

Coleridge's "hymn":
new perspectives on
book six of the
prelude



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During the first weeks of August 1902, Samuel Taylor Coleridge toured the hills of England near Scafell on foot. Ironically, the lines that “ involuntarily poured forth” into a “ Hymn” did not end up describing Coleridge’s ascent of Scafell, but rather a hypothetical scene in the Vale of Chamouni. The work, entitled “ Hymn Before Sun-Rise, In the Vale of Chamouni,” appeared in The Morning Post in September of the same year. In “ Hymn,” the poet confronts Mont Blanc during a dark day and becomes overcome with Nature’s “ secret joy,” asking his natural surroundings to join him in celestial song to praise God (20). Wordsworth decried the poem: Keith Thomas, a critic of the romantics, indicates that “ Wordsworth emphatically disliked the poem,” going so far as to label “ Hymn” an exercise in the “ Mock Sublime” (Thomas, 100). Thomas contends that “ Hymn” embittered Wordsworth to the point that he “ might have feared that Coleridge had published a poem that treated a topic he knew intimately far better than he had treated it so far” (Thomas, 102). Not only did Coleridge’s work appear analogous to a sublime work like Wordsworth’s in genre, but according to Thomas, Wordsworth found “ Coleridge’s overly-confident voice...unearned and inauthentic,” not only because Coleridge’s lyrics improperly reflected his own poetic style, but also because Coleridge had never even been to Mont Blanc (Thomas, 100). Three years later, Wordsworth published the first book in the thirteen-book edition of The Prelude. Portions of the work (specifically Book Six), recount Wordsworth’s 1790 excursions through France and the Alps with his friend Robert Jones. Of particular importance to historicist (as well as formalist) critics is what has come to be known as the “ Simplon Pass” episode, where Wordsworth and Jones, anticipating a dramatic scene at the pinnacle of the pass, are informed by a peasant that they missed the exact point where they

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had crossed the Alps. Wordsworth, despite passing by the point of anticipated transcendence, continues his descent on the other side and finds sublimity in the Vale of Gondo. In contrast to this highly intellectual experience, Wordsworth characterizes his experience of Mont Blanc as staring at a "soulless image" (6. 527). When the episodes in Book Six of *The Prelude* are read in the historical context of Coleridge's "Hymn," glimpses of Wordsworth's ego become apparent; Thomas theorizes that "[' Hymn'] becomes a negative precursive paradigm that Wordsworth strives to counter at all costs, even while appropriating its strategies" (Thomas, 83). Because his friend usurped the genre that Wordsworth helped establish—the Sublime—he must reclaim it by doing the subject proper justice. Despite the viewpoint of historicists like Thomas that "Hymn" had a "profound impact" of Book Six of *The Prelude*, other critics, like David Miall, make little mention of Coleridge's poem in interpreting the Simplon Pass episode. In "The Alps Deferred: Wordsworth at the Simplon Pass," Miall states, "The structure of the passage overall...shows Wordsworth dismissing the picturesque for an ecological, participatory account of Nature"; revealing Wordsworth finding transcendence in the Vale of Gondo is a departure from Wordsworth's tendency to find the sublime in highly dramatic landscapes like Mont Blanc (Miall, 87). This reading asserts that the Vale of Gondo became the source of transcendental thought for Wordsworth when he was writing the lines 14 years later; that is, that Wordsworth favored his experience during his descent with the trees and crags over traditionally picturesque views of tall mountains and sharp skylines. Combined with the historicist view (specifically the view that Wordsworth was rewriting "Hymn" because of Coleridge's relative incompetence in the Sublime genre) reveals that <https://assignbuster.com/coleridges-hymn-new-perspectives-on-book-six-of-the-prelude/>

