Wordsworth’s Imagination: Three Critical Approaches
and The Prelude

by

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Introduction

Critics of Romantic poetry are attracted to themes including nature, spirituality, youth versus age, patriotism, and the individual. One topic to which they are particularly drawn that consistently arises in works by William Wordsworth, Samuel T. Coleridge, John Keats, and other poets of the Romantic era is the imagination. This subject matter is unique in that it varies significantly both in poetry and in literary criticism. The imagination is not a simple concept, and it is more than a motif to trace throughout a poem. It is also an idea that Romantic poets substantially reinterpret: Paul de Man notes that the Romantics conceptualize the imagination as less strictly defined or “formal” than do eighteenth century writers, who focus predominantly on the external world and the associative powers of the imagination (195). For Romantic poets, the imagination is a process of the mind that is deeply emotional and nearly indescribable, which is why it is such a prominent theme in their poems. For critics who study Romantic poetry, the definition of imagination is malleable, which makes for an attractive topic and greatly differentiated criticism.

Wordsworth was one of the Romantic poets most intent on interpreting, defining, and exploring the imagination. Terrence Allan Hoagwood writes that in Wordsworth’s preface to Lyrical Ballads the poet intends to link “thought-forms” with “material forms” of daily living; that is, Wordsworth connects the world of real objects to the inner workings of his mind (181). Even in Wordsworth’s earlier projects, he is attentive to how one’s mind affects one’s surroundings. Wordsworth later wrote about the imagination critically in his 1815 preface to Poems in which he
defines it as the power to bring to mind an image already gone, adding that it is “formed by patient observation” (630). In the 1850 version of *The Prelude* Wordsworth laments that language cannot fully incorporate the idea of the imagination, which he adds is named only “Through sad incompetence of human speech” (1850 VI: 593). Hoagwood asserts that Wordsworth’s concept of the imagination, which was key to his understanding of the world and of poetry, changed throughout his life (187).

The imagination is particularly important in Wordsworth’s most famous work, the epic, multi-book poem, *The Prelude*. He originally wrote the poem in two parts in 1799, and then between 1804 and 1805 he rewrote and reworked it into thirteen books, though he never published this version. Three months after Wordsworth’s death in 1850, his wife published his last transcript of the poem, which had grown to fourteen books. Most critics study the 1805 version and consider it the true *Prelude*, and unless otherwise noted that is the version that I will cite. The imagination is a central theme in every version and nearly every book of *The Prelude*. At times the poet directly refers to “the Imagination” as a power that Wordsworth the character can identify, but in other instances it is a power that the poet can only recognize upon reflection. There are also moments in which the imagination alters Wordsworth’s reality, even if he does not directly name it “the imagination.” For example, after being disappointed by the anticlimactic crossing of the Alps, Wordsworth the character begins to see improbable things such as “stationary blasts” of waterfalls (VI: 558). The imagination is also present in the reader’s awareness that the poet is using it in order to create the poem. The majority of the life events that Wordsworth
refers to in *The Prelude* occurred in the early 1790s, but he did not finish the first full edition of the poem until over a decade later. In this sense, the poet uses the imagination as he defines it in 1815: he calls to mind events long past.

Considering how significant the imagination was to Wordsworth, it is unsurprising that it has remained a central issue for critics who study his greatest work; and given how Wordsworth himself grappled with the concept, it is perhaps also unsurprising that critics’ notions of the imagination have not been consistent. Throughout this study I will examine how critical approaches to the imagination in Wordsworth’s *Prelude* have changed over time, both in terms of where critics have placed their focus and in terms of methodology. I will look at three different schools of criticism: poststructuralism, historicism, and the most recent wave of criticism, as yet undefined as a particular school. I aim to better comprehend the changing arguments about the imagination while simultaneously examining the differences in interests and approaches of these three schools through the shared lens of Wordsworth’s imagination.

