the first sketch, and as he relates in the body of the poem itself, the proper subject of poetry is not raw nature but nature as it impresses itself upon the mind and imagination of man. These ideas are clearly related to Wordsworth's later poetry, especially The Prelude, the poetic autobiography which retraces his personal journey toward becoming a poet: a man invested with special powers of spiritual and poetical communion with his fellow man because of his imaginative vision of natural and social experience.<sup>17</sup> In Descriptive Sketches, as Birdsall and others note, Wordsworth makes the stylistic mistakes of a young poet who has not yet found his voice; yet the poem's structure and vision are typically Wordsworthian.<sup>18</sup> As this thesis will show, in the loco-descriptive journey poem, the poet discovers the basic form for describing the development of poetic vision, a form which became a central, structural

element of The Prelude and of other, shorter poems from 1798 to 1815.

Unlike those to An Evening Walk, another loco-descriptive poem published with Descriptive Sketches, Wordsworth's revisions to the latter from 1793 to the final edition of the poem in 1836 were relatively minor and preserved the basic structure and sense of the original. It is a premise of this thesis that Wordsworth's repeated publication of the poem and relatively minor revisions underscore the continuing validity in his mind of this first poetic record of his Alpine journey which he was to describe many times, in poetry and prose, throughout his life, especially in The Prelude, Book VI, where it stands as a touchstone of imaginative growth and realization in the poet's development.

Descriptive Sketches will be thus considered as an early exploration of Wordsworthian spiritual and imaginative autobiography, written at a time when the poet was still struggling to find a persona and a voice. What Wordsworth does with the events of the 1790 tour and the conventional loco-descriptive genre is closely intertwined with his quest for poetic identity. Descriptive Sketches may be considered the first step on the poet's journey, marking an early and important transformation - and even rejection - of his literary origins, a journey which was necessary to achieve the intellectual and imaginative autonomy characteristic of



such peculiarly Wordsworthian poems as "Tintern Abbey" and  
The Prelude.

## CHAPTER I NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Works of Samuel Johnson (Dublin: 1793), p. 55. Quoted in John W. Foster, "A Redefinition of Topographical Poetry," JEGP, 69 (July 1970), 395.

<sup>2</sup> The standard history is R. A. Aubin, Topographical Poetry in Eighteenth-Century England (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1936; rpt. 1966). See also Dwight L. Durling, Georgic Tradition in English Poetry (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1964), and Foster, 394-406.

<sup>3</sup> See Steven E. Sharp, "The Unmerited Contempt of Reviewers: Wordsworth's Response to Contemporary Reviews of Descriptive Sketches," Wordsworth Circle, 9 (Winter 1978), 71-74. Nineteenth century editor William Knight put the 1793 edition in an appendix because he considered it "so artificial, prosaic, and dull, that its reproduction (except in the form of footnotes) would be an injustice to Wordsworth." In William Wordsworth, The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth (Edinburgh: William Patterson, 1882), I, XXV and note. H.W. Garrod called Wordsworth's juvenile poems, especially Descriptive Sketches, "endless arid tracts" through which the critic trekked on toward the "oases" of the Great Decade. In H. W. Garrod, Wordsworth: Lectures and Essay (2nd ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), p. 14. The growth of inquiry into Wordsworth's literary origins and juvenile poetry has contributed to a revival of interest in Descriptive Sketches. See, for example, Geoffrey Hartman, Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964; rpt. 1971), pp. 102-115, and Paul D. Sheats, The Making of Wordsworth's Poetry, 1785-1798 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 59-74. See Chapter II of this thesis for further discussion.

<sup>4</sup> In William Wordsworth, Descriptive Sketches, ed. Eric Birdsall (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984), pp. ix, 11-12. All citations are from this 1793 edition, with an appartus criticus of variants through 1832, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. ix.

<sup>6</sup> The picturesque is a late eighteenth-century aesthetic term referring to a certain kind of rough, wild and irregular landscape popularized in English prose by William Gilpin (1724-1804) and Uvedale Price (1747-1829) among others, and in painting by Italian Salvatore Rosa (1615-1673). William Gilpin's extremely influential writings on the picturesque in his accounts of the Wye,

Wales and the Lake District were read by Wordsworth and it is certain that he had Gilpin in mind in certain passages of Descriptive Sketches. See Christopher Wordsworth, The Early Wordsworthian Milieu: A Notebook of Christopher Wordsworth with a few entries by William Wordsworth, ed. Z. S. Fink (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 79 for Wordsworth's entries on Gilpin in an early outline of Descriptive Sketches. The standard history of the picturesque is Christopher Hussey, The Picturesque: Studies in Point of View (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1927; rpt. 1967). See also: Peter Bicknell, Beauty, Horror and Immensity: Picturesque Landscape in Britain (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981); Walter John Hipple, Jr., The Beautiful, The Sublime and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1957); Edward Malins, English Landscaping and Literature, 1660-1848 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966) and Elizabeth Wheeler Manwaring, Italian Landscape in Eighteenth Century England: A Study Chiefly on the Influence of Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa on English Taste, 1700-1800 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), and J. R. Watson, Picturesque Landscape and English Romantic Poetry (London: Huteson Educational Ltd., 1970). For a further discussion of the picturesque and Descriptive Sketches, see Chapter II of this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> The footnote is appended to Descriptive Sketches, l. 347:

I had once given to these sketches the title of Picturesque; but the Alps are insulted in applying to them that term. Whoever, in attempting to describe their sublime features, should confine himself to the cold rules of painting would give his reader but a very imperfect idea of those emotions which they have the irresistible power of communicating to the most impassive imaginations ... Had I wished to make a picture of this scene I had thrown much less light into it. But I consulted nature and my feelings.

This footnote and its implications are discussed further in Chapters II and III of this thesis.

<sup>8</sup> Birdsall, p.x.

<sup>9</sup> William Wordsworth, The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, eds. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (5 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940-1949). II. All citations of Wordsworth's poems other than Descriptive Sketches and The Prelude or otherwise specified are from this standard reading text. Hereafter cited as Poetical Works.

10 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographica Literaria, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), II, XIV, p. 11. All citations hereafter are from this standard reading text.

11 Ibid., p. 16.

12. In A Defense of Poetry where he declares that there is

no art delivered to mankind that hath not the works of nature for his principal object ... Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up by the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature ... so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit. Nature never set forth the earth in so rich a tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.

Sir Philip Sidney, A Defense of Poetry, ed. Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966; rpt. 1975), pp. 23-24.

13 As he states in his footnote (l. 347), had he confined himself to the "cold rules of painting", in describing the Alpine storm, he would have given his readers "a very imperfect idea of those emotions which they [the Alps] have the irresistible power of communicating to the most impassive imaginations." The subject of the passage in the poem, Wordsworth notes, is not the stormy sunset itself, but, as he says, "The ideas excited by the stormy sunset." He is implying that while the outward face of nature has inspired him, only imagination has the creative power to give his readers a more perfect idea of the "irresistible power" of the Alps. Therefore, to write the passage in the poem he consulted "nature and my feeling"; as a result it was the shaping force of imaginative ideas - the powerful associations of deluge and destruction - which transform nature into a greater image of sublimity in the poet's description (ll. 285-347). As he says later in The Prelude in his description of Mount Snowdon, the poet's art may be so imaginatively powerful that even "the grossest minds must see and hear, / And cannot chuse but feel" (1805, XIII, ll. 83-84). William Wordsworth, "The Prelude": 1799, 1805,

1850, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979). All citations hereafter are from the standard 1805 reading text.

14 Only the imagination produces "a new world, ... that was fit / To be transmitted and made visible / To other eyes" (The Prelude, XII, ll. 371-73) and maintains a reciprocity between the mind and the world.

15 This is the effect of such magnificent scenes of nature as the Alps on ordinary minds if described imaginatively by the poet. See note 13 above.

16 As he says in his footnote (l. 347), he intends in his poetical description "to move even the most impassive imaginations."

17 As he clearly states in his footnote, when he wrote Descriptive Sketches he was not subject to the formal aesthetics of the picturesque and the domination of the eye. Thus, he later confirmed in The Prelude that the picturesque "Although a strong infection of the age, / Was never much my habit" (The Prelude XI, 156-57). The period of picturesque habits has been variously dated between 1793 and 1795. As Jonathan Ramsay ("The Prelusive Sounds of Descriptive Sketches," Criticism, 20 (1978), 31-42) has observed, Wordsworth's dissatisfaction with the picturesque as a mode of description is most often associated with the literary pictorialism of An Evening Walk and Descriptive Sketches. W. J. B. Owen concludes, however, in his "Wordsworth's Aesthetics of Landscape," Wordsworth Circle, 7 (Spring 1976), 70-82, Descriptive Sketches marks a fundamental shift in Wordsworth's view of nature and of language as a way of describing the effect of nature upon the mind of the observer. The ostensive reason for this shift seems to be Wordsworth's strong emotional reaction to the Alps as the most splendid type of natural scene. This is true of Wordsworth's reaction to mountain scenery in general. He felt that the Alps produced the same imaginative response as his early experiences in the Lake District when he worshipped "among the depth of things" (The Prelude, XI, l. 233). He carried "the same heart" (The Prelude, XI, l. 241) when he travelled through the Alps; thus he was able to shake off the domination of the senses and stand "In Nature's presence ... as I now stand / A sensitive, and a creative Soul" (The Prelude, XI, ll. 255-56). Chapters III and IV discuss this further.

18 As he says in the climactic Snowdon episode of The Prelude, the poet bears a special relationship to nature and man in the power of his imagination which can create a new existence out of sense experience. While all men may see

such a sublime scene, only the poet has the power to transform these images of nature into poetry which has the imaginative power to move all men. Thus, in his relationship with Nature, the poet is both receptive and creative:

The power, which these  
Acknowledge when thus moved, which Nature thus  
Thrusts forth upon the senses, is the express  
Resemblance, in the fullest of its strength  
Made visible, a genuine counterpart  
And brother of the glorious faculty  
Which higher minds bear with them as their own.  
This is the very spirit in which they deal  
With all the objects of the universe:  
They from their native selves can send abroad  
Like transformation; for themselves create  
A like existence; and whenever it is  
Created for them, catch it by an instinct;

(The Prelude, XIII, l. 84-96)

As Wordsworth says of his experience of the Alps, he discovered that in the presence of the most magnificent of natural scenes he was "Not prostrate, overborne, as if the mind / Itself were nothing, a mean pensioner / On outward forms" (The Prelude, VI, 666-68). For a discussion of the difficulty of reconciling the receptive and creative faculties see W. J. B. Owen, Wordsworth as Critic (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1969), pp. 184-87.

## CHAPTER II

THE VARIOUS JOURNEY: DESCRIPTIVE  
SKETCHES AND ITS SOURCES

The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, II, Chap. XIV

Descriptive Sketches, with An Evening Walk, was Wordsworth's first published poem. While An Evening Walk does not commemorate an actual event, Descriptive Sketches is based on his 1790 walking tour of France, Switzerland and the Alps with his friend Robert Jones to whom he dedicates the poem.<sup>19</sup> The precise reason for Wordsworth's choosing an Alpine tour remains unclear but it may have been influenced in part by a growing sense of his vocation. Abandoning his Cambridge studies in mathematics, he chose instead independent studies in language and literature.<sup>20</sup> His choice of an Alpine tour reflected his enthusiasm for popular travel literature,<sup>21</sup> much of which celebrated the savage scenery of the Alps<sup>22</sup> and popular images of the Swiss as romantic ideals of primitive man.<sup>23</sup> The pedestrian tour took approximately ninety days, or nearly thirteen weeks, from late July to early October 1790, the itinerary closely following (only in reverse order) the route described in William Coxe's Lettres de M. William Coxe à M. W. Melmouthe, sur l'état politique, civil, et naturel de la Suisse; traduite de L'Anglais (1782) translated by Raymond de Carbonnières.<sup>24</sup>

Wordsworth and Jones travelled through France from Calais to Geneva from 13 July to 6 August; from 7 August to 21 September they travelled through Switzerland and Italy. Returning by boat down the Rhine to Cologne by 28 September, they crossed the Channel from Calais to Dover around 11



October. In all, they walked an estimated 2,000 miles with extended excursions at Chartreuse (described in both Descriptive Sketches and The Prelude) and at Chamonix, and eastward over the Alps at the Simplon Pass (a crossing described in detail in The Prelude but not in Descriptive Sketches) and travelled an additional 820 miles by boat (also not mentioned in Descriptive Sketches but described in The Prelude).<sup>25</sup>

Wordsworth began to write Descriptive Sketches between early December 1791 and the fall of 1792 after he had returned alone to France in 1791 to learn French, first at Orléans and then at Blois. During this period he became a passionate supporter of the French Revolution through his friendship with Michel Beaupuy; while in France he also met and fell in love with Annette Vallon by whom he had a child in December 1792.<sup>26</sup> Both An Evening Walk (composed largely in 1787) and the newly completed Descriptive Sketches were published in January 1793 upon Wordsworth's return to England.<sup>27</sup>

When published, Descriptive Sketches was regarded as a conventional attempt at loco-descriptive poetry. "The wild, romantic scenes of Switzerland have not yet been celebrated by an English poem ... which of themselves inspire the most sublime and poetical scenes ..." the Critical Review began; however, it continued: "Mr. Wordsworth has caught few

sparks from these glowing scenes. His lines are often harsh and prosaic; his images ill-chosen, and his descriptions feeble and insipid ... and incorrect ..."<sup>28</sup> The Monthly Review concurred with the Critical Review:

More descriptive poetry! ... Have we not yet enough? Must eternal changes be rung on uplands and lowlands, and nodding forests, and brooding clouds, and cells, and dells, and dingles? Yes; more, and yet more; so it is decreed. Mr. Wordsworth begins his exordium: [Quotes ll. 1-12.] May we ask, how is it that rivers join the song of ev'n? or, in plain prose, the evening! but, if they do, is it not true that they equally join the song of morning, noon, and night?<sup>29</sup>

Even the loyal Dorothy echoed the critics' charges, albeit more charitably, when she observed in a letter to Jane Pollard that both An Evening Walk and Descriptive Sketches contained " ... many Faults, the chief of which are Obscurity, and a too frequent use of some particular expressions and uncommon words ... Their Faults are such as a young Poet was most likely to fall into and least likely to discover ..."<sup>30</sup> As critic Thomas Holcroft lamented,

How often shall we in vain advise those, who are so delighted with their own thoughts that they cannot forbear from putting them into rhyme [sic], to examine those thoughts till they themselves understand them? No man will ever be a poet, till his mind be sufficiently powerful to sustain this labour.<sup>31</sup>

Considering that Descriptive Sketches was written mostly in the late spring and early fall of 1792, with very little revision and under the pressure of the momentous events then taking place in Wordsworth's life, it is not surprising that the poem was delivered prematurely to the public. Although he wanted to be a poet, his unpublished juvenile poems (mainly lyrics written in the highly emotional, pathetic style of the "Graveyard School")<sup>32</sup> and his early 1787 experiments in loco-descriptive verse ("The Vale of Esthwaite" and An Evening Walk written in 1787 in the picturesque mode) were his only formal preparation to adapt the traditional peregrination over the English countryside to a description of a tour of the Alps. Descriptive Sketches was almost twice as long as An Evening Walk and in the Alps (a landscape most often associated with the sublime)<sup>33</sup> and in loco-descriptive poetry (a lengthy, sustained verse form usually written in a highly embellished style)<sup>34</sup> Wordsworth ambitiously combined novel and exotic content with a complex conventional form.

