

The Sublime

In a letter written in October 1817 Keats, famously describes Wordsworth's 'poetical Character' as an instance of the 'egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone'.¹ Drawing on the classical understanding of sublime with its connotations of grandeur, nobility and elevation (from Longinus' first century rhetorical treatise *Peri Hypsous* or, *On the Sublime*), but also with a sense of the word's more recent association with 'ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible'² Wordsworth emerges in Keats's account as a singular and formidable presence, the 'strong precursor' against whom the younger poet struggles to distinguish himself.³ Established as a key term in aesthetic debate in the early- to mid- eighteenth- century, by the time Keats came to write his assessment of Wordsworth 'sublime' was routinely used to describe not only literary and artistic accomplishment but a range of extreme and often unsettling experiences: from observations of the grand and terrifying in nature (storms, volcanoes and alpine landscapes being the most popular examples) to descriptions of the power and majesty of the divine.⁴ As popularised in the early- to mid- eighteenth century by influential literary and cultural critics such as John Dennis, Joseph Addison, Lord Shaftesbury and Edmund Burke, and also in ambitious cosmographical poems by James Thomson and Mark Akenside, by the end of the 1790s the discourse of the sublime was in danger of becoming a hackneyed means to inflated ends.⁵ Where once Milton, for most eighteenth-century writers the poet of the sublime, had sought to 'raise a secret ferment in the mind of the reader, and to work, with violence, upon his passions' now poets,⁶ seeking to indulge bourgeois fantasies of ownership and command, provided readers with unintentionally bathetic descriptions of rugged and notable views.⁷

At first glance, Wordsworth's earliest published poetry appears to depart little from this prescription. Composed in London in 1792 following the poet's return from a walking tour of France and Switzerland, *Descriptive Sketches* presents a somewhat clichéd account of soul-stirring Alpine scenery. Echoing Burke's assessment of the limited abilities of the visual arts to capture the sublime, Wordsworth, argues in a footnote to the poem, argues that verbal description is best suited to conveying the feelings aroused by what Burke calls the 'immense forms' of nature (*DS*, p. 72).⁸ Located Standing '[s]ublime upon' a 'far-surveying cone' (l. 367), the observer describes 'images which disdain the pencil' and which owe their 'grandeur' chiefly to the 'unity of impression' that words alone can lend to dizzying scenes (*DS*, p. 72). In his descriptions of 'cloud-piercing' trees (l. 63) and 'trackless bounds' (l. 75), however, Wordsworth does little more than echo the conventions of mid- to late-eighteenth-century loco-descriptive poetry. Moreover, as Cian Duffy and Peter Howlett note, the poet's descriptions of mountainous vistas owes much to Louis Ramond Carbonnières's 'Observations on the Glaciers and Glaciers', included in English translation as a supplement to William Coxe's *Travels in Switzerland* (1789), but most likely known to Wordsworth in the original French.⁹ Where, however, the poem departs from the conventions of landscape poetry and popular

Comment [A1]: Is that right? 'topographical'?

Comment [ps142]: This is my own coinage: 'topographical' doesn't quite capture the philosophical ambitions of Akenside's poem. I'm happy to be over-ruled on this!

Comment [ps143]: 'Switzerland' in 1789 publication

travel writing is in its closing account of a landscape churned up by apocalyptic presumptions of death and renewal. Here, an earlier description of ‘mountains, glowing hot, like coals of fire’ (l. 299), is elevated to a scene of millennial transformation as, with elements of Virgil’s fourth eclogue, of [The Gospel of St Peter](#) (2 Peter 3: 10-13) and of the Book of Revelation, the enflamed landscape gives birth to ‘another earth’ (l. 783).¹⁰ Significantly, however, Wordsworth’s borrowings from pagan and Judeo-Christian imaginings of the apocalypse are informed by more immediate, political concerns: chiefly by the thwarted promise of the French Revolution, which the poet had recently witnessed. Attempting to salvage some principle of restoration from the collapse of the Revolution into despotism and terror, Wordsworth appeals to ‘~~to~~ Freedom’s waves to ride / Sublime o’er Conquest, Avarice, and Pride’ (ll. 792-3). By combining, in Burke’s terms, the ‘compound abstract’ ‘Freedom’ with the simple ‘aggregate word’ ‘waves’, the poem connects an abstract idea with a particular image.¹¹ The phrase is in turn modified by the adverbial ‘Sublime’, signifying in this case ‘elevation’ over martial, economic and dynastic ‘Oppression’ (l. 795). Considered in its entirety, the line may thus be read as a demonstration of what Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla call the ‘transformational’ discourse of the sublime.¹² With echoes of the alchemical connotations of sublimation as a means of purifying through cleansing fire, words are transformed into transcendental vectors, signifying release from the base, material accretions of the *ancien regime*. But while in these lines the poet clearly celebrates the ability of language to perform an act of liberation from worldly orthodoxy elsewhere, as we shall see, the sense of freedom comes freighted with **concerns**.

In Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’, the pantheistic ‘sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused’ that ‘impels / All thinking things, all objects of thought, / And rolls through all things’ (*LB* ll. 96-103) is associated still with ‘the joy / Of elevated thoughts’ (ll. 94-5) as, buoyed along by ‘that blessed’ and ‘sublime’ (l. 38) insight ‘into the life of things’ (l. 49), the speaker is granted relief from the delusional realm of corporeal vision. As most critics of the poem have acknowledged, ‘Tintern Abbey’ points to an abiding concern with the relations between ‘thoughts’ and ‘things’ and with the genesis of self-consciousness. In Wordsworth’s account of the Pedlar, later incorporated into *The Ruined Cottage* (1798), for example, the recognition of ‘an ebbing and a flowing mind’ (*RC*, p. 396; l. 155) is derived from encounters with ‘the presence and the power’ of natural ‘greatness’ (p. 394; ll. 131-2). The ‘Power’ of nature, as *The Prelude* [goes on to later](#) concludes, appears as the ‘Counterpart’ or ‘Brother of the glorious faculty / Which higher minds bear with them as their own’ (*1805 Prelude* ll.88-9). Writing of the relations between mind and nature in ‘Tintern Abbey’ Albert O. Wlecke argues that ‘the poet’s “sense sublime” of a universally in-dwelling “something” is [...] a function of consciousness becoming reflexively aware of its own interfusing energies’.¹³ That Wordsworth’s thoughts are ‘elevated’ indicates the transcendental aspirations of the imaginative consciousness; that these thoughts are, at the same time, ‘deeply interfused’ with the forms of nature is an indicator of the extent to which the poet wishes to transform the dread power of imagination into a measurable ‘thing’. In a manner analogous to the influential account of the sublime

Comment [A4]: ‘Concerns’ sounds slightly euphemistic to me – ‘anxiety’?

Comment [ps145]: Agreed

given by the German idealist philosopher Immanuel Kant, an immeasurable and overpowering force is checked by the imposition of boundaries, forms and limits so that it may be understood as an object of reason.¹⁴ Yet Wordsworth's poem appears to remain in thrall to the possibility of an encounter with forces that would exceed rational comprehension. With echoes of the Latin roots of the sublime (*sub* means 'up to'; *limen* refers to the threshold or lintel of a building) the 'sense sublime' in 'Tintern Abbey' derives its power not merely from the exhilarating notion of consciousness reaching the limits of what can be thought or expressed, but also from the terrifying prospect of breaching these limits.¹⁵