Each school of criticism handles the imagination in *The Prelude* in a unique way. Poststructuralism, the earliest of the three schools I study, concentrates on textual evidence and on the nature of language. The main topics of poststructuralist analysis of *The Prelude* are reference, allegory, the arbitrariness of language, and signifiers and signs. Geoffrey H. Hartman, for example, focuses on how Wordsworth borrows from Scripture and the classics in order to represent the imagination, as well as on how these references and allusions help or hinder the reader’s understanding of the poem. Poststructuralism maintains that the meaning of the text can be found in
the text and in the specific linguistic choices of the author. Historicist critics, however, begin to look outside the text. They use history and biography to inform their arguments and to question how to situate the poem within its epoch. As a result, their arguments about the imagination look decidedly different from their predecessors’ arguments. These differences surface, for instance, in the new importance historicists assign to Napoleon Bonaparte as a tool for analyzing the imagination in *The Prelude*. Alan Liu writes that the imagination is the “haunt of Napoleon” for Wordsworth, and that coming to terms with the military leader helped the poet understand the imagination, and vice versa (24). Finally, recent critics have a less definable approach at this time, but they are united in that their concept of the imagination is constantly evolving. These critics bring in information that their antecedents would have discounted, such as maps, letters, psychological information, and even seemingly unrelated sources such as Eastern religious doctrine and neuroscience. There is no prevailing view of the imagination for modern critics, and many of their arguments are unprecedented. Mark J. Bruhn, for example, uses fMRI scans and other such technologies in order to evaluate how Wordsworth’s imagination may have worked and determine why he represents it the way he does in *The Prelude*. This critical movement is substantial because it speaks to the directions in which criticism and academia are moving, or at least have been moving over the last two decades.

When I began this project, I was interested in the dynamic nature of criticism about Wordsworth and the imagination. But ultimately I found that as I read various scholars’ writings about the imagination, the comparisons and contrasts illuminated
the waves of criticism in ways that I did not expect. Though I set out only to compare
the different understandings of Wordsworth’s imagination, I discovered that the three
schools lend themselves to a concurrent study of criticism and theory because they
vary in noteworthy ways. In fact, in addition to the central issue of this study—how
the critical treatment of Wordsworth’s imagination has evolved—other broad changes
have occurred that affect criticism both of *The Prelude* and of literature in general.

For instance, in these three schools there is a movement away from critics
consciously studying similar aspects of a text and responding directly to one another,
which was common in the trends that preceded them. Already in the poststructuralist
book *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Hartman’s preface defends the inclusion of all
the essays in the volume despite the fact that they do not center on the same issues,
which suggests that this lack of consensus is novel in criticism (ix). By the time
historicism arises there is seemingly no expectation that critics directly engage with
each other, and thus they do not defend their range of study. Moreover, in recent
criticism writers actively seek areas of analysis that no one else has examined.
Additionally, changes in the ways that information is conveyed have affected
criticism. With the immediacy of information via the Internet, critics and audiences
have instant access to a wider variety of materials, and thus literary criticism has
grown to include evidence from surprising sources and specialties. Writers who
study literature can glean enough information about other disciplines to inform an
argument about *The Prelude* from an unexpected angle.

Using Wordsworth’s imagination as a lens, one can see how much broader
critical approaches have become with the shifting focuses of different theories. And
as they explore the imagination, scholars elucidate their modes of inquiry and exemplify the novel aspects of their schools. Although these schools of literary criticism have vastly different methodologies and often-inconsistent conclusions, as the scope of critical materials continues to expand over time one central issue remains: understanding Wordsworth’s imagination in *The Prelude*. 
Chapter 1: Poststructuralism

“The world of the imagination then becomes a more complete, more totalized reality than that of everyday experience, a three-dimensional reality that would add a factor of depth to the flat surface with which we are usually confronted.” – Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (34)

In his “Essay Supplementary to the Preface to *Poems* (1815),” Wordsworth states, “Poverty of language is the primary cause of the use which we make of the word, Imagination” (658). Poststructuralist critics agree and focus on the nature of language as they study literature. One of the main concerns for this school of criticism is deconstructing language in order to understand an author’s meaning. Their analysis of the imagination is in large part linguistic, and they support their arguments with evidence taken directly from the lines of the text. Their readings of *The Prelude* focus on how Wordsworth’s presentations of the imagination rely and comment on the nature of language. They compare the relationship between the signifier and sign to that between Wordsworth’s poetry and the world he represents. Poststructuralists examine the various ways in which the poet suggests the imagination mediates between reality and the mind. In this chapter, I will trace how several poststructuralist critics approach Wordsworth’s imagination in terms of language and examine their attention to his use of allegory, hyperbole, intertextual allusions, and other forms of intercession between the mind and the external world.