In its critique of the poem, the Analytical Review gives us an idea of the multifariousness of popular loco-descriptive poetry, and the expectations of the contemporary reader:

Certainly nothing can be conceived better adopted to inspire sublime conceptions, and to enrich the fancy with poetical imagery, than a tour to the Alps .... The diversified pictures of nature which are sketched in this poem, could only have been produced by actual and attentive observation with an abundant store of materials. The majestic grandeur of the mountains, the rich and varied scenery of lakes and vallies, the solemn gloom of ruined monasteries and abbeys, and the different aspects of Alpine scenes in the morning and evening, during a storm, and in other atmospheric changes, are described in the studied variety of imagery; the piece is occasionally enlivened with human figures, and the whole is rendered instructive by the frequent introduction of moral reflections.<sup>35</sup>

Descriptive Sketches, "adopted to inspire sublime conceptions and to enrich the fancy", was clearly regarded as a poem of pleasures for the imagination in the picturesque-sublime mode.<sup>36</sup> Late eighteenth-century poets like Wordsworth did not simply mirror nature in their landscape description, although "actual and attentive observation" was the catalyst for moral and imaginative reflection: as Wordsworth states in his footnote to his description of the Alpine sunset (ll. 332-47):

I had once given to these sketches the title of Picturesque; but the Alps are insulted in applying to them that term. Whoever, in attempting to describe their sublime features, should confine himself to the cold rules of painting would give his reader but a very imperfect idea of those emotions which they have the irresistible power of communicating to the most impassive imaginations. The fact is, that

controlling influence, which distinguishes the Alps from all other scenery, is derived from images which disdain the pencil. Had I wished to make a picture of this scene I had thrown much less light into it. But I consulted Nature and my feelings ....<sup>37</sup>

The phrase "Nature and my feelings" rather than simply "Nature" indicates Wordsworth's interest, typical of the late eighteenth-century, in man's inner, emotional responses to nature and the role of imagination. While the vogue of the picturesque sustained interest in ut pictura poesis (the notion that both poetry and painting primarily imitated nature), the cult of Alpine travel, and the taste for mountain scenery in general, required a more complex literary form to describe the stupendous natural landscapes and the strong feelings to which they had given rise.<sup>38</sup> Verbal portraiture alone was insufficient to convey a moral sense of nature's beauty such as the sense of religious awe aroused by the Alps which Wordsworth acknowledged in his letter to Dorothy while on tour in 1790:

It is impossible not to contrast that repose, that complacency of Spirit, produced by these lovely scenes, with the sensations ... in passing the Alps. At the Lake of Como my mind ran through a thousand dreams of happiness .... 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.<sup>39</sup>

As his letter shows, he analyzed or organized his experience of scenery from the beginning of the tour in terms either sublime or beautiful.<sup>40</sup> In the footnote (l. 347) he bases his distinction between the picturesque and the sublime on his recognition that his experience of the Alps and the feelings to which they had given rise were essentially different from his experience of the beautiful. Repudiating the picturesque, the confines of "the cold rules of painting", because the sublime features of the Alps cannot be described in those terms, he claims to derive his poetic images from "nature and my feelings". They will thus convey to even "the most impassive imaginations" the interplay of nature and emotions, rather than merely a pictorial image of the Alps. It is his imagination, then, in relation to a natural object (in this case the Alps) and his ability to create "images which disdain the pencil" that forms the basis of his poetic description.

In his dedicatory letter to Robert Jones, he emphasizes that the poem is intended to be commemorative of the happy memories and impressions of the tour:

I am happy in being conscious I shall have one reader who will approach the conclusion of these few pages with regret. You they must certainly interest in reminding you of the moments to which you can hardly look back without a pleasure not the less dear from a shade of

melancholy. You will meet with few images without recollecting the spot where we observed together, consequently, whatever is feeble in my design, or spiritless in my colouring will be amply supplied by your own memory.<sup>41</sup>

Although based on "actual and attentive observation" of the places and events of his tour, Wordsworth was not bound to geographic versimilitude in his poetic description. In publicly addressing Jones, Wordsworth was also warning his readers of his intention to depart from the context of familiar reportage which characterized many loco-descriptive poems.<sup>42</sup> Reordering and altering the well-established route of the Grand Tour to enliven his verse, he combines personal experience with an "abundant store of materials" and "instructive moral reflections" from a variety of sources. As a comparison of the actual tour and the journey of the poem shows, rather than being a versified diary or journal, the poem is a literary reconstruction in which Wordsworth very subjectively selected sights, impressions and insights from the original tour and combined these with other materials, literary, historical, political and autobiographical.

Most of the journey across France (described in The Prelude VI, 360-82) and the boat trip (described in The Prelude VI, 383-421) are omitted from Descriptive Sketches. The two-day visit to the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse is referred to in The Prelude VI, 11.422-25; in Descriptive

Sketches the monastery is depicted under siege by revolutionary soldiers (as it was in 1792 while Wordsworth was in France, but not as it was when he visited while on tour),<sup>43</sup> In 1790 Wordsworth and Jones, probably on the advice of Coxe's volume, turned south from Chartreuse to Chamonix and Mont Blanc after which they crossed the Alps at the Simplon Pass (described in detail in The Prelude VI, ll. 494-524). The Simplon Pass incident is not referred to in Descriptive Sketches and the celebrated Alpine scenes of Chamonix and Mont Blanc, which Wordsworth and Jones saw near the beginning of their tour, are mentioned only briefly in one of the poem's concluding sketches (ll. 600-712).

In 1790, descending the Ravine of Gondo after crossing the Simplon Pass, the travellers followed a circuitous route, suggested by Coxe, through Switzerland and the Italian Lakes. Parts of this region - Lake Como, Via Mala, the Reuss River, the Valley of Schöllenen, Lakes Uri and Lucerne - are placed in Descriptive Sketches (ll. 176-316) before the region of the higher Alps (ll. 317-47). This latter scene of a stormy Alpine sunset introduces the poem's large, central section in which the description of Alpine scenery is interwoven with a running commentary on Swiss life, manners and history (ll. 348-653). In 1790 Wordsworth actually had very little personal contact with the Swiss<sup>44</sup> and it is to Coxe/Ramond that he is most heavily indebted



for his Rousseauistic themes and images of Switzerland as the representation of free, independent man.

Following the sketches of the Swiss, Wordsworth depicts the Abbey of Einsleiden and its pilgrims (ll. 654-79). In 1790, Wordsworth and Jones visited the abbey after travelling around the Italian Lakes and before turning southward along the River Aare. The description of the River Aare (ll. 414-441) combines landscape features and incidents associated with Wordsworth's experiences on the tour in the Vale of Chamonix.<sup>45</sup> The Rhine Falls at Schaffhausen, one of the most famous sights of Europe which Wordsworth saw after leaving the Aare region in 1790, is omitted entirely from the poem, as is the boat ride from Basel to Cologne. The final descriptive sketches reflect Wordsworth's revolutionary beliefs and events while he was resident in France in 1792, namely, the slavery of the Savoy (ll. 706-12), the sights of the River Loire (ll. 760-73) on whose banks he composed the poem, and the proclamation of the French Republic (probably the subject of ll. 774-809).

In all Wordsworth includes twenty-eight descriptive sketches in the poem which, by its title, suggests a series of brief compositions presenting single scenes, characters or incidents as an artist would make sketches as the preliminary groundwork for a more fully developed work. In content, the poem seems to be a pastiche of descriptive types, themes, tales, tones, points of view, literary

borrowings and poetic styles all loosely organized as the story of a mountain ascent undertaken by a fictitious hero. There are basically three types of sketch in the poem: those which describe the journey (what is seen and what happens along the way); those which describe emotional experiences during the journey (how the narrator or other fictitious characters feel at different times in response to different settings and events); and those which describe reflections raised during the journey (what the character thinks and feels about what he has recalled from reading and his own memory).

Contrasting scenes in the picturesque, beautiful and sublime modes are placed, like colours from a painter's palette, to arouse strong or subdued emotional impressions. The soft, pastoral beauty of Lake Como (ll. 80-162), which resembles a landscape painting by Claude Lorrain, is contrasted with the sombre mountain gloom of the Grande Chartreuse (ll. 53-79). The savage, irregular scene of Via Mala's "chasms" (l. 184) and the "impervious gloom" (l. 186) of the land of the Grison is complete with picturesque touches like the gipsy encampments and Banditti. By contrast the landscape of the Alps is empty, vast and horrible:

Thro' vacant worlds where Nature never gave  
 A brook to murmur or a bough to wave,  
 Which unsubstantial Phantoms sacred keep;  
 Thro' worlds where Life and Sound, and Motion sleep,  
 Where Silence still her death-like reign extends,  
 Save when the startling cliffs unfrequent rends:  
 In the deep snow the mighty ruin drown'd,  
 Mocks the dull ear of Time with deaf abortive sound;

(ll. 372-76)

These scenes are further differentiated by the narrator's reflective exploration of his feelings as he passes through the landscape. He sighs "at hoary Chartreuse' gloom / Weeping beneath her chill of mountain doom" (ll. 53-54) but he is "more pleas'd" to walk around "Comq bosom'd deep in chestnut groves" (ll. 80-81). The sequence of scenes at Lake Como (ll. 80-175) shows "Time - Sunset - Same Scene, Twilight - Same Scene, Morning, It's Voluptuous Character"<sup>46</sup> is arranged to show various picturesque vantage points. Contrasting scenes of darkness and light as sunset progresses to sunrise are the backdrops against which the narrator's shifting emotions are portrayed: he is introduced as "pleas'd" (l. 80); he becomes the "viewless lingerer" (l. 92) and eventually retires in the twilight to "The thicket, where th' unlisten'd stock-dove coos" (l. 119); the next morning his eye is "bless'd" (l. 120) with the "delicious" (l. 120) scene. Human characteristics are also attributed to the landscape: the beauty of Lake Como is personified as "Pale Passion" (l. 118),<sup>47</sup> while the gothic qualities of the

landscape of the Grison are represented by the single gipsy who "solitary through the forest drear / Spontaneous wanders, hand in hand with Fear" (ll. 199-200). The awful landscape of the higher Alps by comparison is savage and desolate:

Mid stormy vapours ever driving by,  
Where ospreys, cormorants, and herons cry,  
Where hardly giv'n the hopeless waste to cheer,  
Deny'd the bread of life the foodful ear,  
Swindles the pear on autumn's latest spray,  
And apple sickens pale in summer's ray,

(ll. 317-22)

The Alpine landscape is personified by "Independence" (l. 324) and "Freedom" (l. 326) which is "Shy as the jealous Chamois" (l. 326); Wordsworth, however, augments this stark impression with the gothic tale of the Chamois-Chaser (ll. 369-413). The grisly invention of this sketch (based not on his own but Ramond's personal experience in 1771)<sup>48</sup> conveys his lack of skill in producing truly macabre moments like those of the masters of the gothic;<sup>49</sup> his graphic description of the hunter's life and death is gratuitously extended by a final sensational touch (a fault which lingers in several Lyrical Ballads):

- Meanwhile his wife and child with cruel hope  
 All night the door at every moment ope;  
 Haply that child in fearful doubt may gaze,  
 Passing his father's bones in future days,  
 Start at the reliques of that very thigh,  
 On which so oft he prattled as a boy.

(ll. 408-13).

Such sketches typify the stylistic excesses of loco-descriptive poetry (which included many elements and motifs from other genres such as the gothic, and of neo-classic poetry in general), in the hands of an unseasoned imitator. While the experience of the 1790 tour had provided him with an infinite variety of actual scenes, moods and memories from which to create his descriptive sketches, his use of conventional embellishments such as pathetic fallacy, personification, gothic touches combined with his own extravagant sense of invention often gives his description a strained and hysterical tone epitomized in the scene of the famished wolf stalking the terrified gipsy:

- Bursts from the troubl'd Larch's giant boughs  
 The pie, and chattering breaks the night's repose.  
 Low barks, the fox; by Havoc rous'd the bear,  
 Quits, growling, the white bones that strew his lair;  
 The dry leaves stir as with the serpent's walk,  
 And, far beneath, Banditti voices talk;  
 Behind her hill the Moon, all crimson, rides,  
 And his red eyes the slinking water hides;  
 Then all is hush'd; the bushes rustle near,  
 And with strange tinglings sings her fainting ear.

(ll. 229-38)

Editor Ernest de Selincourt attributes this sense of false description to the fact that "D.S. [Descriptive Sketches] is based less exclusively on the poet's own observation, and draws more on literary sources ...".<sup>50</sup> In his poem Wordsworth borrows from masters of descriptive poetry such as Milton, James Thomson, Gray and Collins, as well as lesser, though fashionable, writers such as James Beattie, Mark Akenside, Tobias Smollett, and William Mason. Wordsworth's many allusions, verbal echoes, quotations and poetic stances amount in some sketches, like the "Pleasures of the Pedestrian Traveller" (ll. 13-44) to a cento-like patchwork of eighteenth-century verse scraps.<sup>51</sup>

Contemporary critics of Descriptive Sketches were contemptuous of Wordsworth's trite style which, to quote Cowper on Pope, makes "poetry a mere mechanic art; / And every warbler has his tune by heart" (Table Talk, ll. 543-544).<sup>52</sup> There are "Wordsworthian" exceptions in scattered phrases like the "Black drizzling craggs, that beaten by the din, / Vibrate, as if a voice complain'd within" (ll. 249-50), which in The Prelude (VI, 563-64) becomes the "Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side / As if a voice were in them," and the gorgeous description of the mountain sunrise (ll. 494-511, itself a close imitation of Beattie's The Minstrel, 1, XXI, ll. 181-89) which Wordsworth carries forward in his description of the ascent of Snowdon (The Prelude, XIII, ll. 36-65).<sup>53</sup> Not surprisingly, he excised much of the elaborate neo-classic poetic language,

allusions, imitations and stylistic devices in subsequent editions of the poem.<sup>54</sup>

In the central sections on the Swiss, he relies even more heavily on the prose accounts which were the likely sources of inspiration for both the actual tour and his poetical description. Many of his vivid narratives, such as the Chamois-Chaser (ll. 369-413), grand images such as the Reuss River (ll. 245-50), historical events such as the battles near Glarus (ll. 536-42), myths such as the Golden Age (ll. 520-35), legends such as the song of the "Ranz des Vaches" (ll. 630-31) and political commentary such as the Swiss under nature's tyranny compared to the enslavement of the Savoy under man's (ll. 705-12), even his language and style, are derived largely from Coxe/Ramond. By thus closely following a popular prose account, Wordsworth may have intended to heighten the pleasure of his readers who enjoyed comparing treatments of similar subjects in such different art forms as prose and poetry, and literature and painting. And he was providing suitably elevated - and elevating - images for his audience's edification and instruction. Switzerland was considered to be an ideal society, popularized by Jean Jacques Rousseau and others; Wordsworth's selection of Swiss scenes and historical incidents, even his elevated tone, are described by Moxie Fairchild as

wholly conventional. He pays his respects to mountainous liberty and he says the proper things about Tell's Chapel. His references to the Golden Age are also in the right traditional manner. Man's built has been forever banished that time of constant sunshine and plenty but Nature has not entirely averted her face. To those whose hearts are uncorrupted, she gives some measures of her original joys ....<sup>55</sup>

The sublime features of Alpine scenery - the rushing torrents, the icy remoteness of mountain peaks, the gloomy forests and perilous cliffs - which recur in the landscape description of many sketches (whether the actual locale is Switzerland or not) underscore the considerable influence of Wordsworth's prose sources on both his expectations of the tour and his writing in the poem. In a favourite volume of Wordsworth's, William Mason's edition of The Poems of Mr. Gray to Which are Prefixed Memoirs of his Life and Writings (1775), is Gray's detailed account of his trip to the Grand Chartreuse:

... the way to it [is] up a vast mountain, in many places the road not 2 yards broad; on one side the rock hanging over you and on the other a monstrous precipice. In the bottom runs a torrent, called les Guiers morts, that works its way among the rocks with a mighty noise and frequent Falls. You here meet all the beauties so savage and horrid a place can present you: rocks of various uncouth figures, cascades pouring down from an immense height out of hanging groves of pine trees, and the Solemn sound of the stream, that rears below, all concur to form one of the most poetical scenes imaginable.<sup>56</sup>



Wordsworth depicts the Grande Chartreuse as occupied by soldiers; the actual description of the Chartreuse he seems to incorporate in the description of the savage yet beautiful Italian Lakes:

The unwearied sweep of wood thy cliffs that scales,  
 The never-ending waters of thy vales;  
 The cots, those dim religious groves embow'r,  
 Or under rocks that from the water tower ...  
 Bright'ning the gloom where thick the forests stoop;  
 - Thy torrents shooting from the clear blue sky  
 Thy towns, like swallows' nests that cleave on high;

(ll. 122-31)

In his letter to Dorothy in September 1790 in which he mentions the Glaciers of Savoy, he draws her attention to the imaginative power of literary accounts when he writes "you have undoubtedly heard of those celebrated s[c]enes, but if you have not read them any description which I have here room to give you must be altogether inadequate."<sup>57</sup>

Wordsworth, himself disappointed with Mont Blanc, may have relied in his poetic account on John Moore's Travels in France, Switzerland and Germany (1779) with its extensive description of these scenes, rather than his own personal experience<sup>58</sup>:

Along ascends that mountain nam'd of white,  
 That dallies with the Sun the summer night,  
 Six thousand years amid his lonely bounds  
 The voice of Ruin, day and night, resounds  
 Where Horror-led his sea of ice assails,  
 Havoc and Chaos blast a thousand vales,  
 In waves, like two enormous serpents, wind  
 And drag their length of deluge train behind.

