

The Sublime and the Beautiful William Wordsworth

[Probably composed between September 1811 and late November 1812 (probably close to the later date). First published 1974. Most of the punctuation has been added.]

This fragment was most likely originally intended as part of what eventually became A Guide Through the District of the Lakes (1835) although this essay presents a wider philosophical reference than the Guide. It is not known how much of the beginning is missing, but it is thought to be little. There is also a lacuna, thought to have been a quarto sheet filled on both sides, about three-quarters of the way through (see note 6).

. . . amongst them. It is not likely that a person so situated, provided his imagination be exercised by other intercourse, as it ought to be, will become, by any continuance of familiarity, insensible to sublime impressions from the scenes around him. Nay, it is certain that his conceptions of the sublime, far from being dulled or narrowed by commonness or frequency, will be rendered more lively and comprehensive by more accurate observation and by increasing knowledge. Yet, tho' this effect will take place with respect to grandeur, it will be much more strikingly felt in the influences of beauty. Neither the immediate nor final cause of this need here be examined; yet we may observe that, though it is impossible that a mind can be in a healthy state that is not frequently and strongly moved both by sublimity and beauty, it is more dependent for its daily well-being upon the love and gentleness which accompany the one, than upon the exaltation or awe which are created by the other. —Hence, as we advance in life, we can escape upon the invitation of our more placid and gentle nature from those obtrusive qualities in an object sublime in its general character; which qualities, at an earlier age, precluded imperiously the perception of beauty which that object if contemplated under another relation would have been capable of imparting. I need not observe to persons at all conversant in these speculations that I take for granted that the same object may be both sublime and beautiful; or, speaking more accurately, that it may have the power of affecting us both with the sense of beauty and the sense of sublimity; tho' (as for such Readers I need not add) the mind cannot be affected by both these sensations at the same time, for they are not only different from, but opposite to, each other. Now a Person unfamiliar with the appearances of a Mountainous Country is, with respect to its more conspicuous sublime features, in a [situation] resembling that of a Man of mature years when he looked upon such objects with the eye of childhood or youth. There appears to be something ungracious in this observation; yet it is nevertheless true, and the fact is mentioned both for its connection with the present work and for the importance of the general truth. Sensations of beauty and sublimity impress us very early in life; nor is it easy to determine which have precedence in point of time, and to which

the sensibility of the mind in its natural constitution is more alive. But it may be confidently affirmed that, where the beautiful and the sublime co-exist in the same object, if that object be new to us, the sublime always precedes the beautiful in making us conscious of its presence—but all this may be both tedious and uninformative to the Reader, as I have not explained what I mean by either of the words sublime or beautiful; nor is this the place to enter into a general disquisition upon the subject, or to attempt to clear away the errors by which it has been clouded. –But as I am persuaded that it is of infinite importance to the noblest feelings of the Mind and to its very highest powers that the forms of Nature should be accurately contemplated, and, if described, described in language that shall prove that we understand the several grand constitutional laws under which it has been ordained that these objects should everlastingly affect the mind, I shall deem myself justified in calling the Reader, upon the present humble occasion, to attend to a few words which shall be said upon two of these principal laws: the law of sublimity and that of beauty. These shall be considered so far at least as they may be collected from the objects amongst which we are about to enter, viz., those of a mountainous region - and to begin with the sublime as it exists in such landscape.

Let me then invite the Reader to turn his eyes with me towards that cluster of Mountains at the Head of Windermere; it is probable that they will settle ere long upon the Pikes of Langdale and the black precipice contiguous to them. - If these objects be so distant that, while we look at them, they are only thought of as the crown of a comprehensive Landscape; if our minds be not perverted by false theories, unless those mountains be seen under some accidents of nature, we shall receive from them a grand impression, and nothing more. But if they be looked at from a point which has brought us so near that the mountain is almost the sole object before our eyes, yet not so near but that the whole of it is visible, we shall be impressed with a sensation of sublimity. –And if this is analyzed, the body of this sensation would be found to resolve itself into three component parts: a sense of individual form or forms; a sense of duration; and a sense of power. The whole complex impression is made up of these elementary parts, and the effect depends upon their co-existence. For, if any one of them were abstracted, the others would be deprived of their power to affect.