In the poststructuralist approach to literature, all the possible meanings of the work are contained within a text. However, there is no one meaning because all signs
must be interpreted; so while meaning comes only from the text, it is not always obvious (Klages 47). Because we speak and understand one another in a system of pre-existing words, our thoughts and opinions are influenced and framed by the structure of language (47). We can express thoughts only in words that others can comprehend. According to poststructuralists, language and communication is based on a “sign” or “signified,” which is an object or concept that the author hopes to describe, and a “signifier,” which is the language he uses to convey that thought. Paul de Man notes the inescapable discrepancy between signifier and sign and labels this discrepancy the “distinctive curse of all language” (11). By definition, he says, there must exist “the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual sign coincide with what it signifies” (11). Though language is the tool through which we express ourselves to others, it is an imperfect tool; words cannot precisely convey a feeling or experience to another person. Wordsworth himself refers to the “sad incompetence of human speech” in Book VI of the 1850 version of The Prelude, suggesting that he, too, acknowledged the deficits of language (593). In addition to decrying the “incompetence” of language, poststructuralists point to what Mary Jacobus, in her essay “Wordsworth and the Language of the Dream,” calls “the arbitrariness endemic in language” (623). Since there is an unavoidable distance between the actual object, the word used to describe it, and the reader’s comprehension, to some degree the words a person uses are indiscriminate. Words cannot fully express what the author intends, so whichever ones he chooses will ultimately fail him, and thus the choice is arbitrary.
Nonetheless, the poststructuralists are concerned certain the positive aspects of language as well. Critics attend to the many ways in which Wordsworth manipulates language to effectively convey meaning, often by creating bidirectional relationships. For example, Wordsworth simultaneously uses the language of the imagination to describe the world, and uses the language of the world to describe the imagination. Furthermore, poststructuralists see language as a tool Wordsworth uses to bridge the gap between the signifier and the sign; that is, Wordsworth uses his imagination to link the thing he is describing and the ways in which he describes it. According to Tilottama Rajan, this desire to link words and meanings accounts for the Romantic poets’ prominent use of allegory, which is a major area of study in the poststructuralist approach and one to which I will return later in this chapter. Rajan explains that the use of allegory “concedes” that whatever word the author selects will be unsatisfactory and the concept he is trying to convey “exists at a certain distance from actuality, and must be rendered abstractly rather than realistically” (319). By employing such linguistic devices, Wordsworth reveals how his imagination influences his perception of the world and vice versa. According to the poststructuralist view, through the imagination Wordsworth endows language with meaning, and through language Wordsworth endows the imagination with meaning.

There are two integral passages of *The Prelude* to which poststructuralist critics repeatedly return in their treatments of language and the imagination: the Arab’s Dream and the Simplon Pass. In the Arab’s Dream section of Book V, Wordsworth the character falls asleep while reading *Don Quixote* and dreams of an Arab who comes to him on a camel baring a stone, a lance, and a shell. This man
explicitly tells Wordsworth that the stone represents Euclid’s *Elements* and that the shell represents an unnamed book of prophesies. Wordsworth holds the shell to his ear and it tells him of a dismal future: a flood is coming and all the books in the world will be destroyed. The Arab then abandons Wordsworth, who suddenly sees water rushing toward him. He abruptly awakens and notices *Don Quixote* sitting at his side. This section is largely thought to represent Wordsworth’s despair in trying to preserve art.