(ll. 691-98)

In addition to presenting scenery coupled with the narrator's reflective responses showing the pleasures for the imaginative mind, Wordsworth also presents sketches - entertaining tales, stories, and folk legends - which illustrate his themes of man and nature. Such sketches treat either general philosophical, social and political themes or human life in a series of intimate portraits. Thus Lake Como and the land of the Grison are natural settings for what the Argument calls "The Old Man and Forest Cottage Music" (ll. 162-74) and the "Via Mala and Grison Gypsy" (ll. 188-242), a set of nicely contrasting vignettes illustrating both the delightful and fearful sides of the human condition on a small scale. The hermit is a familiar, rustic image (with which his contemporary English audience could easily identify) while the Grison gypsy is a diverting, foreign novelty whose pathetic story was a different yet similar appeal to sentimental tastes.<sup>59</sup> On a larger scale Wordsworth explores the human condition through contemporary philosophical concepts such as primitivism, the nature of freedom and tyranny and the Golden Age of the

Swiss, and political events such as the French Revolution and the slavery of the Savoy.

Apart from the inevitable blending of landscape features from scene to scene (much like his impression of the town when he told Dorothy "My Spirits have been kept in a perpetual hurry of delight by the almost uninterrupted succession of sublime and beautiful objects which have passed before my eyes ....")<sup>60</sup>, Wordsworth's major reordering of the 1790 tour seems to be to accommodate his political, moral and philosophical reflections on the Swiss and the French. The first half of Descriptive Sketches describes an ascent of the Alps which is a progression through beautiful and sublime landscape seen through the eyes of the melancholy narrator and enlivened by the occasional human story. He achieves this effect by shifting the scenes of actual locales he saw after crossing the Alps in 1790 (mainly the region of the Italian Lakes) to the first part of the journey of the poem where they are juxtaposed with the gloomy scenes of the Grande Chartreuse. Once atop the Alps, the journey is suspended as the narrator, in the loco-descriptive manner, contemplates the prospect before him. This sublime vantage point marks the beginning of a mental journey in which he combines landscape description with legend, folk tales, history and moral reflections. The sketches describing the Swiss and the French mark a turning point in the journey of the poem. The

narrator, elevated by a sense of transport, declares, "But now with other soul I stand alone / Sublime upon this far-surveying cone" (ll. 366-67).<sup>61</sup> Interweaving myth, history and fiction with his description of Alpine scenery, the narrator draws an extended analogy between the nature of the Swiss and the nature of liberty.

The Swiss sketches are based on a mixture of materials from literary sources such as Coxe/Ramond, Wordsworth's own revolutionary beliefs of 1791-92, invention and personal experience; yet, his portrait of the Swiss also represents his earliest connection between the beautiful scenery of the Alps and the ideals of liberty preserved there, ideals he would also strongly associate with the mountain scenery and rusticity of the English Lake District and Scotland.

Superficial similarities between the two regions are already tentatively being drawn in 1793: to denote the highest parts of the Alps he uses the word "pike", a word he notes "very commonly used in the north of England to signify a high mountain of the conic form, as Landale Pike, etc.;"<sup>62</sup> he chooses the word "sugh" which he notes is "a Scotch word expressive of the sound of wind through the trees,"<sup>63</sup> in the otherwise excellent description of "Faint wail of eagle melting into blue / Beneath the cliffs, and pine-woods steady sugh" (ll. 436-37). He also makes much use, through Ramond's additions to Coxe's tour of Switzerland, of Swiss

stories or folk legends such as the tradition of the Golden Age of the Alps, although he notes that

This tradition ..., as M. Ramond observes, is highly interesting, interesting not the less to the philosopher than to the poet. Here I cannot help remarking, that the superstitions of the Alps appear to be far from possessing that poetical character which so eminently distinguishes those of Scotland and other mountainous northern countries. The Devil with his horns, &c. seems to be in their idea, the principle agent that brings about the sublime revolutions that take place daily before their eyes.<sup>64</sup>

Wordsworth's philosophical interest in the Swiss was predominantly and inextricably bound up with his revolutionary interests in 1792 at the time of writing Descriptive Sketches.<sup>65</sup> Thus his 1790 journey was only one of the actual journeys on which the poem is based. In 1790 Wordsworth had written to Dorothy of the excitement of his walk through France when "the whole nation was mad with joy, in consequence of the revolution",<sup>66</sup> referring to the celebrations of the Fête de la Federation (the first anniversary of the Revolution) then taking place throughout the country. Returning to France he became an ardent supporter of the Revolution and, upon his return to England in December 1792, continued to support for a time those political ideals of the patriots until his early enthusiasm gave way to disillusionment with the excesses and crimes of the Terror.<sup>67</sup> In Descriptive Sketches, however, the

typical Swiss peasant is presented as an ideal portrait of liberty:

The native dignity no forms debase,  
The eye sublime, and surly lion-grace.  
The slave of none, of beasts alone the lord,  
He marches with his flute, his book, and sword,  
Well taught by that to feel his rights, prepar'd  
With this "the blessings he enjoys to guard."

(ll. 530-35)

Different aspects of Swiss history and folk culture highlight different aspects of Wordsworth's revolutionary beliefs in independence, freedom and liberty. The legend of William Tell (l. 349) and the description of the battles against the Kings of Austria (ll. 536-41) show the Swiss to be staunch defenders of their rights against monarchical encroachments and oppression. Although materially poor, the Swiss are shown to be vigorously self-reliant:

Thro' Nature's vale his homely pleasures glide  
Unstain'd by envy, discontent, and pride,  
The bound of all his vanity to deck  
With one bright bell a favourite heifer's neck;  
Content upon some simple annual feast,  
Remember'd half the year, and hop'd the rest,  
If dairy produce, from his inner hoard,  
Of thrice ten summers consecrate the board.

(ll. 582-89)

The simple, rustic Swiss are content despite the contrarieties and paradoxes of their existence, and to them Wordsworth attributes an inward elevation of spirit, an

unmediated vision of man in his most sublime, god-like aspects:

γ

For images of other worlds are there,  
Awful the light, and holy is the air,  
Uncertain thro' his fierce uncultur'd soul  
Like lighted tempests troubled transports roll,  
To viewless realms his Spirit towers amain,  
Beyond the senses and their little reign.

And oft, when pass'd that solemn vision by,  
He holds with God himself communion high,  
When the dread peal of swelling torrests fells  
The sky-roof'd temple of th' eternal hills,  
And savage Nature humbly joins the rite,  
While flash her upward eyes severe delight.

(ll. 544-55)

The Swiss Golden Age is an orthodox version of primitive ideals of social liberty: only in Switzerland has primitive reason developed into a national dedication to liberty and independence as shown in the everyday life of the Swiss and their glorious history. As John Beer notes "From this must follow the mountain-dwellers natural feeling for liberty, and (by way of the universality of human nature) the further corollary that universal freedom would one day descend to humanity."<sup>68</sup> Yet Wordsworth in the final sketches of the poem describes an underworld of human misery, poverty and hopelessness, a sort of dark before the dawn of the new world symbolized by France. The swain's parable (ll. 594-621) is a general summary of the paradox of man's existence "Condemn'd, in mists and tempests ever rife, / To pant slow up the endless Alp of life" (ll. 593-94).<sup>69</sup>

The glowing domestic image of the narrator, reposing "in luxury" (l. 597) before "the dying fire" (l. 597) is in sharp contrast to the dark picture the swain paints of Swiss life where "the avalanche of death" destroys "The little cottage of domestic Joy" (ll. 600-01). The final view of the Swiss shows the perpetual enslavement of poverty:

"For ever, fast as they of strength become  
 "To pay the filial debt, for food to roam,  
 "The father, forc'd by Powers that only deign  
 "That solitary Man disturb their reign,  
 "From his bare nest amid the storms of heaven  
 "Drives, eagle-like, his sons as he was driven,  
 "His last dread pleasure! watches to the plain -  
 "And never, eagle-like beholds again.

(ll. 614-21)

The Abbey of Einsiedlen (ll. 655-79) offers some hope to man through organized religion but the "secret Power" (l. 652) of Roman Catholicism offers a false consolation; the narrator, contemplating the poor and suffering, yet hopeful supplicants, is touched yet unconvinced by their faith: "my heart," he says "alive to transports long unknown, / Half wishes your delusion were its own" (ll. 678-79).

The narrator contrasts the physical beauty of the Savoy, "delicious vale! ... / Thy reddening orchards, and thy fields of gold" (ll. 704-05), with the poverty of its people, especially the babies with "Dead muttering lips, and hair of hungry white", who "Besiege the traveller whom they



half affright" (ll. 711-12). And the Savoy epitomizes the dichotomy of the journey itself: while he has found beauty in nature and human happiness and freedom among the "farthest hamlets" (l. 724), he still finds oppression and tyranny among mankind:

In the wide range of many a weary round,  
Still have my pilgrim feet unfailing found,  
As despot courts their blaze of gems display,  
Ev'n by the secret cottage far away  
The lily of domestic joy decay

(ll. 719-23)

The prospect from the Alps, as in Goldsmith's The Traveller, allows the narrator to compare and contrast Italy, Switzerland and France as his ascent of the Alps has allowed him to compare and contrast his response to the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque in natural scenery. Like the mythic Swiss whose spirit transcends "Beyond the senses and their little reign" (ll. 548-49), the narrator's final, apocalyptic vision is an image of another world of which the sublime Swiss are living images of the freedom which he imagines will extend throughout the world.<sup>70</sup>

- Tho' Liberty shall soon, indignant, raise  
 Red on his hills his beacon's comet blaze;  
 Bid from on high his lonely cannon found,  
 And on ten thousand hearths his shout rebound,  
 His larum-bell from village tow'r to tow'r  
 Swing on th' astounded ear its dull undying roar:  
 Yet, yet rejoice, tho' Pride's averted ire  
 Rouze Hell's own aid, and wrap thy hills in fire:  
 Lo! from the innocuous flames a lovely birth!  
 With its own virtues springs another earth

(ll. 774-84)

The overthrow of the old order and the birth of a new world of Freedom which will "ride o'er Conquest, Avarice and Pride" (l. 792) echoes the triumphant denouement of Pope's Windsor Forest.<sup>71</sup> The final verse paragraph, however, is addressed like the dedicatory letter to "my friend" (l. 810); this quiet, coda-like conclusion summarizes the narrator's "various journey, sad and slow" (l. 813) in an image of social consolation and human love and a final benediction and prayer that "within this humble cot / Be the dead load of mortal ills forgot" (ll. 810-11).

Thus Wordsworth's knowledge of actual places, poetry, ideas, beliefs and experience coalesce in the poem's "various journey", combining memories and impressions of his real and literary experiences. The literal or geographic journey in Descriptive Sketches, the journey from Chartreuse to the Alps through France, Switzerland and Italy, is the formal, structural vehicle for other metaphorical and allegorical journeys: the journey through nature, the journey toward social and political ideals, the human

journey, the mental or inward journey through the poet's memory. The narrative structure, whereby the narrator actually travels over the landscape, loosely knits together the disparate scenes of the tour which seem to have been rearranged to highlight the poet's own interests and purposes.

In many ways Descriptive Sketches is a quintessential neo-classic poem, its many elements - natural description, didacticism, philosophical reflection and sentimentalism - adding diversity if not coherence to the loco-descriptive form. The narrator assumes a number of conventional guises: the melancholic poet, the sentimental traveller, the man of the world and the philosopher. Mountains and valleys provide a variety of contrasting scenes: the Italian lakes with their play of light and shadow, different vantage points at different times of day are authentically picturesque while the thundering floods, dizzy heights, breath-taking terror and sense of transcendence of the Alps are orthodox renditions of the sublime. Through his sketches Wordsworth weaves late-eighteenth themes of melancholy and sentiment - sentimental tales such as the Grison gipsy, the gothicism of the Chamois-chaser, the rural borrow of the Savoyard and the minor stories of domestic happiness such as the "hermit - with his family around" (l. 175). The poet's general consideration of human life is further developed in the swain's parable and the description

of the Swiss and their ascetic life. His despair at man's inhumanity to man, as exemplified in the conditions of the Savoy, is coupled with the panegyric to the French Revolution and his vision of a new world of Freedom rising out of the ashes of the old.

Edifying and entertaining though at least one contemporary critic found Wordsworth's allegory of "Freedom ... poetically exhibited,"<sup>72</sup> as a literal journey from Chartreuse to the Alps, the journey of the poem becomes burdened by excess rhetorical, philosophical and stylistic baggage which greatly reduces the poem's overall effect. The Analytical Review, while admiring certain lines and passages, found that

At the same time, we must own, that this poem is on the whole less interesting than the subject led us to expect; owing in part to the want of a general thread of narrative to connect the several descriptions, or of some episodic tale, to vary the impression; and in part also to a certain laboured and artificial cast of expression, which often involves the poet's meaning in obscurity.<sup>73</sup>

As a poem based on a literal journey, Descriptive Sketches has been thought to be closer to the versified gazeteers of the eighteenth century than to his own later descriptions of his journey which M. H. Abrams has called "symbolic landscapes traversed by a metaphorical wayfarer".<sup>74</sup> Since it was first viewed by contemporary

critics as an all-too-typical sample of loco-descriptive poetry, recent critics, distracted by the poem's obvious faults, have sought either an explanation of the poem in the history of Wordsworth's life or focused their attention on those features which make Descriptive Sketches so much a product of the age (and the antithesis of Wordsworth's later views and practice after Lyrical Ballads, 1798) - namely the formalized descriptive catalogue, ornate language, melancholy tone, use of pathetic fallacy, sentimentalism, gothic sensationalism, intrusive historical, political and didactic materials, and the pandering to aesthetic fashions such as the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque.<sup>75</sup>

While Wordsworth does not create a unique work in Descriptive Sketches, neither is Descriptive Sketches unique in Wordsworth's poetry. As knowledge of its literary origins has grown so too has appreciation of the poem as part of Wordsworth's canon.<sup>76</sup> Descriptive Sketches, in part the product of unquestionably powerful extrinsic influences, is also a poem in which Wordsworth acts upon these poetic conventions and traditions by understanding and applying them in profoundly original ways in his own poetry. The following chapters will show that Descriptive Sketches looks forward to the poems of Wordsworth's maturity in many of its fundamental stances and themes: the mind and its relationship to natural objects, the development of imagination, the role of nature - and especially mountain

scenery - in shaping moral character and personality, the French Revolution and concepts of liberty and social justice, the traditions of independent rural life, the pursuit of the poetic life and the problem of sustaining the poet's belief in man in the face of man's inhumanity. As Paul Sheats concludes, Descriptive Sketches is similar to Book VI of The Prelude in its

realization in words of the power of the imagination to usurp images of nature, to create eternal images of hope and expectation. Descriptive Sketches is this realization constructed out of the tools then at hand--dramatic narrative, the journeying soul who is travelling to this end whose creative bonds can only be formed with the reader by presenting through pathetic story and evocative pictorial images.