An idea of what it might be like to go beyond the limits of thought and expression is hinted at repeatedly in Wordsworth's verse. *The Prelude* combines several accounts, dating from the 1790s, of encounters with sublimity that threaten to place the mind beside itself. In book twelve, for instance, a description of a vision on Salisbury Plain, originally conceived in 1793, forges an association between druidic sacrifice and the apocalyptic tendencies of the creative imagination as, in a chilling formulation, the poet announces: 'I call'd upon the darkness; — and it took, / A midnight darkness seem'd to come and take — / All objects from my sight' (*1805 Prelude*, p. 312; ll. 327-9).¹⁶ In this instance, in what amounts to a daemonic inversion of the *fiat lux* motif from Genesis ('let there be light'), identified by Longinus as a sublime expression of divine creativity,¹⁷ the mind is no longer 'interfused' with but violently removed from nature. Yet, in another sense, 'it took' suggests that something has been combined with the speaking subject in exchange for the loss of corporeal sight. Understood as a kind of horticultural graft, the incorporation of darkness provides the Wordsworthian 'I' with an unsettling insight into its own constitutional otherness. The disturbing implication is that Wordsworth and darkness have taken to each other. In 'The Discharged Soldier', a verse fragment from 1798 later transplanted into *Book 4 of The Prelude*, a night-time encounter with a 'ghastly' wounded veteran (*LB*, p. 279; ll. 51, 161) provides the poet with a 'sublime' (l. 139) insight into that part of himself that would exceed the limits of intelligibility. The soldier, 'cut off / From all his kind, and more than half detached / From his own nature' (ll. 58-60), appears in the poem as a visitant from an alien realm, unable to dwell or converse with ordinary mortals. That Wordsworth takes it upon himself to lead this estranged being to the threshold of a cottage says much about that side of the poet that would seek to domesticate the transgressive power of the sublime. Once safely housed, the soldier speaks with 'reviving interest' (l. 167) and is no longer associated with the desolation and solitude dwelling on the other side of ordinary communication.

The crossing of the Alps episode from Book 6 of *The Prelude* is without doubt one of the most frequently cited passages in Wordsworth's *oeuvre*, described by Samuel Monk as the epitome of 'a century of commentary on the religion and poetry in the sublime Alpine landscape' and by Thomas Weiskel as a 'set piece of the sublime'.¹⁸ Since Monk's assertion of the 'general similarity' between Kant's 'Analytic of the Sublime' and Wordsworth's *Prelude* critics have tended to interpret the passage as a poeticised version of the mind's triumph over the natural world.¹⁹ Stripped to its bare bones the verse recounts the journey made by Wordsworth and his companion Robert Jones to the

Comment [ps146]: Agreed

Comment [A7]: The Norton punctuation helps to make this make sense, so I wonder if it is worth using it here.

Comment [ps148]: OED: a. Of a plant, seed, or graft: To 'get hold' of that on which it grows; to take root, 'strike', germinate, begin to grow. Also, in *Med.*, of animal tissue, etc.: to continue in a healthy state after being transplanted.

I'm trying to convey both senses of 'took', i.e. 'violently removed' and something 'taking hold' of WW. Would this be clearer if the OED definition could be included in some way? The problem here is trying to compress a fairly tricky thought into a short amount of words. If you have doubts, please feel free to rework/delete.

Comment [A9]: I'm not sure that I quite follow this: if it's a graft, then it's not a horticultural one (even if that is where the metaphor is coming from), but as the Norton punctuation I think makes clearer, this has to do with taking away rather than something 'taking' or 'taking to'/grafting, isn't it? Or am I missing something?

Comment [A10]: Perhaps worth registering that the word appears twice in this passage?

Comment [ps1411]: I'm struggling to find a way of saying this: '(ghastly' appears twice in the poem: *LB*, p. 279, l. 51; p. 282, l. 161)?

French and Swiss Alps in the summer of 1790, a journey initially documented in *Descriptive Sketches*. The poet's first impression of Alpine scenery is far removed from the enthusiastic response of the earlier poem as, rather than instilling awe, Mont Blanc presents a 'soulless image', usurping 'upon a living thought / That never more could be' (*1805 Prelude*, p. 188; ll. 454-6). Disappointment with the inability of nature to convey a sense of the sublime is compounded further when, on reaching the other side of the Simplon Pass, the travellers realise that they 'had cross'd the Alps' (p. 189; l. 524) yet had failed to experience the anticipated sense of wonder. What happens next might justly be described as one of the most remarkable recoveries in the history of English verse:

Imagination! lifting up itself
 Before the eye and progress of my Song
 Like an unfather'd vapour; here that Power,
 In all the might of its endowments, came
 Athwart me; I was lost as in a cloud,
 Halted without a struggle to break through,
 And now recovering to my Soul I say
 I recognise thy glory; in such strength
 Of usurpation, in such visitings
 Of awful promise, when the light of sense
 Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
 The invisible world, doth Greatness make abode,
 There harbours whether we be young or old.
 Our destiny, our nature, and our home,
 Is with infinitude, and only there;
 With hope it is, hope that can never die,
 Effort, and expectation, and desire,
 And something evermore about to be. (*1805 Prelude*, pp. 189-90; ll. 525-42)