The second important passage to which many critics refer is the Simplon Pass episode. In this portion of Book VI, Wordsworth and his companion set out to climb the Swiss Alps. However, they are twice met with disappointment. First they see Mont Blanc and are underwhelmed by its appearance:

…That day we first

Beheld 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… (VI: 452-456)

Later they are eager to cross the Alps at Simplon Pass, but when they ask a peasant for directions, he reveals that they have already unwittingly passed the crossing point they were so looking forward to seeing. Wordsworth is initially distressed. Nonetheless, almost immediately after this incident Wordsworth the poet explains that he is able to recognize the power of the imagination, the “unfathered vapour” that changed how he saw the situation (VI: 527). After he overcomes his disappointment, Wordsworth is capable of seeing the world differently. The imagination takes over,
and his mind is “strong in itself,” able to change his reality (VI: 547). He views paradoxical or improbable images: “woods decaying, never to be decayed,” frozen waterfalls, “torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,” and muttering rocks (VI: 557, 558, 561, 562). In both of these episodes, the imagination edits Wordsworth’s view of reality, whether through the allegorical style of the dream, or through later reflection. Poststructuralist critics frequently refer to these passages, in which the imagination is palpable, both textually and thematically.

One facet of Wordsworth’s imagination that poststructuralists are interested in is how he uses language to mediate between his interior world and the world of external reality. Wordsworth’s thoughts frequently turn inward, and his contemplations do not consist solely of facts—he sometimes recalls situations as altered by his imagination rather than true to reality. As a result, critics often consider representations of his inner thoughts to signify the imagination. Wordsworth uses the rhetoric and imagery of the outer, universally known world in order to best express his thoughts; at the same time, what makes them worth expressing is that they are separate from that same outer, universally known world. Imagination and reality inform one another throughout The Prelude.

Poststructuralist critics also examine the various ways in which Wordsworth manipulates language to more implicitly convey his imagination. That is, they study the ways in which his imagination mediates between reality and what he presents in The Prelude through indirect language such as hyperbole and quotation. Of Wordsworth’s poetry in general, Geoffrey H. Hartman writes, “How much of it tends toward the condition of quotation, attenuated allusion and paraphrase!” (185).
Hartman suggests that Wordsworth was aware of the need to mediate between mind and world, and that he often used his predecessors’ works to convey meaning. The imagination of one man is a unique thing, but by comparing it to or describing it through well-known works, Wordsworth attempts to make it universal. Hartman does not always think that the use of paraphrase helps Wordsworth make his point. He argues that because the works to which the poet refers are so widely recognized and grandiose, Wordsworth does not succeed in aligning himself with great authors, but rather distances himself through contrast. Hartman claims that Wordsworth desires to use works like Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and the Bible to convey the imagination to his readers, but that “the strength of the Classics themselves interfere” (186). Instead, quotation overshadows the imagination: what is relevant to the reader is the reference to a universally known text, not the poet’s new meaning.

Paraphrasing Harold Bloom, de Man argues that, “since the imagination is unimaginable, it can only be stated as hyperbole” (270). According to this view, as in Hartman’s, men are incapable of describing the imagination. Vocabulary from the material world is the only language Wordsworth has available to him to convey his inner thoughts to the public, so he uses extremes in order to express the power of the imagination. Thus language both limits and constructs the connection between Wordsworth’s inner and outer worlds. This is perhaps because, as Hartman says, “no easy, integrating path leads from the absolute or abrupt image to the meditation that preserves it” (185-6). Whether by reference to outside texts or by hyperbole, Wordsworth employs indirect language to help him describe to his audience the imagination and the world as perceived by the imagination.
While Hartman and de Man focus on the indescribable qualities of the imagination, Mary Jacobus focuses on how it creates a world in which the reader can understand Wordsworth’s inner thoughts. She explains that language and dreams share the common ability to create (627). Wordsworth uses language to make worlds for readers in which they can comprehend his imagination. By conveying his words to us, Wordsworth creates pictures in our minds, which is what the imagination is meant to do. These thoughts and images would be impossible for him to express across space and time if not for language. Jacobus refers to the Arab Dream passage, in which Wordsworth applauds all dreamers because they “…make our wish our power, our thought a deed./ An empire, a possession…” (V: 552-3).