The conventional assumptions of loco-descriptive poetry and indebtedness to various kinds of eighteenth-century poetry and prose provided Wordsworth with the basis for his critical self-examination of his responses to nature and to literature as well as testing his poetic skills within a conventional form. For, in addition to the conventions which are at play in the poem, there are also poetic principles of selection and arrangement in his reordering of the tour which he preserves in all subsequent revisions to, and editions of, the poem beginning in 1793-94. At that time he completely revised An Evening Walk, resulting in a longer and much different poem, but no significant revisions.

to Descriptive Sketches can be found.<sup>78</sup> It is known that he did project two more "sketches" - one entitled "Author reminded of scenes of his youth" and the other "Old man and his Reflexions" or "old man's story".<sup>70</sup> Although neither was published with the poem, the addition of "scenes of his youth" in place of the sketches of the chamois-chaser and views of the higher Alps underscores the early connections Wordsworth made between Switzerland and the Lake District, especially the importance of his youthful experience in the Lakes in his imaginative development and love of liberty and independence, embodied in the traditions of rural life.<sup>80</sup>

Wordsworth revised and republished Descriptive Sketches at least eight times between 1790 and 1836.<sup>81</sup> As B. G. Wiley notes, the poem's textual history shows "Wordsworth's continued interest in that poem and his ability to revise and rework its style even after he had created a new style of treatment for those same themes in The Prelude."<sup>82</sup> Wordsworth's revisions also further suggest that he was satisfied with the poetics of Descriptive Sketches. The 1836 edition was the first major revision of the poem to be significantly different from the 1793 edition. According to his son-in-law Edward Quillinan (who assisted with the revisions), Wordsworth felt that the revisions and corrections "very greatly improved them; as this juvenile production was a full of corrupt diction as of vigorous poetry - Mr. W. says full of swagger and flourish".<sup>83</sup> As

modern editor Eric Birdsall notes, Wordsworth's careful, precise revisions of language make the poem shorter and generally smoother and clearer. His major change is the revision to the final lines which Birdsall sees as a fundamental change in the journey's conclusion, from the deep pessimism of 1793 with its "dead load of mortal ills" (l. 811) and "various journey sad and slow" (l. 813) to the optimistic outlook of the 1836 edition, "be fear and joyful hope alike forgot" (l. 683) and "with a light heart our course we may renew" (l. 686).

Despite Wordsworth's lack of expertise, even ineptitude with his craft, a careful reading of Descriptive Sketches from the perspective of his later poetry shows how consonant the poem is with his later principles and how original is his use of the conventional loco-descriptive form. Thus Descriptive Sketches may be seen to be more than the pastiche or rifacimento its title suggests. Wordsworth rearranges events and experience to make the point that imaginative experience is of a different order: in fact these events and their imaginative associations become the props he needs to present an artistic unity not unlike drama in its selection of moments, but unlike the random order of real life or the set order of poetic convention.



## CHAPTER II NOTES

19 For the most recent and thorough study of the journey see Donald E. Hayden, Wordsworth's Walking Tour of 1790 (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Univ. of Tulsa, 1983), which contains detailed maps and corrections to earlier errors in our understanding of the facts of the journey. See also Mary Moorman, William Wordsworth: A Biography. The Early Years 1770-1803 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), pp. 128-49, hereafter cited as Moorman I; Mark Reed, Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years 1770-1799 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 97-116, hereafter cited as Chronology Early Years; Max Wildi, "Wordsworth and the Simplon Pass," Swiss Studies in English, 88 (1976), 176-208.

20 For more information on Wordsworth's years at Cambridge, see Ben Ross Scheider, Jr., Wordsworth's Cambridge Education (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957), especially Chaps. 1 and 2.

21 See C. N. Coe, Wordsworth and the Literature of Travel (New York: Octagon Books, 1953; rpt. 1979).

22 Many eighteenth century English writers such as Gray, Walpole, Addison and Smollett made the Grand Tour through France, the Alps and Italy. Guide books and other published travel accounts were enormously popular and many writers dwelt on the sublimity of the Alps and the primitive ideals which Switzerland and Swiss history represented (see below note 23). The cult of Alpine travel also stimulated English travellers to seek out the wild picturesque scenery of Britain, especially Scotland and Wales. It is interesting to note that between his Alpine tour of 1790 and the composition of Descriptive Sketches, mainly in 1792, Wordsworth climbed Mount Snowdon with Jones. It was while in Wales that he wrote the dedication to Descriptive Sketches in which he comments that he is apprehensive about writing of his mountain climb in Wales. See Chronology Early Years, p. 119. The standard history on the influence of travel, especially mountain scenery and the Alps, on eighteenth century writers and aestheticians is Marjorie Hope Nicolson, Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite. See also Clarence D. Thorpe, "Two Augustans Cross the Alps: Dennis and Addison on Mountain Scenery," Studies in Philology, 32 (1935), 463-482 and Basil Willey, "When Men and Mountains

Meet," English Studies, 43 (Oct. 1962), pp. 359-477. Peter Bicknell, Beauty, Horror and Immensity: Picturesque Landscape in Britain (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981) discusses the cult of mountain travel in Britain.

23 For an account of the influence of Switzerland on eighteenth century thought and taste see Oscar Kuhns, Switzerland Its Scenery, History and Literary Associations (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1910) and Hoxie Fairchild, The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism (New York: Russell & Russell, 1932; rpt. 1961). A standard history of primitivism is Lois Whitney, Primitivism and the Idea of Progress in English Popular Literature of the Eighteenth Century (New York: Octagon Books, 1934; rpt. 1965).

24 C. N. Coe in his "Did Wordsworth read Coxe's 'Travels in Switzerland' before making the Tour of 1790?," Notes & Queries, 195 (April 1950), pp. 144-45, makes a convincing argument that Wordsworth probably read Coxe's Sketches of the Natural, Civil, and Political State of Switzerland as translated, expanded and greatly revised by Ramond de Carbonnières in 1781. There is some confusion, however, which edition of Coxe Wordsworth read and when he read it. As D. E. Hayden (p.129) suggests, an interesting study remains to be done on the editions of Coxe, the additions of Ramond and their relationship to Descriptive Sketches. It has been suggested that Coxe/Ramond was only one of several possible sources of information and inspiration for the tour. Moorman (I, p. 128) notes that Wordsworth may have chosen to visit the Grande Chartreuse because of Thomas Gray's account of his visit contained in one of Wordsworth's favourite volumes, William Mason's edition of The Poems of Mr. Gray to Which are Prefixed Memoirs of his Life and Writings (1775). Another possible source was John Moore's A View of Society and Manners in France, Switzerland and Germany (1779), a book given as a gift to Hawkshead School Library according to T. W. Thompson, Wordsworth's Hawkshead (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), Appendix IV, p. 361. For a discussion of Wordsworth's tour in relation to Gray, Moore and Coxe/Ramond, see D. E. Hayden (Appendix I, pp. 103-110).

25 As conservatively estimated by D. E. Hayden (p. 129). There still remain questions about some locations and stopping places on the tour. Different sources differ on places (and place-names) of the itinerary. See D. E. Hayden, Appendix II, (pp. 111-113) for a discussion of the different overnight stopping places in 1790 and Appendix III (pp. 116-117) for a list of places and approximate distances travelled each day on the tour.

26 For more on Wordsworth's relationships with Michel Beaupuy and Annette Vallon, see Moorman I, chaps. 5, 6 and 7.

27 The publisher was the well-known radical Joseph Johnson, also a publisher of William Blake. For more information on Johnson see Leslie F. Chard, II, "Joseph Johnson: Father of the Book Trade," Bulletin of the New York Public Library, 79 (1975-1976), pp. 51-82.

28 Birdsall, Appendix II, pp. 299-300. The complete texts of this and other contemporary reviews cited are printed in this appendix. For a full discussion of contemporary reviews and Wordsworth's response to them see Sharp (1978).

29 Birdsall, Appendix II, p. 306.

30 William Wordsworth and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years 1787-1805, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, (2nd ed., rev. Chester L. Shaver; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 39. Hereafter cited as Letters Early Years.

31 Birdsall, Appendix II, p. 301. Steven Sharp in "Principle and Whimsey: Thomas Holcroft and Descriptive Sketches," Wordsworth Circle, 9 (Winter 1978), pp. 71-74, shows how Holcroft was often biased and contradictory in his reviews. It should be noted further that of all Wordsworth's contemporary reviews, Holcroft is the one most puzzled by what exactly Wordsworth is trying to do. In the poem Holcroft finds the topographical description of the opening exordium (ll. 1-12) illogical and the character of the hero contradictory and confusing. This is, of course, because Wordsworth was not describing an actual place nor presenting a stock character according to loco-descriptive conventions. See Chapter III of this thesis for a discussion of Wordsworth's use of landscape description and characterization in the poem.

32 A term applied to eighteenth-century poets such as Thomas Parnell, Edward Young, Robert Blair and Thomas Gray who wrote melancholy, reflective works, often set in graveyards, on themes of human mortality and transcendence. For a discussion of the influence of such poets on the early poetry of Wordsworth, see Sheats (pp. 14-41). Sheats shows that Wordsworth carried many lyric elements - subjectivism, pathetic fallacy, gothicism, imagination - over into his experiments in the loco-descriptive genre. For a general overview of the "Graveyard School" from pre-Romantic to Romantic poetry, see Eleanor M. Sickels, The Gloomy Egoist: Moods and Themes of Melancholy from Keats to Gray (New York: Octagon Books, 1932; rpt. 1969).

33 A term associated with ideas of vastness, natural magnificence, strong emotion and religious awe. First analysed in poetry and rhetoric in the Greek work On the Sublime (attributed to Longinus), eighteenth-century aestheticians and critics extended the concept to include concepts of original genius or a soaring above the rules of taste and style. For a standard history see Samuel H. Monk; The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1962). Edmund Burke's Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757) was the most widely read work on the sublime. Although he cannot prove it conclusively, W. J. B. Owen (1976, pp. 70-82) believed that Wordsworth read Burke either before taking the tour or writing Descriptive Sketches or both. Owen agrees with Martin Price who cites Wordsworth's footnote (l. 347) as evidence that Wordsworth from his earliest poetry is "a poet of the sublime, and from the very early years he is at work on the conversion of what might have been picturesque to sublime." In Martin Price, "The Picturesque Moment," eds. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom, From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick H. Pottle (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 289.

34 Topographical poetry, one of the most popular genres of the eighteenth century, included different sub-genres such as "loco-descriptive" or journey poems, "prospect" poems (i.e. written from a great height such as a mountain and describing a grand view), river poems and cave poems. Whatever the sub-genre, such poetry usually included exhaustive description, extended metaphor (such as the journey), highly figurative language, time projections (past and future), historical, social and political reflections and a controlling moral vision. From the time of Thompson's The Seasons (1726-1743, the most popular, printed and illustrated poem of the age), the correspondence between natural settings and moral concepts shifted to interest in the correspondence between nature and the poet's emotions as writers and aestheticians became preoccupied with questions of the value of man's inner response to Nature. There was widespread inquiry into the nature and function of the senses and the faculties, especially imagination, in relation to natural objects and the role of internal senses or psychological reactions in artistic endeavours. See Foster (p. 403) and Hope Nicolson (pp. 328-373).

35 Birdsall, Appendix II, p. 299.

36 As noted by Bowman G. Wiley, The Clear Synthesis: A Study of William Wordsworth's Stylistic Development as a Descriptive Poet from 1793 to 1808, Salzburg Studies in English Literature: Romantic Reassessment, No. 16 (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literature, Univ. Salzburg, 1974), p. 63. According to Wiley the second sketch, entitled "Pleasures of the Pedestrian Traveller" (ll. 13-44) informs the reader of the pleasures and importance of travel as a type of education of the imagination through Nature, an important theme of the sublime. Wordsworth's close observation and description of nature throughout the poem is evidence of his continuing interest in the picturesque.

37 Descriptive Sketches, fn. 1. 347.

38 See Nicolson (pp. 328-373) and Monk (*passim*) for a discussion of the effect of Alpine scenery on aesthetic concepts and poetic form. Essentially principles of mimetic theory such as the picturesque suggested that poetry, like painting, should imitate nature and human action; that is carefully composed to describe nature pictorially. With the sublime, vast, wild and irregular natural objects and the strong response they elicited were impossible to "picture" in mimetic terms. New methods of description were needed to describe not only the natural object but also the feelings of the poet in a less pictorial and more impressionistic way.

39 Letters Early Years, p. 34.

40 As noted by Owen (1976, p. 80), such organization was evidence that Wordsworth in 1790 was not so much interested in describing scenery as he was interested in the effect of that scenery on his own mind.

41 Birdsall, p. 32.

42 Many loco-descriptive poems would be read in conjunction with well-known travel accounts of the same scenes so that the reader could compare treatments between different authors and different modes such as poetry and prose, and literature and painting. See Jean Hagstrum, The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism from Dryden to Gray (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958).

43 As noted by Moorman (I, p. 37) Wordsworth and Jones could not have met soldiers at the Grande Chartreuse in 1790 although soldiers may have been in the neighbourhood for some official reason.

44 In 1790 Wordsworth, writing to Dorothy, stated "With regard to the inhabitants of this singular country [Switzerland], the impression which we have had often occasion to receive has been unfavourable" (Letters Early Years, p. 36). He goes on to say that he had more time or spoken the language, he might have found the Swiss as amiable as the French.

45 Namely the incident of the Alpine boy: "Save that, the stranger seen below, the boy / Shouts from the echoing hills with savage joy" (ll. 440-41). Wordsworth and Jones met the Alpine boy described in Descriptive Sketches as they passed Mont Blanc and the Col de Balme 12 August 1790. See D. E. Hayden, p. 36.

46 As listed in Wordsworth's "Argument" to Descriptive Sketches.

47 Much of the landscape in Descriptive Sketches is characterized by a veritable catalogue of personification: "Joy", "Passion", "Desire", "Hope", "Slavery", "Fear", "Death", "Devotion", "Danger", "Content", "Disdain", "Freedom", "Victory", "Oppression", "Terrors", "Despair", "Labour", "Penury", "Pain", "Grief", "Ruin", "Liberty", "Pride", "Justice", "Conquest", "Avarice", "Persecution", and so on, along with the various spirits, powers and genii which inhabit the landscape. While Wordsworth does not rival Erasmus Darwin's Botanic Garden (1791), such personification epitomized the trend against which Wordsworth later rebelled. See C. F. Chapin, Personification in Eighteenth Century English Poetry (New York: King's Crown Press, 1954), pp. 81-97 for a discussion of late eighteenth century attitudes to personification.

48 D. E. Hayden (Appendix II, p. 109).

49 These macabre, fantastic and supernatural tales, usually set in ruins, graveyards, castles and picturesque landscapes reached a height of popularity in the 1790s. Mrs. Radcliffe, author of five gothic novels (including three published by 1791) was the gothic's leading exponent. Burke's emphasis on terror as an element of the sublime greatly influenced gothic novelists. There were also gothic influences in Scottish poetry read by Wordsworth such as MacPherson's Ossian poems (1762). For the influence of Scottish poetry on Wordsworth see E. H. King, "Beattie's The Minstrel and the Scottish Connection," Wordsworth Circle, 3 (Winter 1982), pp. 20-26. For the influence of gothic elements on late eighteenth century literature in general,

see G. R. Thompson, The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism (Pullman, Washington: Washington State University Press, 1974) and D. P. Varma, The Gothic Flame, being a history of the Gothic novel in England: its origins, efflorescence, disintegration, and residuary influence (London: A. Barker, 1957).

50 Poetical Works I; p. 325 note.

51 According to the apparatus criticus this sketch (ll. 13-49) echoes Gray's Ode on the Pleasures Arising from Vicissitude (ll. 45-46) and Sonnet on the Death of Richard West (l. 2), Addison's Cato (l. iv, 71) as well as Milton's Comus (897-899). The similarity between Wordsworth's lines and passages from other eighteenth century poets throughout Descriptive Sketches shows how Wordsworth borrowed phrases, rhythms, images and ideas from contemporary poetry but, mainly because of his difficulties with language and syntax in the poem, did not succeed in unifying the rhythms and phrases in Descriptive Sketches as he would in later poems such as Tintern Abbey. See John O. Hayden, "The Road to Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth Circle, 12 (Autumn 1981), pp. 211-216, for a discussion of Wordsworth's dynamic relationship to his eighteenth century sources. By creating a cento of Tintern Abbey's literary sources (including Thomson, Cowper, Akenside, Beattie, Thomas Warton and Charlotte Smith), Hayden demonstrates that Wordsworth's originality lay in his ability to create from this pastiche of eighteenth-century poetic sounds, rhythms, images and specific ideas a new and unified poem.