In these lines, as Geoffrey Hartman has argued, what the poet recognises as sublime is no longer the grandeur of nature but the 'awful Power' of Imagination.²⁰ Those objects of sense that, in the earlier verses, had threatened to overwhelm consciousness are now themselves usurped by a force owing nothing to the natural world that rises *sui generis*, like 'an unfather'd vapour', from deep within the self. In anticipation of the Salisbury Plain passage, Imagination is presented here as a life-threatening force, strong enough to baffle the natural man's dependence on 'the light of sense'. In this case, however, the potential for excess residing within the self is contained by a decisive moment of self-reflection: 'And now recovering to my Soul I say / I recognise thy glory'. Critically, with the re-imposition of temporal markers comes narrative continuity and with it the sense of the sublime as an

object of reflection rather than as an unbounded and potentially harmful power. The retrospective awareness that the ‘unfather’d power is an emanation of the ‘Soul’, and not of some external body, enables the narrating consciousness to perceive that ~~its the Soul’s~~ ‘home’ is with ‘infinite’ rather than with nature; moreover, where once the natural world had imposed on thoughts that ‘never more could be’ now the ‘sense sublime’ reveals in visionary flashes ‘something evermore about to be’.

In recent decades it has become fashionable to ~~reject~~ ~~deride~~ neo-Kantian readings of the sort rehearsed above as idealist distortions of Wordsworth’s poem. Beginning with Alan Liu’s influential 1989 description of the Simplon Pass episode as an allegory of the poet’s struggle with history rather than nature, critics have begun to place emphasis on the sublime as the product of a culturally specific, historically determined set of discourses rather than as an objective phenomenon.²¹

Wordsworth’s sublime, on this reading, owes little to the esoteric, culturally remote philosophising of Kant, and far more to the ‘complex interaction’ between British aesthetic theorising, travel writing and loco-descriptive poetry. Thus, Carbonnières’s rendering, in the ‘Observations’, of ‘Imagination seiz[ing] the reins which Reason drops’ in order to transform ‘finite into infinite, space into immensity’ and ‘time into eternity’ is seen as a more ‘immediately relevant antecedent’ for the poet’s ‘apostrophe to the imagination’ than Kant’s ‘Analytic of the Sublime’.²² Leaving aside the question of influence, what historicist readings of this kind overlook, for all their manifest good sense, is an acknowledgement of the sublime as anything more than the sum of its intertexts.

An idea of the specificity of Wordsworth’s understanding of the sublime may be grasped by a close reading of the verses that follow the apostrophe to Imagination. Recounting the traveller’s journey through the Gondo Gorge the poem goes on to describe the ‘immeasurable height / Of woods decaying, never to be decay’d’ and the ‘stationary blasts of water-falls’ (1805 *Prelude*, p. 190; ll. 556-7). ~~In a The~~ landscape ~~that Wordsworth describes as~~ ‘rent’ by ‘thwarting winds’, ‘raving’ streams and rocks ‘that mutter’d close upon our ears’ (ll. 559-62). ~~Wordsworth describes a tumultuous landscape having has~~ more in common with the apocalyptic scenes depicted in the Book of Revelation, in Thomas Burnet’s *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681) and in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) than ~~it does~~ with the clichéd scenes of terror depicted in eighteenth-century travel writings, ~~and~~ topographic poems, or, for that matter, with the abstruse reasoning of German idealist philosophy. To the poet, the ‘unfettered’ and seemingly contradictory elements of the Alpine landscape appear

[...] like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first and last, and midst, and without end. (ll. 568-73)

Comment [ps1412]: Agreed

Comment [A13]: Is that right? ‘its’ seems ambiguous

Comment [A14]: A bit strong? ‘see’ or ‘reject’, maybe?