Wordsworth's denial of the picturesque could actually be a product of his contempt for Coleridge's poem. Essentially, both critiques use the same type of textual evidence to justify similar points: Thomas cites the picturesque in Coleridge's "Hymn" and the subtle sublimity of Wordsworth's descent in the Vale of Gondo to explain Wordsworth's counter to Coleridge; Miall cites the same evidence to show Wordsworth's denial of the picturesque to venerate the subtle, more "participatory views" Wordsworth experiences in the Vale. While not without merit, these accounts fail to address a hybridized version, that portions of Book Six simultaneously rewrote "Hymn" and denied the picturesque. In Coleridge's "Hymn," the penultimate stanza consists of six one line apostrophes naming the picturesque inhabitants of the Vale of Chamouni. Coleridge mentions the "flowers," the "wild goats," and the "eagles," images commonly associated with the Alps (64-66). Because Coleridge did not explicitly visit Mont Blanc, he could be listing its stereotypical inhabitants to better match the poem's contents with its subject. Regarding Book Six, Wordsworth satisfies both the historicist and formalist views if he neglects to mention stereotypical images surrounding Mont Blanc. Indeed, Wordsworth does deny the typical picturesque; he does not find transcendence, like Coleridge, only "dumb cataracts" and "motionless...waves" that reduce him to only experiencing a more concrete reality in "small birds" and "leafy trees" (531-2, 535). The difference between Coleridge and Wordsworth here is that while Coleridge's speaker sees Mont Blanc and is immediately overcome by the picturesque, Wordsworth continually strives to look beyond reality, and only when his eye is met with boring scenes does he feel limited to commonplace images. Proof that Nature's picturesque immediately overcomes Coleridge's speaker lies in <https://assignbuster.com/coleridges-hymn-new-perspectives-on-book-six-of-the-prelude/>

the first twenty lines of "Hymn." In the opening lines, the speaker directly questions Mont Blanc, asking, "Hast thou a charm to stay the morning-star / In his steep course?" indicating a direct engagement with his subject (1-2). His question quickly turns to a conversational form of praise for the mountain; Mont Blanc, the speaker states, has a "bald awful head" (3). Not only does Coleridge personify Mont Blanc as having a head, but he also calls the morning-star a "he," suggesting that Coleridge's interaction with nature at this point is like an interaction between two humans (2). In order to address the immediacy with which Nature overcomes the speaker, Coleridge's personification of the mountain quickly changes to a recognition of the mountain as a large, silent, and godly form. Because the mountain rises "silently" from the pines and pierces the stormy sky, Coleridge's viewpoint is changed, and "when [he] look[s] again" the mountain that once exhibited humanlike qualities becomes a "home" and a "crystal shrine" (7; 10-11). In the opening stanza of the poem, the speaker's perspective on Nature changes from a friendly view of Nature to the sense that Nature is not a friend, but a "dread and silent" power that induces "entrance[ment]," wonder, and worship (13; 15-16). This change suggests that the speaker receives an answer to his initial question, that the mountain does not have a "charm" to hold the morning-star to its course, but is more powerful, with direct access to the heavens. Wordsworth's first account of Mont Blanc is almost the opposite from Coleridge's speaker in "Hymn": he recalls that he and Robert Jones "beheld the summit of Mount Blanc, and grieved/ the have a soulless image on the eye, Which had usurp'd upon a living thought that never more could be" (6. 526-529). The difficulty of these lines lies in attributing them to Thomas' view that they represent a "direct counter" to <https://assignbuster.com/coleridges-hymn-new-perspectives-on-book-six-of-the-prelude/>

the lines in "Hymn," or to use Miall's terminology, imply a denial of the picturesque. Wordsworth's feelings are not of wonder or entrancement, but of "grieving," as if Wordsworth is mourning the loss of something. Inherent in these lines is the question of whether or not the soullessness of Mont Blanc has a negative connotation in Wordsworth's mind. The image usurps a "living thought," much like Coleridge's bodily senses vanishing from his thoughts, but the power of Mont Blanc in Wordsworth grants the "wondrous Vale" the ability to "make rich amends" with Wordsworth (6. 528; 530; 533). If eyeing the Vale is more significant to Wordsworth than the form of Mont Blanc, then the soulless image is the cause of this good vision, but if he decries the sight of Mont Blanc because of Coleridge's poem, Wordsworth is deliberately grieving the loss of what could have been transcendence. Shortly before Wordsworth spies Mont Blanc, his "heart leap'd up" when he first sees the Vale (6. 510). Either Wordsworth's heart leaps because he cannot wait to encounter the dense spirituality of the "green recess[es]," to participate with Nature (as Miall describes), or his heart leaps in order to foreshadow his later downplaying of Mont Blanc as a counter to "Hymn" (6. 520). Perhaps the most evidence for the historicist viewpoint that Simplon Pass is a response to "Hymn" is in lines 542 to 558 of Book Six. In this stanza, Wordsworth uses the words "we" and "our" repeatedly, and never once mentions the personal "I." Taken literally as a recount of their pilgrimage through the Alps, Wordsworth could be referring to himself and Robert Jones. Read in the context of "Hymn" and Wordsworth's friendship with Coleridge, however, it provides insight into the context of Simplon Pass. Wordsworth's first lines could describe his and Jones' state of mind, or could comment directly on his and Coleridge's state of affairs in writing about Mont