52 William Cowper, Verse and Letters, selected by Brian Spiller (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968).

53 See Jonathan Wordsworth, William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 310-312 for a comparison of Beattie's description and Wordsworth's descriptions in Descriptive Sketches and The Prelude xiii, pp. 10-90. Jonathan Wordsworth maintains that to "compose his picturesque scene, Wordsworth, one feels, hardly needed to go near a mountain, let alone have a specific occasion in mind. And yet there is one element in his description that does suggest personal experience - the "gulf of gloomy blue" that is to become the "deep and gloomy breathing space" (p. 312).

54 See discussion Birdsall, pp. 12-23.

55 Fairchild, p. 219.

56 D. E. Hayden (Appendix I, p. 103).

57 Letters Early Years, p. 33.

58 He later says that he "first beheld / Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved / To have a soulless image on the eye / Which had usurped upon a living thought / That never more could be" (The Prelude VI, 454-56). This seems to express his disappointment of things seen compared with things imagined (invented or read in books), a theme he also explored in Yarrow Unvisited, Yarrow Visited, and the sonnet At Rome. The possible relationship between Moore's account and Descriptive Sketches is discussed in D. E. Hayden (Appendix I, p. 104).

59 The hermit was a conventional figure in eighteenth-century nature poems such as Goldsmith's The Hermit, Parnell's The Hermit and Percy's The Hermit of Warkwith. Both the figures of the hermit and the gipsy in Descriptive Sketches exemplify the sentimental taste for virtuous characters portrayed sympathetically and with copious feeling. For the eighteenth-century background on such characters and their place in Wordsworth's later poetry, see Mary Jacobus, Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads" (1798) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) and Kenneth Parker, "Wordsworth's Solitaries," English Studies in Africa 15 (Mar. 1972), pp. 15-32.

60 Letters Early Years, p. 32.

61 Such a sublime stance celebrating transcendence is typical of eighteenth-century descriptive nature poetry of Collins, Young, Thompson and Cowper. See James B. Twitchell, Romantic Horizons: Aspects of the Sublime in English Poetry and Painting, 1770-1850 (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1983), pp. 16-37. As John Dixon Hunt notes, during most of the eighteenth century, the ascent of prospects in topographical poetry would be described as a vista or word-picture. Later loco-descriptive poetry of the sublime variety such as Wordsworth's sketch (ll. 366-67) describe an altered state of consciousness or new focus on the contemplation of strong emotions and awareness of greatness, space and power. See John Dixon Hunt, The Figure in the Landscape: Poetry, Painting and Gardening During the Eighteenth Century (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 145-98.

62 Descriptive Sketches, fn. 1. 368.

63 Ibid., fn. 1. 437.



64 Ibid., fn. 1. 475. For an extensive treatment of the myth of the golden age see Warren Stevenson, The Myth of the Golden Age in English Romantic Poetry, Salzburg Studies in English Literature: Romantic Reassessment, No. 109 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1981). In Wordsworth's later poetry he often echoes Scottish poets such as James Beattie in his use of folk tales, characters, legends and fairy stories. See King (1982).

65 In fact his inclusion of the French and Swiss materials in Descriptive Sketches have led many biographers and critics to conclude that the poem is primarily political, its descriptive passages added only to frame his main political themes. See, for example, Leslie F. Chard, Dissenting Republican: Wordsworth's Early Life and Thought in Their Political Context (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1972); Carl Woodring, Politics in English Romantic Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970); E. San Juan, Jr., "Wordsworth's Political Commitment," Dalhousie Review, 65 (Autumn 1965), pp. 299-306 and F. S. Fink, "Wordsworth and the Republican Tradition," JEGP, 47 (1948), pp. 107-126. James F. Turner sees Wordsworth's intense political and social commitment in Descriptive Sketches as an outgrowth of the pastoral tradition of descriptive nature poetry. In his "Various Journey, Safe and Slow: Wordsworth's Descriptive Sketches (1791-2) and the Lure of Pastoral," Durham University Journal, 69 (Dec. 1976), pp. 38-51.

-66 Letters Early Years, p. 36.

67 Under Michel Beaupuy's guidance and instruction in France, Wordsworth became an ardent supporter of the French Revolution (see Moorman I, chaps. 5, 6 and 7). His hope and belief in France was challenged by the September Massacres, the execution of King Louis on January 21, 1793 and France's declaration of war on England on February 1, 1793. In June Wordsworth defended the achievements of France and his own republican beliefs in his Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff. In 1794 he continues to call himself a "democrat", declaring to his friend William Matthews "of that class I shall continue forever" (Letters Early Years, p. 119). By 1795 or early 1796, however, he had lost his hope in the revolution and turned to Dorothy, Coleridge and nature for strength and knowledge. See Chronology Early Years, pp. 174-175. Wordsworth in The Prelude (X, l. 305) writes that at this time he "yielded up moral questions, in despair."

68 John Beer, "Nature and Liberty: The Linking of Unstable Concepts," Wordsworth Circle, 14 (Autumn 1983), p. 204.

69 The swain's parable is delivered as a kind of dramatic monologue. As noted by R. Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition (New York: Random House, 1957), pp. 40-42, this is among Wordsworth's earliest use of dramatic narrative, a form he would later employ in Lyrical Ballads and The Prelude. In Descriptive Sketches the swain's parable is a method of describing the narrator's complex, psychological response to the harsh contrarieties of Swiss life.

70 Beer (pp. 204-8) believes it was necessary for Wordsworth in 1793 to believe that all men had his sense of mystical experience in nature, and that concepts like independence and freedom were natural to mankind. When he became disillusioned with the Revolution, he came to believe that true liberty resided in the individual human mind and in the lives of those who, like his native English shepherds, had an independent spirit which added a sublime dimension to their living.

71 As J. F. Turner (p. 50) points out, in Wordsworth's poem it is France, not Britain, who is the victorious champion of liberty and order.

72 Birdsall, Appendix II, p. 299.

73 Ibid.

74 M. H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 285.

75 See, for example, J. R. Watson (1970) who has concluded that the picturesque was a major influence on the poem with its emphasis on keen observation of nature, use of particular epitaphs, borrowings, colouring, tone and other picturesque devices. Watson concludes, however, that the poem displays "What appears to be a divided mind" (p. 74). Watson states that while Wordsworth's main subject was Alpine landscape, he included the effect of scenery on individual and national character to reflect his revolutionary beliefs but he "does not succeed in welding the two together" (p. 75). Irving Buchen, "The Poet as Poetry: An Aesthetic Reading of The Prelude," Wordsworth Circle, 1 (Autumn 1970), 133-140, maintains that the "literary idolatry" evident in Wordsworth's early locodescriptive verse was associated with the poet's period of picturesque habits of vision when the eye was dominant. James Heffernan, "Wordsworth on the Picturesque," English Studies 49 (1968), 489-498, also agrees with Buchen that after Wordsworth's early experiments in picturesque description such as Descriptive Sketches, he rejected the artifice of literary idolatry and "chose to contemplate

nature by the law of his own emotions" (p. 498). As with the perceived revolt against ocular vision, the French Revolution, so eloquently championed in Description Sketches has been seen also as a breach in the poet's development. See, for example, Chard, Woodring, Fink (1948) and Todd (1957; 1963).

<sup>76</sup> There has been increased emphasis on Wordsworth's early poems as part of his process of organic growth as a poet and his evolutionary rather than revolutionary poetic beliefs and practices in relation to the age. Critical attention has been fixed on the early poems as an accurate record of Wordsworth's growth as a poet, his literary debts as well as his accomplishments, in forging a poetic language adequate to his perception. Descriptive Sketches, as the first poetic record of momentous events in the history of Wordsworth's own mind such as the Alpine Tour and the French Revolution, has been increasingly regarded as an accurate record of that development. The poem is regarded as related in thought if not in style to Book VI of The Prelude as suggested by Geoffrey Hartman, "Wordsworth's Descriptive Sketches and the Growth of a Poet's Mind," PMLA, 76 (Dec. 1961), pp. 519-527. Roger Sharrock in "The Figure in a Landscape: Wordsworth's Early Poetry," Proceedings of the British Academy, 58 (1972), pp. 313-333, finds the poem chaotic and disorganized but full of "certain germinal phrases and ... simple and strong thoughts that would find their true direction in due time" (p. 330). Both Hartman (1964) and Sheats (1973) have concluded that in Descriptive Sketches, nature itself is not Wordsworth's subject but rather the human heart. Sheats finds further that all the fundamental beliefs and stances of Wordsworth's maturity are present in the conventional assumptions of his early poetry. B. G. Wiley agrees that many Wordsworthian themes are present in Descriptive Sketches but he characterizes the poem as disorganized and lacking the fully developed form and poetics of Wordsworth's later work. E. H. King (1985) sees Descriptive Sketches as typical of the habits of Wordsworth's apprenticeship, namely his reading of and borrowing from minor poets such as Beattie which enabled him gradually to "find his own distinctive voice and to shape his characteristic style (p. 135). One of his most important debts to Beattie in Descriptive Sketches and his later poems is The Minstrel as a model of poetic life. In Descriptive Sketches Wordsworth uses the metaphor of the mountain climb as the climactic moment of imaginative perception and suggests the central paradox of the poetic life, namely Nature's ability to shape moral character and man's inhumanity and insensitivity.

<sup>77</sup> Sheats, p. xii.

<sup>78</sup> Birdsall, pp. 12-13.

79 See Birdsall, Appendix I, pp. 289-297 for a discussion of Coleridge's appropriation of The Old Man of the Alps. Although it has not been proved conclusively Wordsworth's revisions to Descriptive Sketches suggest he contemplated adding a section to be titled "Old man and his Reflexions" or "old man's story" and the themes and tone of The Old Man of the Alps are strong evidence that the poem, published by Coleridge in The Morning Post March 8, 1798, is actually Wordsworth's. The poem is reprinted in Birdsall, Appendix I, pp. 294-297.

80 The conclusion to Book VI of The Prelude states that his aesthetic reactions to the Alps had been anticipated in his earlier experiences in Britain: his impressions of the Alps were "but a stream / That flowed into a kindred Stream; a gale / That helped me forwards" (The Prelude VI, ll. 673-75). He claims that he did not approach the scenery of the tour in search of the picturesque "as if the mind / Itself were nothing; a mean pensioner / On outward forms" (The Prelude VI, ll. 666-68). In the Alps he received impressions of the Sublime, which affected him powerfully and directly, and the Beautiful, which affected him less powerfully and indirectly:

Finally, whate'er  
I saw, or heard, or felt, was but a stream  
That flowed into a kindred stream, a gale  
That helped me forwards, did administer  
To grandeur and to tenderness - to the one  
Directly, but to tender thoughts by means  
Less often instantaneous in effect -

(The Prelude VI, ll. 672-78)

81 The first edition in 1793 was followed by the 1815 edition in which he made further stylistic changes. He then republished the poem with further minor changes in editions of his collected works in 1820, 1827, 1832, 1836, 1845 and 1849. The edition of 1836 is the only edition substantially different from the 1793 edition.

82 In fact, Wordsworth's repeated publication and classification of the poem further demonstrates that he saw it as an integral part of an evolving whole. His revisions for the 1815 edition involve mainly rearrangement of words and lines to eliminate awkward metaphors, obscure words and inappropriate personification. The 1815 edition marked the culmination of years of arranging and classifying individual poems, an arrangement which Wordsworth hoped would allow for

both an aesthetic reading of his poetry as a whole, without abrupt transitions of style and subject, and a historically accurate picture of the organic growth of his poetry, as the poems follow, for the most part, a chronological order. Descriptive Sketches was classed as one of his "Juvenile Pieces", which Wordsworth said "seem to have a title to be placed here as they were the productions of youth, and represent implicitly some of the features of a youthful mind ...." William Wordsworth, The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, III, eds. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, pp. 29, 1. 112 note). Hereafter cited as Prose Works. The poem was further classified as an "Idyllium" or poem "descriptive chiefly of the processes and appearances of external nature" (Prose Works III, p. 28). Wordsworth's classification of the poem as one descriptive of the relationship of nature and the youthful mind and his inclusion of it in his 1815 edition is significant to a poet highly conscious of aspects and influences of his poetical history. In 1820 he took a 1793 copy of the poem with him on his continental tour in which he retraced his 1790 journey only this time with Dorothy and Mary. By bringing his earliest edition of the poem with him on his 1820 tour, he emphasized the continuing importance of his first poetic record of this event. See Birdsall, p. 17, for a discussion of the poem and the 1820 tour.

<sup>83</sup> Birdsall, p. 19.

## CHAPTER III

THE JOURNEY OF DESCRIPTIVE SKETCHES:

## A READING OF THE POEM

... by contemplating these Forms  
In the relations which they bear to man,  
He shall discern, how, through the various means  
Which silently they yield, are multiplied  
The spiritual presences of absent things.  
Trust me, that for the instructed, time will come  
When they shall meet no object but may teach  
Some acceptable lesson to their minds  
Of human suffering, or of human joy.

(The Excursion IV, ll. 1230-38)

From the expansive exordium which opens the poem,<sup>84</sup> a "God's-eye view" which is both timeless and omnipresent, we are led immediately to an ambiguous (even the syntax is unclear) and unknown solitary figure. It is one "Who plods o'er hills and vales his road forlorn" (l. 15), who at first appears to be the stock image of the eighteenth-century solitary or rustic,<sup>85</sup> but Wordsworth soon amends this impression - he is after all one upon whom Nature has bestowed her "healing pow'r":

No sad vacuities his heart annoy,  
Blows not a Zephyr but it whispers joy;  
For him lost flowers their idle sweets exhale;  
He tastes the meanest note that swells the gale;  
For him sod-seats the cottage door adorn,  
And peeps the far-off spire, his evening bourn!  
Dear is the forest frowning o'er his head,  
And dear the green-sward to his velvet tread;  
Moves there a cloud o'er mid-day's flaming eye?  
Upward he looks - and calls it luxury;  
Kind Nature's charities his steps attend,  
In every babbling brook he finds a friend,  
While chast'ning thoughts of sweetest use, bestowed  
By Wisdom, moralize his pensive road.

(ll. 17-30)

His is clearly a special relationship with Nature and the natural world; he is a lover of nature and nature in return attends him with her "charities". It is the same reciprocal relationship that Wordsworth was to describe later in "Tintern Abbey" (and to build upon throughout his canon), where he calls himself a "worshipper of Nature" (l. 152), a

relationship in which "Nature never did betray/ The heart that loved her" (ll. 122-23). The traveller's commitment to the natural setting seems absolute. Wordsworth offers an image for each of the senses - the sounds of the wind and the babbling brook, the scent of the flowers, the feel of the sward and the sun, and the whole visual panorama of town and forest. The effect is to create a sensory milieu where the lines between subject and object begin to blur even as the sensory modalities themselves have merged ("He tastes the meanest note that swells the gale").

Nature and the figure have achieved a communion and harmony, however, which extend beyond the aesthetic to the moral. Like the poet of The Prelude (VIII), love of Nature has led him to love of mankind,<sup>86</sup> and the charity (greatest of the moral virtues, bestowed by Nature is returned to the "passing poor". His integration with the human environment (ll. 37-41) is as complete as with the natural, and while remaining a solitary lover of nature, he may nevertheless freely cross the isthmus from nature to human life, just as the hermit (ll. 168-75) may continue to be a hermit even "with his family around".

This figure is, indeed, the "favoured being" (The Prelude I, 364) who is specially fostered and tutored by nature, and this description is an inchoate - though essentially thorough - sketch of the figure who was to become



the subject of "Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree",  
 "Tintern Abbey", Book I ("The Wanderer") of The Excursion and  
The Prelude, the individual who may become the poet. Nor is  
 this only a description of the potential poet, the raw and  
 untempered youth described in "Tintern Abbey" to whom

the tall rock,  
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood  
 Their colours and their forms were then ...  
 An appetite; a feeling and a love  
 That had no need of a remoter charm,  
 By thought supplied, nor any interest  
 Unborrowed from the eye.