I first enumerated individuality of form; this individual form was then invested with qualities and powers, ending with duration. Duration is evidently an element of the sublime; but think of it without reference to individual form, and we shall perceive that it has no power to affect the mind. Cast your eye, for example, upon any commonplace ridge or eminence that cannot be separated, without some effort of the mind, from the general mass of the planet; you may be persuaded, nay, convinced, that it has borne that shape as long as or longer than Cader Idris, or Snowdon, or the Pikes of Langdale that are before us; and the mind is wholly unmoved by the thought; and the only way in which such an object can affect us, contemplated under the notion of duration, is when

the faint sense which we have of its individuality is lost in the general sense of duration belonging to the Earth itself. Prominent individual form must, therefore, be conjoined with duration, in order that Objects of this kind may impress a sense of sublimity; and, in the works of Man, this conjunction is, for obvious reasons, of itself sufficient for the purpose. But in works of Nature it is not so: with these must be combined impressions of power, to a sympathy with and a participation of which the mind must be elevated—or to a dread and awe of which, as existing out of itself, it must be subdued. A mountain being a stationary object is enabled to effect this in connection with duration and individual form, by the sense of motion which in the mind accompanies the lines by which the Mountain itself is shaped out. These lines may either be abrupt and precipitous, by which danger and sudden change is expressed; or they may flow into each other like the waves of the sea, and, by involving in such image a feeling of self-propagation infinitely continuous and without cognizable beginning, these lines may thus convey to the Mind sensations not less sublime than those which were excited by their opposites, the abrupt and the precipitous. And, to complete this sense of power expressed by these permanent objects, add the torrents which take their rise within its bosom, and roll foaming down its sides; the clouds which it attracts; the stature with which it appears to reach the sky;¹ the storms with which it arms itself; the triumphant ostentation. with which its snows defy the sun, &c.

Thus has been given an analysis of the attributes or qualities the co-existence of which gives to a Mountain the power of affecting the mind with a sensation of sublimity. The capability of perceiving these qualities, and the degree in which they are perceived, will of course depend upon the state or condition of the mind, with respect to habits, knowledge, and powers, which is brought within the reach of their influence. It is to be remembered that I have been speaking of a visible object; and it might seem that when I required duration. to be combined with individual form, more was required than was necessary; for a native of a mountainous country, looking back upon his childhood, will remember how frequently he has been impressed by a sensation of sublimity from a precipice, in which awe or personal apprehension were the predominant feelings of his mind and from which the milder influence of duration seemed to be excluded. And it is true that the relative proportions in which we are affected by the qualities of these objects are different at different periods of our lives; yet there cannot be a doubt that upon all ages they act conjointly. The precipitous form of an individual cloud which a Child has been taught by tales and pictures to think of as sufficiently solid to support a substantial body and upon which he finds it easy to conceive himself as seated in imagination, and thus to invest it with some portion of the terror which belongs to the precipice, would affect him very languidly, and surely much more from the knowledge which he has of its evanescence than from the less degree in which it excites in him feelings of dread. Familiarity with these objects tends very much to mitigate and to destroy the power which they have to produce the sensation of sublimity as dependent upon personal fear or upon wonder; a comprehensive awe