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Blanc: Whate'er in this wide circuit we beheld, Or heard, was fitted to our unripe stateOf intellect and heart. By simple strainsOf feeling, the pure breath of real life, We were not left untouch'd. (6. 542-546)Here, both Book Six and "Hymn" could be the products of an "unripe" mind and heart. Wordsworth could be reflecting on his commentary of Coleridge's poem as "Mock Sublime" and attacking the poem as critically as immature. At the same time, though, this unripeness of "intellect and heart" could refer to Coleridge's actual publication of the poem, suggesting that Wordsworth is saying something to effect of, "Sam, it was unwise for you to write this poem about a place you've never been, and a bit immature. But it was also my fault for criticizing you too harshly." Therefore, "Whate'er in this wide circuit we beheld" becomes representative of Coleridge's experience of Scafell and Wordsworth's actual experience of Mont Blanc; when they composed their respective lines, Wordsworth implies, it had no bearing on their actual feelings toward each other, as they were both touched by the simplest and purest strains of reality. These lines can represent a reconciliation with Coleridge on the part of Wordsworth, both for Coleridge's writing of "Hymn" and for Wordsworth's criticism of the work. Thomas alludes to a resolution of this problem in Book Six, indicating that Wordsworth's "fierce antagonism" with "Hymn" becomes a "positive engagement" with his text (Thomas, 104). Despite the possibility of this reconciliation, Wordsworth's ego propelled him to rewrite the final 55 lines of Coleridge's poem in his transcendental episode in the Vale of Gondo. This last portion of "Hymn" is to be read emphatically; lines 25 through 85 contain 26 exclamations, many of which are apostrophes used to call forth the voice of God and the voices of Nature that should praise God. However, <https://assignbuster.com/coleridges-hymn-new-perspectives-on-book-six-of-the-prelude/>

the effect of these praises is that they come off as obvious, and provide the reader with little insight (which may be the foremost reason for Wordsworth's label as "Mock Sublime"). Scattered among the apostrophes, Coleridge asks rhetorical questions of the mountains, including "Who made thee parent of perpetual streams?" and "Who bade the sun clothe you with rainbows?" (38, 55-56). A poet so enraptured by the scene before him would not need to ask all of these questions because they are of little importance to the true Sublime poet. Instead, Wordsworth's Simplon Pass and Vale of Gondo transcendences are marked with the effects of God on the poet that are characteristic of a deeper emotion than proclamations of the glory of God. Wordsworth strives to rewrite the apostrophes in "Hymn" by stating the implications of Coleridge's questions; Coleridge wants God to know that "Earth, with her thousand voices, praises" Him, whereas Wordsworth states what this implies for mankind: "Our destiny, our nature, and our home/ Is with infinitude, and only there; With hope it is, hope that can never die" (Coleridge, 85; 6. 605-607). Essentially, Wordsworth wants to show that a proper Sublime poem should incorporate the human experience, and not be written in what Thomas refers to as "an unself-conscious voice that assumes mastery over external objects" (98). The Simplon Pass episode is the ultimate paragon of self-consciousness; Wordsworth's anti-climactic event is directly connected with his anticipation of transcendence. When he severs this bond, however, he revels "in thoughts / That are their own perfection and reward" (6. 612-613). There is evidence, though, that Wordsworth's response to Coleridge's "Hymn" as described above is not the entire picture.

In Morton D. Paley's "'This Valley of Wonders': Coleridge's Hymn Before

Sun-Rise in the Vale of Chamouni", he calls attention to the fact that <https://assignbuster.com/coleridges-hymn-new-perspectives-on-book-six-of-the-prelude/>

Wordsworth stated in 1844: “[Coleridge] had extraordinary powers of summoning up an image, or a series of images in his own mind...that no visible observation could make it more so. A remarkable instance of this is his poem said to be ‘ composed in the Vale of Chamouni.’ Now he never was at Chamouni, or near it, in his life” (Paley, 370-371). This statement by Wordsworth does indicate an acknowledgement that Coleridge’s work was not perfectly authentic, but that at the same time, Paley remarks, it acknowledges Coleridge’s “ signature of poetic power” (371). Whether or not Wordsworth still decried “ Hymn” almost half a century later for its questionable sources and its “ mocking” of a distinct Wordsworthian notion of imaginative verse may not ever be known. What is known, though, is that Thomas and the new historicists, as well as Miall and the formalists, must be open to interpreting Book Six as if Wordsworth was self-conscious of their interpretations. There is the distinct possibility that Simplon Pass and the Vale of Gondo are subtle counters against Coleridge’s “ Hymn” as well as endorsements of Wordsworth’s attraction to a more engaging interaction with nature and the Sublime.