(ll. 77-83)

The figure in Descriptive Sketches is one whose "pensive  
 road" is moralized by wisdom (l. 30), whose interest extends  
 beyond the senses to mankind: he responds not only to the  
 music of the winds but also to "the still, sad music of  
 humanity" ("Tintern Abbey" l. 91). His imagination and senses  
 are tuned, like "Memnon's lyre" (and Coleridge's aeolian  
 harp) to receive impulses from nature,<sup>87</sup> and respond to them  
 with the appropriate, correspondent articulation in his  
 poetry. He is, then, the youthful - yet complete - poet  
 fully armed to begin his poetic vocation, conceived in terms  
 which are consonant with Wordsworth's later works. The image  
 of the figure as the poet - one who is both at one with, yet  
 set apart from, the rest of mankind - is consolidated in the  
 closing lines of this introduction:

The maidens eye him with inquiring glance,  
 Much wondering what sad stroke of crazing Care  
 Or desperate Love could lead a wanderer there.

(ll. 42-44)

The lunatic or lover has long been identified with the poet,<sup>88</sup> because poets, like madmen and the love-crazed, were considered special children of the gods (like Wordsworth's own "Idiot Boy") invested with magical, prophetic and imaginative powers. The poeticus furioso in lines 42-44, though set apart by his pensive aspect and special sensitivity, is yet an empathetic soul who may easily join the cottage meal, and does not disrupt the village dance, or the round of life it represents.

By line 44 the initial image of the stock figure has been amended and clarified: it is actually the image of the poet set in the landscape of his own poem, a landscape which is not merely an equivalent or representation of the landscape of the actual journey. With the image of the figure complete he identifies him, and line 45 begins with "me" and the first person replaces the third-person pronouns of the preceding lines. Not only has Wordsworth now succeeded in identifying the traveller, but the description has simultaneously and retroactively identified the poet.

This accomplished, he rounds out the image of the speaker by particularizing him, giving some details of mood and setting (ll. 45-52). These lines connect with the brief

description of the solitary figure at the opening to show again one who "plods o'er hills and vales his roads forlorn", but the solitary is no longer an abstract image in a generalized landscape, but the poet in France, at the base of the Alps. But it is interesting that this first specific description gives almost no physical detail - the only visual adjective used in this passage is "white". Instead, Wordsworth uses affective adjectives: "truant" pathways, "secret" villages, "lonely" farms. The emotive aspects and qualities of the landscape are recorded rather than the physical, the geography, through pathetic fallacy, assuming the emotional state of the traveller.

The description of the Grande Chartreuse which follows (53-79) relies on a similar kind of representation, one which is more meditative than descriptive. The scene also blends different times and events in Wordsworth's past and present experience. His recollection of his visit there in 1790<sup>89</sup> provides the particulars of geography: the monastery and its well-known crosses and spires amidst the forest of St. Bruno, the valley of Vallombre, and the twin streams called Life and Death. But the main concern of this passage is not to describe the impressive scene, but to consider the occupation of the monastery by revolutionary soldiers in 1792, an event which occurred two years after the visit it purports to describe.

The occupation he characterizes as an intrusion, an affront to the natural order, harmony and peace of the setting, a setting in which the monastery itself appears as a natural element, one which does not disturb its serenity. The conjunctive "or" (l. 59) equates the "torrent's sound" and the sound of the prayer-bell, which is submerged in turn by the "dull cicada", and the pines, spires, rocks and lawns are listed (ll. 62-63) as equal elements within the scene. The Chartreuse itself is in mourning, "Weeping beneath his chill of mountain gloom" (l. 54) and the startled cloister and the shuddering fane share a common horror and a common fate.

But while Wordsworth may share an element of this horror and sigh with Chartreuse at its doom, the direct and specific allusion (l. 72) to Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" provides the context for the account.<sup>90</sup> The "parting Genius" in Milton (l. 186) marks the departure of the pagan gods who are displaced by the new Christian order. While Milton, too, may be moved by the loss of the Oracles and the whole panoply of rich and imaginative classical figures, he cannot dispute the felicity of the new order; as a poet, he may regret Apollo's death, but as a Christian he cannot. So Wordsworth may be disturbed by the violation of a natural and poetic setting, yet as an avid supporter of the Revolution<sup>91</sup> he cannot conclude that its fall is wholly unfortunate. After all, the peace of the woods is "death-like" (l. 57) and becomes animated only with the arrival of the revolutionaries.

At it is, this description of the Grande Chartreuse suggests that Wordsworth, the poet, is more concerned with the effect or essence of experience, than with its substance. The Grande Chartreuse, although physically unchanged by historical events, is depicted in Descriptive Sketches as an image of a lost world of power and beauty, whose life has been altered by temporal events, but whose eternal, spiritual life is shown in the poem. It is the idea of the Chartreuse, as it has inscribed itself in the mind of the poet, and as it has been inscribed by the poet in the poem that shows the true nature of its power - and the true power of Nature to impress mighty scenes in the mind and memory of man.

The ensuing view of Como relies on more picturesque, and certainly gentler, descriptions, and stands in stark contrast to the preceding presentation. Lines 80-91 bring the traveller quickly through a vague but quiet landscape, past unnamed towns to "bosom'd" Como. The passage itself is a kind of circumlocution as the narrator, following a roundabout pathway is led deeper and deeper into the groves of sense until he is completely enclosed by the "purple roof of vines". The poem suddenly reaches a brief point of stasis in this bower and from there the traveller moves to and stops at a series of vantage points whence he observes the diurnal round of human and physical nature (ll. 92-161). Although "led" by nature and the physical world he still maintains a

distance between subject and object, between the "delicious Scene" and the "eye that greets" it (l. 120), which permits him to build a detailed and specific picture of the lake and valley. The perfunctoriness which has characterized most of the physical description in the poem up to this point is replaced by a sudden piling-on of detail, of image, metaphor and simile. The chiaroscuro interplay of shadows and sunlight at evening (ll. 102-113) is handled with a generosity of words, as are the other sensory descriptions which follow while the daily cycle is completed.

But the scene, rendered in language which derives largely from the literary conventions of descriptive poetry,<sup>92</sup> ends in the kind of image that is, while not unique in descriptive verse, quite typical of the later Wordsworth, in both language and sentiment:

Yet, arts are thine that rock th' unsleeping heart,  
And smiles to Solitude and Want impart.  
I lov'd, mid thy most desert woods astray,  
With pensive step to measure my slow way,  
By lonely, silent cottage doors to roam,  
The far-off peasant's day-deserted home;  
Once did I pierce to where a cabin stood,  
The redbreast peace had bury'd it in wood,  
There, by the door a hoary-headed sire  
Touch'd with his wither'd hand an aged lyre;  
Beneath an old-grey oak as violets lie,  
Stretch'd at his feet with stedfast, upward eye,  
His children's children join'd the holy sound.  
A hermit - with his family around.

(ll. 162-75)

This passage follows an acknowledgement of the potential slavery of senses which are utterly given over to voluptuousness, a Circean captivity of the imagination and emotions.<sup>93</sup> But the "unsleeping heart", that which is not caught by mere "voluptuous dreams", is affected in a different way. Not only may it be filled with immediate "joy" derived from extremes of natural beauty but also from the witness of such human scenes as those quoted above. And something remains in such a heart which can lend "smiles to Solitude and Want". Wordsworth recognizes here what was to become a cornerstone of his concept of the imagination in his later poetry, that in such encounters "there is life and food/ For future years" ("Tintern Abbey" ll. 64-65), a residual power which can sustain the soul even when the props of the affections are removed.<sup>94</sup>

The "spots of time" passage in The Prelude (Book XI, l. 258f) describes not only this faculty of the memory and imagination, but expands upon the right relationship of the mind and the senses, using the master - slave/servant metaphor suggested in Descriptive Sketches, ll. 158-61. Certain recollections of scenes or events provide comfort in times of Solitude and Want:

A vivifying virtue, whence, depressed  
By false opinion and contentious thought,  
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,  
In trivial occupations, and the round  
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds  
Are nourished and invisibly repaired;

A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,  
 That penetrates, enables us to mount,  
 When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.  
 This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks  
 Among those passages of life in which  
 We have had deepest feeling that the mind  
 Is lord and master, and that outward sense  
 Is but obedient servant of her will.

(Prelude XI, ll. 260-73).

The "pensive" mood in the passage from Descriptive Sketches leads as it so often does in other of Wordsworth's poems, to a human encounter, to an apprehension and appreciation of human values here epitomized in the hermit. He is one who has achieved through experience - he is old - a right appreciation of nature. He is in the midst of nature and part of it<sup>95</sup>, yet is not its passive thrall, and he adds his own music ("a holy sound"), his own harmonious articulation, to the scene. He has, as a hermit, achieved the requisite solitary and personal relationship with nature, and has returned (as the poet must in Wordsworth) to mankind, here the little human family. Thus he may be "a hermit - with his family around" without logical contradiction; the strengths and values of his experiences, gained in solitude are carried with him, back into society, and never desert him. He need not remain the "viewless lingerer", hidden and alone, to maintain those aspects of nature which are valuable to him.



The hermit (and the poet) finds a strength and solace in experience that carries him through "Solitude and Want" as it does the "old man" in Wordsworth's sonnet, whose "waking empire" is the same as that of the "unsleeping heart", and he, too, has achieved "sovereignty" over the senses:

Though narrow be that old Man's cares, and near,  
The poor old man is greater than he seems:  
For he hath waking empire; wide as dreams;  
An ample sovereignty of eye and ear.  
Rich are his walks with supernatural cheer;  
The region of his inner spirit teems  
With vital sounds and monitory gleams

(Miscellaneous Sonnet XXIX, ll. 1-7).

Descriptive Sketches is as concerned with people as it is with scenery; like the hermit vignette, the landscape leads almost invariably to the rustic<sup>96</sup> inhabitants of that landscape - the Grison gipsy, the chamois-chaser, the expatriot Switzer. And these are not used merely as figures on the canvas,<sup>97</sup> but as the foci and incarnations of the feelings aroused by the natural setting: the terror and the beauty must have their effect on and be understood ultimately in human terms. In the preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth asserts that one of the characteristics which distinguishes the collection from "the popular Poetry of the day" is that "the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling".<sup>98</sup> Nature is terrible or beautiful only in so far as a human intellect experiences

it: if a scene is moving it must move someone. The poet, Wordsworth was to write, "considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and reacting on each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure"<sup>99</sup> and it is important to Wordsworth's poetics in Descriptive Sketches as it is later in his poetic career. Indeed, the stories of the Grison gipsy (ll. 188-242) and the chamois-chaser (ll. 366-413) would fit comfortably amongst the Lyrical Ballads<sup>100</sup> and the gipsy could stand as a prototype for almost any of the tragic female figures, in "The Female Vagrant", "The Thorn", "The Mad Mother" and "The Complaint of a forsaken Indian Woman".

Both the Como hermit and the Grison gipsy are elemental figures who personify the contrasting but complementary emotions of pleasure and pain, extremes of the "infinite complexity" cited above. The oxymoron of the hermit "with his family around" illustrates the imaginative empathy which is the basis for much of Wordsworth's poetry; instead of a purely pictorial image he delivers a human correlative of the emotional evocation of the scene. As the traveller has pierced the thick forest and found the hermit, the poet has penetrated the superficial sensations and suggested what lies at the heart of his experience of the beautiful, that love of nature leads to love of man. The sublime landscape of the gipsy, in contrast with the beautiful setting of Lake Como, is terrible and awesome. While the traveller ascends

the Alps his narrative descends to the dark plain of mortal suffering, where the mind is condemned "without reprieve, to go/ O'er life's long deserts with it's [sic] charge of woe" (ll. 192-93). But in both landscapes, different as they are, the journey is inward, from the natural world to the human world and from sensory experience toward an understanding of how the human mind and imagination responds to the senses, and how certain emotions may be connected to natural objects. "The Thorn", for example, begins with the simple physical description of a natural object, but what vivifies it - and what makes it worthy to be the subject of poetry - is its consequent workings upon the imagination and emotions; it becomes a means of focusing our attention and feelings, and leads into a human story.

An integrated vision of the natural and human world is presented in the description of the landscape of the Sckellenen-Thal Valley and Lake Uri (ll. 263-331). In these passages the traveller moves through scenes of "beauty" which merge with descriptions of the "sublime" and through alternations of fear and pleasure which show the beautiful to be fearful and the fearful beautiful by turns. The first view of the valley, leading down to Uri (ll. 263-82), where "Calm huts, and lawns between, and sylvan slopes" evoke a "tranquil joy", is suddenly suspended and superseded by "fear" and the "savage scene" around the lake (ll. 283-316). Wordsworth breaks the spell of the latter scene by demanding

that his soul awake "From such romantic dreams". Like the "voluptuous dreams" at Como which may enslave the "failing soul" (ll. 157-58), the pastoral beauty of the valley threatens to become hypnotic and all-consuming. And, as in the Como episode, the imagination thus roused from sensuality is soon brought back to humanity,<sup>101</sup> to the "grandeur in the beatings of the heart", as he would write in The Prelude (I, l. 441).

The scene introduced at line 283 is that of a varied landscape, at once beautiful and dreadful, domestic and savage:

And still, below, where mid the savage scene  
Peeps out a little speck of smiling green,  
There with his infants man undaunted creeps  
And hangs his small wood-hut upon the steeps.  
A garden-plot the desert air perfumes,  
Mid the dark pines a little orchard blooms,  
A zig-zag path from the domestic skiff  
Threading the painful cragg surmounts the cliff.

(ll. 291-298)

The juxtaposition of the garden plot and the savage scene, the little orchard and the dark pines, is a type of the poem itself: like the "spot of holy ground" described in the poem's opening sketch, the writer envisions a natural world transformed by greater, and perhaps more permanent, human values and ideas than those found in the changeable show of the "uncultivated" world. Within the natural landscape nothing seems quite permanent: storms are constantly

brewing, avalanches come crashing down, and the seasonal and diurnal cycles themselves are never at rest. Nature can never produce the kind of scene encountered at the beginning of the poem yet the poet may "cultivate" it in poetry, creating a fertile and essentially human oasis within the wilderness of an often threatening environment. Human values, like those of "Content" and "Independence", may consequently exist "Ev'n here", amidst the "hopeless waste" (ll. 323-24), because they are carried there by human minds and imaginations, by "the individual Mind that keeps her own/ Inviolatè retirement, subject there/ To conscience  
... 102

Ascending the Alps, the traveller passes through increasingly harsh and wild landscapes but carries with him a heart receptive to both fear and beauty. And, even when portions of the landscape are devoid of human life, like "the hermit doors, that never know/ The face of traveller passing to and fro" (ll. 299-300), the poet continually sets in the landscape representations of other, subtler emotions too: human love, hope and pity, as in the brief vignette of the "love-sick maiden" (ll. 309-16). The elements of permanence, consistency and unity are human elements, the stories of the people - even when they are themselves destroyed - and the feelings of the traveller.

On his journey through beautiful and sublime landscapes with their attendant feelings of joy and fear, the persona undergoes a kind of education in nature. Beginning with the strong impression of the Grande Chartreuse, he travels through the beautiful Lake Como region and the fearful landscape of the Grison gipsy with a developing sense of the intense interpenetration of nature and the mind of man, reflected in his increased use of human episodes and stories until, in the second half of the poem, the account of the people comes to predominate. Close to the midway point of the poem the narrator reaches a geographical summit in his journey: "But now with other soul I stand alone/ Sublime upon this far-surveying cone" (ll. 366-67). We might naturally expect an extended "prospect" to ensue, given the physical vantage point (it is "far-surveying") and the descriptive poetic traditions. What follows, however, is almost anticlimactic: his attention, and consequently ours, is arrested by and directed to an object "as small as a bird", a chamois-chaser. The description of the geography which follows is then delivered as if through the experience of that figure. We see his world, where his peregrinations lead us; we are removed, in effect, to see his habitat not from the far-surveying cone but from the point of one seen - and imagined - from there. What we know, then, is filtered both by the preceptions of the chamois-chaser and the

traveller. The poet, again through an act of imaginative empathy, chooses to present this central experience through the eyes and feelings of another, to intensify those feelings by intensifying the fiction of the poem. The interplay of vast, terrible and remote forms of nature and the pathetic history of the chamois-chaser have the effect of contracting the "wastes" and "vacant worlds" (ll. 371-72) to a single human story.