takes the place of the one, and a religious admiration of the other, and the condition of the mind is exalted accordingly. –Yet it cannot be doubted that a Child or an unpracticed person whose mind is possessed, by the sight of a lofty precipice, with its attire of hanging rocks and starting trees, &c., has been visited by a sense of sublimity, if personal fear and surprize or wonder have not been carried beyond certain bounds. For whatever suspends the comparing power of the mind and possesses it with a feeling or image of intense unity, without a conscious contemplation of parts, has produced that state of the mind which is the consummation of the sublime. –But if personal fear be strained beyond a certain point, this sensation is destroyed, for there are two ideas that divide and distract the attention of the Spectator with an accompanying repulsion or a wish in the soul [that] they should be divided: the object exciting the fear and the subject in which it is excited. And this leads me to a remark which will remove the main difficulties of this investigation. Power awakens the sublime either when it rouses us to a sympathetic energy and calls upon the mind to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining - yet so that it participates the force which is acting upon it; or, 2dly, by producing a humiliation or prostration of the mind before some external agency which it presumes not to make an effort to participate, but is absorbed in the contemplation of the might in the external power, and, as far as it has any consciousness of itself, its grandeur subsists in the naked fact of being conscious of external Power at once awful and immeasurable; so that in both cases the head and the front² of the sensation is intense unity. But if that Power which is exalted above our sympathy impresses the mind with personal fear, so as the sensation becomes more lively than the impression or thought of the exciting cause, then self-consideration and all its accompanying littleness takes place of³ the sublime, and wholly excludes it. Or if the object contemplated be of a spiritual nature, as that of the Supreme Being, for instance (though few minds, I will hope, are so far degraded that with reference to the Deity they can be affected by sensations of personal fear, such as a precipice, a conflagration, a torrent, or a shipwreck might excite), yet it may be confidently affirmed that no sublimity can be raised by the contemplation of such power when it presses upon us with pain and individual fear to a degree which takes precedence in our thoughts [over] the power itself. For connect with such sensations the notion of infinity, or any other ideas of a sublime nature which different religious sects have connected with it: the feeling of self being still predominant, the condition of the mind would be mean and abject. –Accordingly Belial, the most sensual spirit of the fallen Angels, tho' speaking of himself and his Companions as full of pain, yet adds:

Who would lose those thoughts
Which wander thro' Eternity?⁴

The thoughts are not chained down by anguish, but they are free and tolerate neither limit nor circumscription. Though by the opinions of many religious sects, not less than by many other examples, it is

lamentably shewn how industrious Man is in perverting and degrading his mind, yet such is its inherent dignity that, like that of the fallen Spirit as exhibited by the Philosophic and religious Poet, he is perpetually thwarted and baffled and rescued in his own despite.

But to return: Whence comes it then that that external power, to a union or communion with which we feel that we can make no approximation while it produces humiliation and submission, reverence or adoration, and all those sensations which may be denominated passive, does nevertheless place the mind in a state that is truly sublime? As I have said before, this is done by the notion or image of intense unity, with which the Soul is occupied or possessed. —But how is this produced or supported, and, when it remits, and the mind is distinctly conscious of his own being and existence, whence comes it that it willingly and naturally relapses into the same state? The cause of this is either that our physical nature has only to a certain degree been endangered, or that our moral Nature has not in the least degree been violated. —The point beyond which apprehensions for our physical nature consistent with sublimity may be carried, has been ascertained; and, with respect to power acting upon our moral or spiritual nature, by awakening energy either that would resist or that hopes to participate, the sublime is called forth. But if the Power contemplated be of that kind which neither admits of the notion of resistance or participation, then it may be confidently said that, unless the apprehensions which it excites terminate in repose, there can be no sublimity, and that this sense of repose is the result of reason and the moral law. Could this be abstracted and the reliance upon it taken away, no species of Power that was absolute over the mind could beget a sublime sensation; but, on the contrary, it could never be thought of without fear and degradation. I have been seduced to treat the subject more generally than I had at first proposed; if I have been so fortunate as to make myself understood, what has been said will be the speculation, and confine it to the sublime as it exists in a mountainous Country, and to the manner in which it makes itself felt. I enumerated the qualities which must be perceived in a Mountain before a sense of sublimity can be received from it. Individuality of form is the primary requisite; and the form must be of that character that deeply impresses the sense of power. And power produces the sublime either as it is thought of as a thing to be dreaded, to be resisted, or that can be participated. To what degree consistent with sublimity power may be dreaded has been ascertained; but as power, contemplated as something to be opposed or resisted, implies a twofold agency of which the mind is conscious, this state seems to be irreconcilable to what has been said concerning the consummation of sublimity, which, as has been determined, exists in the extinction of the comparing power of the mind, and in intense unity. But the fact is, there is no sublimity excited by the contemplation of power thought of as a thing to be resisted and which the moral law enjoins us to resist, saving only as far as the mind, either by glances or continuously, conceives that that power may be overcome or rendered evanescent, and as far as it feels itself tending towards the unity that exists in security or absolute

