



## Wordsworth re-visited - Audio

### *The romantic and politics*

If the Lakes' landscape would influence the early development of Wordsworth's poetic consciousness, then wider political events would bear on his later responses to nature. These could even bear on the formal shaping of nature into poetry.

It is not accidental, for example, that Wordsworth made his first break with the traditional couplet form, the rhyme scheme of *An Evening Walk*, directly after the new French Republic, which he supported, was forced to declare war on England in 1793.

As Wordsworth's mind tries to rationalise a political reverse, so the poetry evolves correspondingly to rethread its cultural response. There is an even greater bearing of revolutionary events on Wordsworth's very conception of nature, a matter not just of style but also of ideology. This, critics point out, can be seen if one compares *An Evening Walk* with its slightly later companion poem, *Descriptive Sketches*, a sort of continental *Evening Walk* set partly in the Alps. It was composed in 1791 and 1792 when Wordsworth was actively participating in revolutionary events in France.

Nature, as such, is not mentioned at all by name in the earlier poem. In *Descriptive Sketches*, however, it frequently appears as an active, elemental and morally uplifting power. Bearing *An Evening Walk* in mind, listen to a reading of part of the original version of the second poem. Note that the 'he' of the first line is the traveller himself.

'He holds with God himself communion high, when the dread peal of swelling torrents fills the sky-roofed temple of the eternal hills, and savage nature humbly joins the right, while flash her upward eyes severe delight, or gazing from the mountain's silent brow bright stars of ice and azure, worlds of snow, where needle peaks of granite shooting bare tremble in the ever-varying tints of air, great joy by horror tamed dilates his heart, and the near heavens their own delights impart. When the sun bids the gorgeous scene farewell, Alps overlooking Alps their state upswell, huge pikes of darkness named of fear and storms, lift all serene their still illumined forms.'

The poem strikes a curious balance between the picturesque and the non-picturesque. The passage we have just heard subverts the ordered balance of elements that constitutes a strict picturesque.

Interestingly, Wordsworth distanced himself from any picturesque aesthetic in a 1783 note to the poem. He maintains in this that the Alps were insulted by having such an aesthetic

applied to them, concluding that the cold rules of painting were inadequate in the face of the irresistible power of the mountains.

There is no doubting that the lines we have just been looking at do have objective pictorial qualities. On the other hand, the highly dynamic, not to say terrifying nature, as much gazes at the viewer as vice versa. What has been called the 'revolutionary style' of *Descriptive Sketches* suggests that Wordsworth's first-hand experience of the tumultuous political powers gathering in France in 1791 and 1792, bears directly on the poetry.

And it is not just that *Descriptive Sketches* deals with alpine rather than British scenery. The aesthetics of line, with all its connotations of fear and terror, would also later be widely applied to poetry, which is firmly based on the Lake District.