Both literally and figuratively atop the material world, he recognizes that he has become, or taken on, "another soul". In The Prelude, Book VI, where he again recounts his journey through the Alps, he tells of the recognition of the power of the soul<sup>103</sup> moved by a profound experience in much more articulate and developed, yet consistent, terms:

Imagination! ...

... 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 recognize thy glory'...

(ll. 525-32)

Through imagination he is capable of perceiving a more complex interrelationship between the creative mind and the external world, and he is conscious of the power of that relationship in the reconstruction in poetry of man's experience of nature.

In his descent from the mountains the narrator is increasingly preoccupied with the problems of mankind, especially with man's relationships with other men, and these concerns are personal, social and political. He begins with the chamois-chaser, and considers in succession the "pastoral Swiss" from the Golden Age to the present, the expatriot Swiss, the Abbey of Einsiedlen and concludes with an evaluation of the contemporary political state of France. His account of the pastoral Swiss (ll. 442-621), like that of the chamois-chaser, again presents the landscape in human terms, as it acts upon people and as they react to it. The description of the scenes through the perceptions and lives of others ensures that we see more than the senses disclose, and with the passage on the expatriot Switzer (ll. 622-31) we are shown the profound effect of the recollection of those scenes.

The account of the "prelapsarian" Golden Age of the Swiss and their subsequent "chang'd estate" points to a significant relationship among nature, the sensitive man and memory. The idyllic landscape, literally a land of milk and honey, is treated in twelve lines (ll. 474-85) which contain very few strong or memorable images. Instead, Wordsworth moves quickly to the consolations offered by nature to those who still possess an "uncorrupted heart", those who, despite man's fall through "human vices", have avoided those sins



(ll. 486-91). The "joys" which make up for the lost estate are simultaneously described and recreated in the passage which follows (ll. 492-519), a description far more powerful and evocative than that of the unfallen landscape. Further, it is a setting which, we are told (ll. 511-12), delights the eye, but not with a "vulgar joy" (like the "joys that might disgrace the captive's heart" ll. 159), and leads eventually to "Hope". And this joy has more than a transient existence because "past enjoyment", through memory, brings present joy, as, by extension, present joy will be relived and sustain the individual in the future (ll. 514-19). The power of memory is described in similar terms in "Tintern Abbey":

.... here I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasures, but with pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment there is life and food  
For future years. And so I dare hope ....

(ll. 62-65)

In the "fallen" state, then, pleasure seems far more dynamic yet no less attainable than in the "unfallen", no less attainable because the "uncorrupted heart", through responsiveness to nature and memory, carries his pleasures in imagination. The static and uninspiring landscape of the golden age - it is somewhat "bland", merely a "happy" land<sup>104</sup> - stands in rather sharp contrast to the varied, moving and profound landscape described in lines 493-511:

it gives "joy" and delight. And the elements of this scene, which are stressed in the description are not aspects of the Edenic vision, are not those things in nature which are reminiscent of the "times of yore", at all. Instead the passage describes "snowy peaks", "a mighty waste", "awful silence", "a gulf of gloomy blue", "chaos still and hoar", "a hollow roar profound", and "lutes of saddest swell": it is these things which delight the eye with "no vulgar joy". Indeed, in the golden age when no one needed to dare "the treacherous cliffs" (l. 483) there would have been no opportunity to view a prospect like that seen while "suspended from the cliff on high". The loss of Eden makes way for the attainment of vision, as the loss of security allows the birth of "hope" (l. 518).

Beginning at line 520 Wordsworth describes the primitive man and his relationship with nature. He starts as "Nature's child" (l. 521), at one with the natural world; in this state he is unrestrained (l. 523) and lives only by reason's law.<sup>105</sup> Some of these elements, "traces of primaeval Man" (l. 529), still appear in those who remain in the "vestal" bosom of nature<sup>106</sup>: dignity, freedom, "lion-grace" and "the eye sublime". But while these "traces" are brought forward as the primitive age is left behind, something new is discovered too, given by nature to the "uncorrupted heart" after the fall, something which connects him with other men and with God:

Oft as those sainted Rocks before him spread,  
 An unknown power connects him with the dead.  
 For images of other worlds are there,  
 Awful the light, and holy is the air.  
 Uncertain thro' his fierce uncultur'd soul  
 Like lighted tempests troubled transports roll;  
 To viewless realms his Spirit towers amain,  
 Beyond his senses and their little reign.  
 And oft, when pass'd that solemn vision by,  
 He holds with God himself communion high ...

(11. 542-51)<sup>107</sup>

In The Prelude, Book XII, just before the account of  
 his ascent of Snowden with Jones in 1791, which echoes many  
 passages in Descriptive Sketches particularly the passage  
 cited above, Wordsworth writes of his own progression  
 "beyond his senses" and his arrival at a point of  
 interchange between the mind and the natural world:

I seemed about this period to have sight  
 Of a new world - a world, too, that was fit  
 To be transmitted, and made visible  
 To other eyes; as having for its base  
 That whence our dignity originates,  
 That which both gives it being and maintains  
 A balance, an ennobling interchange  
 Of action from within and from without;  
 The excellence, pure spirit, and best power  
 Both of the object seen, and eye that sees.

(XII, 11. 370-79)

The progress in both accounts is from the "eye sublime" to a  
 new kind of vision of a world which is not merely  
 reconstructed from sensual data, but shaped by the  
 imagination as well. It is this kind of world - one which  
 is half created and half perceived - that Wordsworth in The

Prelude considers most fit "to be transmitted" in poetry.

And Descriptive Sketches itself is this, not a map of his journey in the summer of 1790, but an account of "another world, a new creation which owes its existence both to "the object seen, and the eye that sees".

The description of an immediate, unmediated communion<sup>108</sup> with God (where even "savage Nature joins the rite", l. 554) which follows in Descriptive Sketches (ll. 550-561) leads again to the small, human circle (ll. 568-89) and then to the "general sorrows of the human race" (ll. 590-643), and then to the lifting of those sorrows by hope through religious faith at the shrine of Einsiedlen (ll. 644-679). Although as a Church of England man he cannot share that particular source of hope, his heart nevertheless "half wishes your delusions were its own". Wordsworth instead turns to the awful and sublime description of Chamounix and Mount Blanc (ll. 680-701).

The sequence, then, is this: the description of the Swiss in the Golden Age, where they are identified as "Nature's", is followed by the relation of the powerful emotional experience of nature and an apprehension of "other worlds", which leads on to a "high" communion and the sense of "great joy by horror tamed", and in turn to contemplation of the human condition. This general pattern, repeated to a varying extent throughout the poem, corresponds roughly but

significantly with the stages of imaginative development- implied in "Tintern Abbey" and The Prelude, succinctly summarized by Earl Wasserman:

... a period of thoughtless animal pleasures without even awareness of the pleasure, one of consciousness of emotional power, and at last a perception of the "still, sad music of humanity" which brings a sense of "something far more deeply interfused" and consequently lightens "the burden of the mystery".<sup>109</sup>

The ending of Descriptive Sketches is very different from the opening of the poem. From a vast Edenic vision we have moved through profound experiences of nature to the interaction of man and nature, and - in the consideration of the French Revolution (ll. 740-809) - to man's interaction with man. It concludes with a brief, intimate and almost anticlimactic passage:

To night, my friend, within this humble cot  
Be the dead load of mortal ills forgot,  
Renewing, when the rosy summits glow  
At morn our various journey sad and slow.

(ll. 810-14)

The companion of this journey is now, for the first time, introduced and the solitary traveller of lines 13-44 becomes a partner in a small society of two. Here, the narrator is finally a man himself amongst men, and, through the simple yet effective diction of these closing lines, a man speaking - softly - to other men. And it is significant that the

tour has not ended, that the "various journey" has still some distance to take the traveller as Wordsworth has ahead of him his own career in poetry.

The clear echo of the end of Milton's Paradise Lost is crucial to the meaning of the whole of Wordsworth's poem:

Some natural tears they dropp'd, but wip'd them soon;  
The World was all before them, where to choose  
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:  
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,  
Through Eden took thir solitary way.

(XII, ll. 645-49)

The traveller has not given up the journey to idle in some "spot of holy ground"; his place is in the world of men, with all its "load of mortal ills", which is after all where the road through nature has led him. By the end of the poem he is, like Coleridge's wedding guest, "a sadder and a wiser man" 110.

Wordsworth, then, has answered the question implied at the poem's opening in a way not at all in keeping with the loco-descriptive tradition or with a reading of it as an invocation of an idyllic golden age, the last gleams of which have been discovered and recorded by the versifier in his travels. "Were there, below, a spot of holy ground, / By Pain and her sad family unfound," then the poet would have no vocation; the terrible, struggling and ultimately humanizing aspects of nature and human nature are as

necessary to experience, and hence to the imagination of the poet, as the beautiful.<sup>111</sup> The poet must be, after all,

"fostered alike by beauty and by fear" (The Prelude I, 306)

and must come to know the "still, sad music of humanity."

His loss of the Eden alluded to in the opening, then, is a fortunate loss, and a loss that, at any fate, may be made

good by the poet himself in the world that he delivers in

his poem. Indeed, the opening of Descriptive Sketches may

look for its cosmology far more to the works of Milton and

the fully-articulated accounts of the later Wordsworth, than

to the geography and aesthetics of the late eighteenth century.

## CHAPTER III NOTES

84 See discussion of lines 1-12, Chapter I.

85 On the stock solitary in the eighteenth century see Eleanor Sichels, The Gloomy Egoist: Moods and Themes of Melancholy from Gray to Keats (New York: Octagon, 1932; rpt 1969).

86 In "Tintern Abbey" also he acknowledges

In nature and the language of the senses  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being.

(ll. 108-11)

87 In "The Tables Turned" he wrote further on the subject of the "impulses" received from nature and their link with man's moral nature:

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.

(ll. 21-24)

88 So Shakespeare wrote in A Midsummer Night's Dream (V.i.7), "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet, / Are of imagination all compact". And Wordsworth in The Prelude:

The Poet, gentle creature as he is,  
Hath, like the Lover, his unruly times;  
His fits when he is neither sick nor well,  
Though no distress be near him but his own  
Unmanageable thoughts.

(ll. 145-49)

89 And, as in so many of the physical descriptions throughout the poem, upon the literary sources from which he draws.

90 The description of the Chartreuse echoes much of the stanza in which this phrase occurs:

The lonely mountain o'er,  
And the resounding shore,  
A voice of weeping heard, and loud lament;  
From Haunted spring and dale  
Edg'd with poplar pale,



The parting Genius is with sighing sent;  
With flow'r, inwov'n tresses torn  
The Nymphs in twilight shade of tangled  
thickets mourn.

(ll. 181-89)

91 The 1836 version of the poem, by which time he had become disillusioned with the Revolution, is significantly more insistent on the evils of the intrusion.

92/ yet the lines are not all "unWordsworthian"; indeed the poet of the 1805 Prelude was to transplant line 130 directly into his description of the Alps..

93 It is comparable in its effect to the "tyranny", described in The Prelude,

In which the eye was master of the heart,  
When that which is in every stage of life  
The most despotic of our senses gained  
Such strength in me as often held my mind  
In absolute dominion.

(XI, ll. 172-76)

94 See The Prelude, I, ll. 291-307.

95 He is deep within the wood and at line 172 he is likened to "an old-grey oak" himself.

96 In the preface to Lyrical Ballads [Lyrical Ballads, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963, rpt. 1968), p. 245; all other references to Lyrical Ballads and its preface are to this edition, which includes the poems of the 1798 edition, those added in 1800, and the 1800 preface with the 1802 variants] Wordsworth says he prefers to use rustic characters in his poetry because

in that situation the essential passions of the heart find better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, ... in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity ... because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; ... because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.

97 See, for instance, such landscape paintings as Richard Wilson's (1713-1782) View of Snowden.

98 Lyrical Ballads, p. 248.

99 Ibid., p. 258.

100 It may be significant that Wordsworth chose to reissue Descriptive Sketches for the first time in 1798, the year Lyrical Ballads was published.

101 In the sketches of lines 299-316. This pattern of scene leading to or evoking a human incident or story is further repeated after the Alpine storm (ll. 332-47) which leads into the catalogue of Great Men (ll. 348-65), the view from the summit (ll. 366-69) leads to the chamois-chaser episode, and the "awful wilds" (ll. 414-441) precedes the extended passage on the "pastoral Swiss" (ll. 442-679).

102 As he was soon to declare, in The Recluse I, ll. 773-74, to be a principal subject of his poetry.

103 "Soul" and "mind" are often interchangeable terms in Wordsworth's vocabulary; indeed, from the 1820 edition of Descriptive Sketches on he altered the word to "mind" in this line. He seems to reduce deliberately the emotional force of this moment, as he does in many places in the later editions of this poem and The Prelude. The following line he changed at the same time from "Sublime upon this far-surveying cone" to "Upon the summit of this naked cone".

104 It is reminiscent of the "death-like peace" (l. 57) which prevailed the Chartreuse before the Revolution.

105 And, as Pope maintains throughout the Essay On Criticism, which lines 524-25 echo, reason and nature are the same.

106 Presumably the "uncorrupted hearts" of line 491.

107 This passage contains many of the essential elements of his descriptions in later poems of imaginative epiphany, which is central and critical to his idea of memory and imagination:

... that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world  
Is lightened; - that serene and blessed mood,  
In which the affections gently lead us on,  
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul:

("Tintern Abbey", ll. 38-47)

... in such strength  
Of usurpation, in such visitings  
Of awful promise, when the light of sense  
Goes out in flashes that have shown to us  
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,  
There harbours, whether we be young or old.

(The Prelude, VI, ll. 598-603)

A meditation rose in me that night  
Upon the lonely mountain when the scene  
Had passed away, and it appeared to me  
The perfect image of a mighty mind,  
Of one that feeds upon infinity,  
That is exalted by an underpresence,  
The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim  
Or vast in its own being, above all  
One function of such a mind had Nature there  
Exhibited by putting forth, and that  
With circumstance most awful and sublime,  
That domination which she oftentimes  
Exerts upon the outward face of things,  
So moulds them, and endues, abstracts, combines,  
Or by abrupt and unhabitual influence  
Doth make one object so impress itself  
Upon all others, and prevade them so,  
That even the grossest minds must see and hear  
And cannot choose but feel.

(The Prelude, XIII, ll. 66-84)

108 Communion or eucharistic images are common throughout Wordsworth's later poetry. See, for instance, Prelude II, ll. 300, 446; V, ll. 13-17, 619-29; XIII, l. 105; The Excursion I, ll. 133-142, 206-218.

109 The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1953), p. 188.

110 The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere (1798), l. 657.

111 In "The Old Cumberland Beggar" Wordsworth makes the case for the necessity of the unfortunate, as it is through such that we are led to those acts which are by their very nature redemptive:

Where'er the aged Beggar takes his rounds,  
The mild necessity of use compells  
To acts of love; and habit does the work  
Of reason; yet prepares that after-joy  
Which reason cherishes. And thus the soul,  
By that sweet taste of pleasure unpursued,  
Doth find herself insensibly disposed  
To virtue and true goodness.

(ll. 98-105)

Blake expressed the idea (though not the sentiment) well when he wrote ("The Human Image"), "Pity could be no more/ If we did not make somebody poor."

## CHAPTER IV

## VISION AND REVISION:

DESCRIPTIVE SKETCHES AND THE CANON

Not Chaos, not  
The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,  
Nor aught of blinder vacancy scooped out  
By help of dreams - can breed such fear and awe  
As fall upon us when we look  
Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man -  
My haunt, and the main region of my song.