triumph. –(When power is thought of under a mode which we can and do participate, the sublime sensation consists in a manifest approximation towards absolute unity.) If the resistance contemplated be of a passive nature (such, for example, as the Rock in the middle of the fall of the Rhine at Chafhausen,⁵ as opposed for countless ages to that mighty mass of Waters), there are undoubtedly here before us two distinct images and thoughts; and there is a most complex instrumentality acting upon the senses, such as the roar of the Water, the fury of the foam, &c.; and an instrumentality still more comprehensive, furnished by the imagination, and drawn from the length of the River's course, the Mountains from which it rises, the various countries thro' which it flows, and the distant Seas in which its waters are lost. These images and thoughts will, in such a place, be present to the mind, either personally or by representative abstractions more or less vivid. –Yet to return to the rock and the Waterfall: these objects will be found to have exalted the mind to the highest state of sublimity when they are thought of in that state of opposition and yet reconciliation, analogous to parallel lines in mathematics, which, being infinitely prolonged, can never come nearer to each other; and hence, tho' the images and feelings above enumerated have exerted a preparative influence upon the mind, the absolute crown of the impression is infinity, which is a modification of unity.

Having had the image of a mighty River before us, I cannot but, in connection with it, observe that the main source of all the difficulties and errors, which have attended these disquisitions is that the attention of those who have been engaged in them has been primarily and chiefly fixed upon external objects and their powers, qualities, and properties, and not upon the mind itself, and the laws by which it is acted upon. Hence the endless disputes about the characters of objects, and the absolute denial on the part of many that sublimity or beauty exists. To talk of an object as being sublime or beautiful in itself, without references to some subject by whom that sublimity or beauty is perceived, is absurd; nor is it of the slightest importance to mankind, whether there be any object with which their minds are conversant that Men would universally agree (after having ascertained that the words were used in the same sense) to denominate sublime or beautiful. It is enough that there are, both in moral qualities and in the forms of the external universe, such qualities and powers as have affected Men, in different states of civilization and without communication with each other, with similar sensations either of the sublime or beautiful. The true province of the philosopher is not to grope about in the external world and, when he has perceived or detected in an object such or such a quality or power, to set himself to the task of persuading the world that such is a sublime or beautiful object, but to look into his own mind and determine the law by which he is affected. –He will then find that the same object has power to affect him in various manners at different times; so that, ludicrous as it . . .⁶ to power as governed some where by the intelligence of law and

reason, and lastly to the transcendent sympathies which have been vouchsafed to her with the calmness of eternity.

Thus, then, is apparent how various are the *means* by which we are conducted to the same end—the elevation of our being; and the practical influences⁷ to be drawn from this are most important, but I shall consider them only with reference to the forms of nature which have occasioned this disquisition.

I have already given a faint sketch of the manner in which a familiarity with these objects acts upon the minds of men of cultivated imagination. I will now suppose a person of mature age to be introduced amongst them for the first time. I will not imagine him to be a man particularly conversant with pictures, nor an enthusiast in poetry; but he shall be modest and unpretentious, one who has not been insensible to impressions of grandeur from the universal or less local appearance and forms of nature (such as the sky, the clouds, the heavenly bodies, rivers, trees, and perhaps the Ocean), and coming hither desirous to have his knowledge increased and the means of exalting himself in thought and feeling multiplied and extended. I can easily conceive that such a man, in his first intercourse with these objects, might be grievously disappointed, and, if that intercourse should be short, might depart without being raised from that depression which such disappointment might reasonably cause. Such would have been the condition of the most eminent of our English Painters if his visits to the sublime pictures in the Vatican and The Cistine Chapel had not been repeated till the sense of strangeness had worn off, till the twilight of novelty began to dispel, and he was made conscious of the mighty difference between seeing and perceiving. I have heard of a Lady, a native of the Orcades (which naked solitudes from her birth she had never quitted), whose imagination, endeavouring to complete whatever had been left imperfect in pictures and books, had feasted in representing to itself the forms of trees. With delight did she look forward to the day when it would be permitted to her to behold the reality, and to learn by experience how far its grandeur or beauty surpassed the conceptions which she had formed—but sad and heavy was her disappointment when this wish was satisfied. A journey to a fertile Vale in the South of Scotland gave her an opportunity of seeing some of the finest trees in the Island; but she beheld them without pleasure or emotion, and complained that, compared with the grandeur of the living and ever-varying ocean in all the changes and appearances and powers of which she was thoroughly versed—that a tree or a wood were objects insipid and lifeless.⁸—Something of a like disappointment, or perhaps a kind of blank and stupid wonder (one of the most oppressive of sensations), might be felt by one who had passed his life in the plains of Lincolnshire and should be suddenly transported to the recesses of Borrowdale or Glencoe. And if this feeling should not burthen his mind, innumerable are the impressions which may exclude him from a communication with the sublime in the midst of objects eminently