Underpinned by memories of Revelation, 22.13 ('Him first, him last, him midst, and without end') opposing images of 'Tumult and peace', 'darkness' and 'light' (l. 567) are brought together, finally, in the overarching synthesis of the 'one mind' (l. 568). In an unfinished [and posthumously published](#) prose fragment [on 'The Sublime and the Beautiful'](#), Wordsworth describes the sublime as 'a feeling or image of intense unity', noting further that to 'talk of an object as being sublime [...] in itself, without reference to some subject by whom that sublimity[...] is perceived, is absurd' (*Prose*, III, p. 357). What Wordsworth discovers in *The Prelude* is the inadequacy of this formulation. For as the Gorge verses reveal, the unity of the sublime and of the integrity of the perceiving subject are illusory attempts to conceal the subject's constitutional incompleteness, the fact that 'I' am nothing and that the boundaries of the self are either exceeded by divine plenitude (the religious view) or undone by material or linguistic difference (the sceptic's view).²³ When, later on, 'deafen'd and stunn'd' by his experience in the gorge the poet gives way to 'melancholy' (ll. 578-80) he seems, with part of his being, to grasp this sense of deprivation as a fundamental truth of the sublime.

Comment [ps1415]: Agreed

Comment [A16]: It might be worth adding this information?

Further Reading

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

Ashfield A. and de Bolla P. *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, ed. A. Ashfield and P. de Bolla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

Duffy, C. and Howlett, P. *Cultures of the Sublime: Selected Readings, 1750-1830*, (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

Hertz, N. *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985)

Shaw, P. *The Sublime: the New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2006)

Weiskel, T. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976)

Wlecke, A. O. *Wordsworth and the Sublime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973)

¹ *Letters of John Keats*, ed. R. Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 157.

² This important mid-eighteenth century account of the sublime is taken from E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), ed by David Womersley (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 86.

³ See H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 5.

⁴ For a general introduction to the history and theory of the concept of the sublime see P. Shaw, *The Sublime: the New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2006)

⁵ D. Fairer, *English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century, 1700-1789* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education, 2003), chapter 7 'Sublimity, Nature, and God', pp. 122-43.

⁶ See J. Addison, *The Spectator*, 418, 30 June, 1712. Extract reproduced in *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, ed. A. Ashfield and P. de Bolla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 67-8.

⁷ See J. Addison, *The Spectator*, 418, 30 June, 1712. Extract reproduced in *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, ed. A. Ashfield and P. de Bolla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 67-8. Representative examples of the late eighteenth-century

topographical or loco-descriptive poem include John Bethell, *LLangunnor Hill: a Loco-Descriptive Poem* (1794) and John Gisborne, *Vales of Wever, a Loco-Descriptive Poem, Inscribed to the Reverend John Granville, of Calwich, Staffordshire* (1797).

⁸ Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, pp. 196-7.

⁹ See *Cultures of the Sublime: Selected Readings, 1750-1830*, ed. C. Duffy and P. Howlett (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 11-13.

¹⁰ See M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 335.

¹¹ Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 188.

¹² Ashfield and de Bolla (eds), *The Sublime*, pp. 6-7.

¹³ A. O. Wlecke, *Wordsworth and the Sublime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 12.

¹⁴ The similarities between Kant's 'Analytic of the Sublime', from *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), and Wordsworth's sublime are explored by T. H. Monk, *The Sublime* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1935), T. Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) and N. Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), chapters 2 and 3. For a critique of this comparative approach see Ashfield and de Bolla (eds), *The Sublime*, pp. 2-3 and Duffy and Howlett (eds), *Cultures of the Sublime*, pp. 9-14.

¹⁵ A helpful account of the etymology of the sublime is given in the introduction to *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. T. M. Costelloe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 2-5.

¹⁶ Punctuation adopted from William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth et al (New York: Norton, 1979), p.454.

¹⁷ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans D. C. Innes and W. R. Roberts (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 191.

¹⁸ Monk, *The Sublime*, pp. 227-32. Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, p. 196.

¹⁹ Monk, *The Sublime*, p. 4.

²⁰ G. H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 39-48.

²¹ A. Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989). See Cian and Howlett, *Cultures of the Sublime*, pp. 10-11.

²² Cian and Howlett, *Cultures of the Sublime*, p. 11.

²³ For a reading of the Wordsworthian sublime that advances a materialist or sceptical view of the attempt to reconcile language and subjectivity see P. de Man, 'Time and History in Wordsworth', in *Romanticism*, ed. C. Chase (London and New York: Longman, 1993), pp. 55-77.