---

The Recluse, ll. 788-794

As a reading of Descriptive Sketches suggests, the main themes and concerns of the poem are those which Wordsworth was to pursue throughout his poetic career: themes like the imaginative or integrated presentation of landscape, the concern with the effects of experience on his imagination and in "the Mind of Man", the meaning of imaginative experience in our lives generally, the moralizing and educative powers of nature (especially the necessity of both beauty and terror, fear and joy), and the need for the poet to recreate nature in his own image. In spite of what might be expected from a loco-descriptive poem, the focus in Descriptive Sketches is rarely or for long on the landscape itself but rather on the figure in the landscape, and the progression, constantly repeated throughout the poem, which suggests that love of nature must lead to love of man.

The landscape of the poem is not merely an equivalent or representation of the landscape of an actual experience because Wordsworth is not primarily concerned with landscape or a general experience of landscapes, such as that described by other loco-descriptive poets.<sup>112</sup> As I have shown in Chapter I, the opening sketch of Descriptive Sketches is a self-conscious appeal for, and demonstration of, the special powers of the poet: The poet's journey or search for a golden age, "a spot of holy ground", is not futile because

imagination may create from the experience of life another world of human affections and hope. He is concerned with the right experience of nature: the relationship of the mind and the senses to the external world which leads to an apprehension and appreciation of human values, epitomized in the human figures with which so many of his sketches - and the poem - culminate. Thus the final image of Descriptive Sketches (1793) - "within this humble cot" (l. 810) which encloses the speaker and the friend - symbolizes the warmth and consolation of human love, a communion not with nature but with man. The journey of the poem is from natural objects to man, from the "sky-roof'd temple" (l. 554) of nature to the domestic cottage of man, "the central point of all his joys" (l. 571).

Implicit throughout the various stages of the journey of Descriptive Sketches, and repeated in miniature cycles throughout the poem, is the dominant pattern of this right experience of nature. The landscape is first surveyed thoughtlessly, "animal pleasures without even awareness of the pleasure", to repeat Wasserman, as in the first impression of Lake Como. The first sensual impression or response to the landscape is interpreted or recollected in terms of its emotional power, as in the second sketch of Lake Como. Every natural scene is then described with the impress of man, scenes either populated with human figures, or evoked through story, history or myth, recollected or imagined.

Even the view from atop the Alps, the most sweeping and magnificent of the natural scenes, is contracted to and usurped by the small, bird-like image of the Chamois-chaser.<sup>113</sup> Wordsworth's human interpretation of the natural scene shows his concern with the effect or essence of his emotional experience of the higher Alps rather than with the substantial qualities of mountain scenery itself. Wordsworth selects the Chamois-chaser's story from Coxe/Ramond because it accurately illustrates and powerfully communicates his own feelings in relation to the Alps.<sup>114</sup> Later he would find his inspiration nearer home, choosing incidents and events from his own experience or associated with the rural life and traditions of the Lake District.

Scenes like the hermit episode show us that Wordsworth's interests were more meditative and philosophical than superficial and descriptive.<sup>115</sup> Stripped of its human characters and qualities, this scene is a forgettable landscape of trees, hills and clumps of flowers. With its focus on the animated picture of the hermit and his family, the scene becomes imbued with an enduring sense of human values, the "something far more deeply interfused". Without the human connection the experience of nature is pointless and confused, a mere mass of sensory data for which there is no discernable meaning. Indeed, all the landscapes from Chartreuse to Lake Uri resemble one another in



significant ways although they represent different regions seen at different times. The features of the landscape of the Chartreuse - its mountains, cliffs, waters and mists - are repeated in each succeeding landscape, whether terrible or beautiful, until the many landscapes blend into one impression. What is distinctive as the journey progresses are the stories of the inhabitants, or rather imagined inhabitants, of the poem. And these episodes, like the Lyrical Ballads, are often distinguished because Wordsworth tends to abandon much of the traditional idiom and vocabulary he uses when describing landscape and scenery.

There is in such imaginative encounters as that with the Hermit, life and thought for future years, a residual power which can sustain the soul even when the props of affection are removed.<sup>116</sup> The descent from the Alps is a testing of hope, of the profound effect of recollection and of the powerful, complex, interrelationship between the creative mind and the external world. The poet's education in nature has not only made him apprehend and appreciate enduring human values in everything he sees, but this "power" also feeds his creative ability to reconstruct in poetry the moral essence of his experiences in the face of human tyranny, poverty, hatred, oppression and despair.

Wordsworth's next published work was Lyrical Ballads (1798), a linguistic as well as a social and aesthetic

manifesto.<sup>117</sup> He insists in his critical gloss to Descriptive Sketches that his poetry will reflect "nature and my feelings"; in the 1800 preface to Lyrical Ballads he advocates a new type of descriptive language which incorporates the "passions of men" with the "beautiful and permanent forms of nature".<sup>118</sup> This poetic language he hoped would be more like prose in its plainness and emphasis, would reflect the simple, permanent values of man and nature and comprise the real language of real men. He intended that his this language replace "certain known habits of association"<sup>119</sup> and "certain classes of ideas and expressions"<sup>120</sup> which he saw as the finite reservoir or "common inheritance"<sup>121</sup> from which poets, especially bad poets, drew their images rather than from the living world of nature and man. In Lyrical Ballads he proposed a new contract between poet and reader: language was to remain, of course, the medium of exchange, but the type of poetic language he advocated was to be descriptive of common, elemental experience of man and nature, or what he termed the "essential passions of the heart"<sup>122</sup> produced by the "primary laws of our own nature."<sup>123</sup> As he says in the preface, he intended to look to men, ordinary men, as the suitable subject of poetry written in the "real language of men", not according to prevailing poetic conventions, genre or style.<sup>124</sup> He does not want his poetry to refer to the rules, style and tastes of other poetry; rather, he wants his poems

to refer to human situations and human passions described in the language which men commonly use. "I have wished", Wordsworth writes, "to keep the Reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by doing so I shall interest him".<sup>125</sup>

Lyrical Ballads is the stuff of simple, commonplace people and happenings - births, deaths, rural life and manners, families, idiots, vagrants, animals - presented in a more colloquial and less deliberately poetical style than in Descriptive Sketches. From the general round of ordinary life and the mass of details which make up ordinary lives, Wordsworth selected those events which show how the simple and commonplace may be seen to be beautiful and terrible.<sup>126</sup> In Lyrical Ballads the narratives speak for themselves; the realistic tone, simple and direct diction, uncommon imagery and familiar chronologies of people's lives combine with the joyful and fearful aspects of everyday experience. Because, as Wordsworth says, the products or artifacts of his feelings give rise to those stories, not the actual events themselves, he is not bound to describe any particular occurrence, or to connect the separate stories to each other.

Lyrical Ballads is very like the stories and episodes of Descriptive Sketches, but more fully developed and without the linking device of the journey or the formal diction and style of loco-descriptive verse. In The Prelude, Wordsworth

abandons the literal journey altogether as a central, unifying theme<sup>127</sup> and focuses exclusively on the epic, inward journey which subordinates all sensory, historical and chronological fact to the complex story of his own imaginative development.<sup>128</sup> The story of the birth and early growth of his imagination (Books I-VI), its impairment (Books VII-XI) and its eventual restoration (Books XII-XIV) is a metaphorical journey in which he traces his actual experiences and what he realizes to have been the significance or cumulative meaning of those experiences. In Descriptive Sketches, he continually shows imaginative response to nature in human terms through the eyes of his fictional characters. In The Prelude he concentrates on the "I" passing through the landscape, not the landscape through which the "eye" is passing. From the beginning of The Prelude (which traces his developing imagination), the presences of nature are always linked to the human environment:

.... we have traced the stream  
 From darkness, and the very place of birth  
 In its blind cavern, whence it is faintly heard  
 The sound of waters; followed it to light  
 And open day; accompanied its course  
 Among the ways of Nature; afterwards  
 Lost sight of it, bewildered and engulfed:  
 Then given it greeting as it rose once more  
 With strength; reflecting in its solemn breast  
 The works of man and face of human life;  
 And lastly, from its progress have we drawn  
 The feeling of life endless; the great thought  
 By which we live, Infinity and God.

(The Prelude XIII, ll. 172-84)

Books I to VI describe his early experiences in nature which lead to a deepening sense of his love of man. Books VII to XIII describe his full understanding of the imaginative powers which he has developed. His imagination, impaired through his commitment to social action and revolution, is restored by the productive self-knowledge which he realizes has been nourished by his consciousness of the ideal relationship of the creative mind to the external world:

Let this alone  
Be mentioned as a parting word, that not  
In hollow exultation, dealing out  
Hyperboles of praise comparative;  
Not rich one moment to be poor for ever;  
Not prostrate overborne, as if the mind  
Herself were nothing, a mean pensioner  
On outward forms - did we in presence stand  
Of that magnificent region.

(The Prelude VI, ll. 661-69)

His experience of nature has not produced the highest development of his imagination, but it is the base of elementary and enduring human values which enable him to recover from his shattering despair at the grim and bloody collapse of social and political order in France.

The Prelude itself culminates in a small journey which is an emblem of the whole poem, the ascent of Mount Snowdon. Two views are presented: the passage describing the climb (XIII, ll. 10-65) itself which fixes the physical particulars of the actual journey through the landscape - the men, the

mountains, the moon and the sea of mist, and the second passage which describes Wordsworth's emotional response to the landscape (XIII, ll. 66-119) and his realization that the poet's imaginative power working "upon the face of outward things" (XIII, l. 78) may move even the "grossest minds" (XIII, l. 83) so that they "cannot choose but feel" (XIII, l. 84).

The poet shares with other men the ability to feel or receive the extraordinary power of this experience. Like the "perfect image of the mighty mind" (XIII, l. 69) the poet may also recreate this powerful experience:

They that from their native selves can send abroad  
Like transformation; for they themselves create  
A like existence; and, whenever it is  
Created for them, catch it by an instinct;

(The Prelude XIII, ll. 93-6)

The creative mind is not passive: it can "build up greatest things/ From least suggestions" (XIII, ll. 98-99) in art, and is

By sensible impressions not enthralled,  
But quickened, roused, and made thereby more fit  
To hold communion with the invisible world.

(The Prelude XII, ll. 103-05)

In the Prelude description of Mount Snowdon, Wordsworth echoes phrases and lines from Descriptive Sketches, but the likeness is not so much in these scattered passages as in the experience of reading both poems as he saw them, as parts of -

experience of reading both poems as he saw them, as parts of a continuous whole. To read Descriptive Sketches in isolation from Wordsworth's canon is to miss its significance as a necessary apprenticeship in loco-descriptive verse which taught the young poet many of the lessons he needed to write his later - and much better - poetry. Many of Wordsworth's central ideas about nature, man in nature and the interplay of memory and imagination - ideas which are themselves a synthesis of much eighteenth-century thought - are present in Descriptive Sketches, but lack the talent of expression of the more mature craftsman.

His subsequent revisions to the poem also suggest that what changes between the writing of Descriptive Sketches and his later poetry is the language rather than the ideas, and that Lyrical Ballads was to articulate and put into practice that change. The 1800 preface to Lyrical Ballads declares a linguistic revolution which, like Wordsworth's note to line 347 of Descriptive Sketches, says what a poet should do and what a poem should be. While Wordsworth greatly revised the language of Descriptive Sketches, he kept its structure nearly intact, clearly seeing no discrepancy between its purpose or aesthetic principles and those of his later poetry.

## CHAPTER IV NOTES

112 B.G. Wiley believes that the strength of the poem depends on its similarity to other loco-descriptive poems, that "any educated English traveller to Switzerland in the 1790s would arrive independently at the same political and social attitudes" (p. 24). He believes this to be the major difference between the account of the tour in Descriptive Sketches and the account in Book VI of The Prelude which he says could only have happened "to William Wordsworth, and that no other individual could have the same experiences or make the same discoveries" (p. 24). On the contrary, Wordsworth's point in both his earlier and later accounts is that his Alpine tour made him consciously aware of the right relationship of the mind to the external world, and the need for the poet to recreate landscape in human terms so that even the most "impassive imaginations" might be moved as he has been moved. The poet seeks to create a commonality of experience by describing landscape in human terms.

113 Wordsworth's experience on Mount Snowdon is similar. Instead of describing the view from the mountain, he says he saw "the image of a mighty mind / Of one that feeds upon infinity" (The Prelude XIII, ll. 69-70). In the Alps, the sight of the "black drizzling craggs" (Descriptive Sketches, l. 249) of the Reuss River culminate in the image of the peasant who kneels before the crosses that are "water'd with the human tear" (l. 258). In the same landscape described in Book VI of The Prelude, the Ravine of Gondo is seen to be "the features / Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree" (ll. 568-69).

114 Stephen Parrish says of Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain Poems, written between Descriptive Sketches and the publication of Lyrical Ballads (1798), that these "reveal the progress of a great mind from indebtedness of various kinds to the more original exercise of its power". See The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press), p. 16. E.H. King, tracing the influence of Beattie's The Minstrel on Wordsworth's formative years, concludes that Wordsworth was stimulated in his juvenile poetry by many minor writers as well as major influences claimed from poets such as Milton and Shakespeare. The habits of his apprenticeship - use of poetic models and themes, literary borrowings, verbal echoes and so on - were a necessary part of learning to write in his own way, using his own subjects and experiences. See E.H. King, "Wordsworth and Beattie's Minstrel: The Progress of Poetic Autobiography", The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature, 3 (1985), 131-162.



115 As he says of the myth of the golden age of the Alps, he is interested in local interpretation of man's relationship to his environment because it is traditional passion or wisdom "interesting not less to the philosopher than to the poet" (Descriptive Sketches, note to l. 475 ).

116 The Prelude II, 294-95.

117 He described Lyrical Ballads in the preface as an "experiment" (p. 242) in poetry because his poems were not based on prevailing social, political or aesthetic ideals. His interest is in "what manner language and the human mind act and re-act on each other" (p. 243). In the preface he did not undertake a systematic defence of his poems, nor a comprehensive review of public taste which would require, he says, a "retracing [of] the revolutions, not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself" (p. 242). Instead he chose to write about rural life and manners because he believed that these represent a simplified and exemplary relationship of man and nature, like the Swiss in Descriptive Sketches. Apart from the geographic difference (. Britain rather than Switzerland), the major difference is his insistence on a "plainer and more emphatic language" (p. 245).

118 Lyrical Ballads p. 245.

119 Ibid., p. 243.

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid., p. 251.

122 Ibid., p. 245.

123 Ibid., p. 244-45.

124 Ibid., p. 261. His method, he says, is to

look steadily at my subject, consequently there is, I hope in these Poems little falsehood of description, and that my ideas are expressed in language fitted to their respective importance. Something I must have gained from this practice as it is ... good sense; but it has necessarily cut me off from a large portion of phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of Poets.

(p. 251)

Ibid., pp. 250-51. He states further:

The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly and not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement.

(pp. 244-45)

126 He writes in the preface that "the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants" (p. 248). Here he is moving away from the Burkean insistence on terror through presentation of the natural sublime.

127 In Book I he says a "pleasant loitering journey, through two days/ Continued, brought me to my hermitage" (ll. 114-15). Although writers have guessed at the actual journey referred to here (see Chronology Early Years, pp. 170-71, n12; Moorman I, pp. 276-77), the consensus is that the poem does not begin by describing any particular journey. For a discussion of Book I, see Richard J. Onorato, "The Prelude: Metaphors of Beginning and Where They Lead". "The Prelude": 1799, 1805, 1850, edit. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), pp. 613-24. There are many journeys in The Prelude within the metaphorical journey of life. For a discussion of the metaphor of the journey with particular reference to The Prelude see Georg Roppen and Richard Sommer, Strangers and Pilgrims: An Essay on the Metaphor of the Journey, Norwegian Studies in English, No. II (Norwegian Univ. Press, 1964).

128 A number of writers have noted the epic structure of The Prelude. See, for example, Karl Kroeber, "Wordsworth: The Personal Epic", Romantic Narrative Art (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1960), pp. 78-114; R. A. Foakes, "The Unfinished Journey: Wordsworth's The Prelude", Romantic Assertion (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 51-79; Brian Wilkie, Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1965). Descriptive Sketches itself has certain epic characteristics, beginning "in medias res" with a kind of invocation to "Nature's GOD", the device of the great journey, epic catalogues of scenes and places, and, perhaps most significantly, the echo at the end of the poem of Milton's concluding lines in Paradise Lost.

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