capable of exciting that feeling: he may be depressed by the image of barrenness; or the chaotic appearance of crags heaped together, or seemingly ready to fall upon each other, may excite in him sensations as uncomfortable as those with which he would look upon an edifice that the Builder had left unfinished; and many of the forms before his eyes, by associations of outward likeness, merely may recal to his mind mean or undignified works of art; and every where might he be haunted or disturbed by a sense of incongruity, either light and trivial or resembling in kind that intermixture of the terrible and the ludicrous which dramatists who understand the constitution of the human mind have not unfrequently represented when they introduce a character disturbed by an agency supernatural or horrible to a degree beyond what the mind is prepared to expect from the ordinary course of human calamities or afflictions. So that it appears that even those impressions that do most easily make their way to the human mind, such as I deem those of the sublime to be, cannot be received from an object however eminently qualified to impart them, without a preparatory intercourse with that object or with others of the same kind.

But impediments arising merely from novelty or inexperience in a well disposed mind disappear gradually and assuredly. Yet, though it will not be long before the Stranger will become conscious of the sublime where the power to raise it eminently exists, yet, if I may judge from my own experience, it is only very slowly that the mind is opened out to a perception of images of Beauty co-existing in the same object with those of sublimity. As I have explained at large what I mean by the word sublimity, I might with propriety here proceed to treat of beauty, and to explain in what manner I conceive the mind to be affected when it has a sense of the beautiful. But I cannot pass from the sublime without guarding the ingenuous reader against those caprices of vanity and presumption derived from false teachers in the philosophy of the fine arts and of taste, which Painters, connoisseurs, and amateurs are perpetually interposing between the light of nature and their own minds. Powerful indeed must be the spells by which such an eclipse is to be removed; but nothing is wanting, save humility, modesty, diffidence, and an habitual, kindly, and confident communion with Nature, to prevent such a darkness from ever being superinduced. "Oh," says one of these tutored spectators, "what a scene should we have before us here upon the shores of Windermere, if we could but strike out those pikes of Langdale by which it is terminated; they are so intensely *picturesque* that their presence excludes from the mind all sense of the sublime⁹." Extravagant as such an ejaculation is, it has been heard from the mouths of Persons who pass for intelligent men of cultivated mind.

1. *the statute with which it appears to reach the sky*: Cf. *Paradise Lost*, IV, 988: "His stature reacht the Skie."

2. *the head and the front*: *Othello*, I, iii, 80.

3. *takes place of*: Takes precedence over.

4. *Who would. . . Eternity*: *Paradise Lost*; II, 146-8.

5. *the fall of the Rhine at Cheifhausen*: In Coleridge's *Shakespearean Criticism* (ed. T. M. Raysor, 2nd ed., London and New York [1960], I, 224) occurs the following comment of 1813: "The sense of sublimity arises, not from the sight of an outward object, but from the reflection upon it; not from the impression, but from the idea. Few have seen a celebrated waterfall without feeling something of disappointment: it is only subsequently, by reflection, that the idea of the waterfall comes full into the mind, and brings with it a train of sublime associations." W. was disappointed when he saw the fall in 1790 (*Letters: Early Years*, I, 35).

6. *ludicrous as it . . .*: A passage is omitted here, thought to be a quarto sheet filled on both sides.

7. *infiuences*: Probably an error for *inferences*.

8. *that a tree.. lifeless*: W. may have drawn some of his wording from an account of this anecdote given in Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, New York (1941), I, 402.

9. *pikes of Langdale . . . sublime*: Probably a reference to William Gilpin, *Observation Relative to Picturesque Beauty* (1786), I, 144-5, where he found fault with the Langdale Pikes.