Jacobus argues that the most important moments in *The Prelude* are those in which language and dreams coincide—that is, when language makes a sphere in which dreams and the imagination can be understood. Furthermore, she writes, “Making thought a deed is one function of the Dark Interpreter, language. Its movements may be profoundly disquieting, since it puts us in possession of our thoughts. But it is a disquiet central to the alliance of language and imagination…” (628). According to Jacobus, in Book V the mind creates the dream that is a symbol for books, literature, and language itself. At the same time, Wordsworth uses language, via metaphors, to express this very idea. Thus Wordsworth can only explain his inner thoughts to his reader through the combination of a constitutive language aided by the imagination and the imagination aided by language. Though Hartman, de Man, and Jacobus are not in direct dialogue, they are all attentive to the
ways in which Wordsworth, through language, helps us to understand both his imagination and the world.

Don L. Jobe introduces biography into this discussion and notes that “The relationship of mind and world, subject and object, was of primary concern to Wordsworth,” not just in *The Prelude*, but also throughout his career as a writer (583). Like other poststructuralists, Jobe argues that Wordsworth was aware of the difficulties of using language to express his imagination. He also posits that Wordsworth deliberately creates a parallel between his presentation of imagination and the interaction of subject and object throughout the poem. That is, as Wordsworth struggles to find the words to describe his meaning, he sees a parallel in his larger-scale struggle to bring his inner thoughts to the outside world. For Jobe, as Wordsworth developed his use of language, he played an important role in literary criticism. By shaping his own personal theory of language Wordsworth sought to reconcile “idealism and natural philosophy,” which is to say that he sought to meld his imaginings and reality (Jobe 584). Indeed, many poststructuralist critics believe that Wordsworth consciously used language to mediate between his mind and the real world, though they have different theories as to how he did this.

Allegory, as previously mentioned, is one of the concrete literary tools that poststructuralists argue Wordsworth used to mediate between mind and world. Through allegory the narrator of *The Prelude* can simultaneously speak of the present and the past. Of allegory’s importance in the poststructuralist school, de Man writes, “The dialectical relationship between subject and object is no longer the central statement of romantic thought, but this dialectic is now located entirely in the
temporal relationships that exist within a system of allegorical signs” (208). As Wordsworth recalls places or events and describes things not present, the imagination is at work; and when he draws unlikely links between incidents or concepts, his imagination is responsible. Though they do not always agree on the specifics, various critics agree that allegory is significant to Wordsworth’s treatment of the imagination because it aids him in presenting his inner thoughts to his readers. Poststructuralist critics tend to agree, too, that allegory is linked to recollection and movement across time and space.

Moreover, Douglas Kneale in his work “The Rhetoric of Imagination in ‘The Prelude,’” argues that thematic allegory is mirrored linguistically in the poem. He uses the example of “error, wandering, deviation from a path,” which is a part of the plot and one of Wordsworth’s major themes throughout The Prelude (Kneale 113). Kneale refers to Wordsworth’s ruminations after discovering he accidentally crossed the Alps in Book VI of the 1850 Prelude, in which the narrator simply states, “I was lost” (1850 VI: 596). According to Kneale there are “fundamental deviations of figural language itself,” which create an allegory of reading, meaning there is a link between the plot and the writing style (113). While Wordsworth describes experiences from his past that serve to illustrate greater meanings, he underscores the importance of the allegory on another level: if the poet is lost, so is his language. Kneale cites other parts of the Simplon Pass passage in which language, like Wordsworth the character, is in error. For example, Wordsworth says the imagination is only “so called” due to the deficits of language—Wordsworth is disappointed in a failed language as he fails to find the crossing point over the pass
Wordsworth uses his imagination to create a link between an earlier event in his life and the language he uses to convey it. The mediation of language situates the event in the present, as well. His imagination envisions these connections and creates the poetry.

Likewise, William H. Galperin argues that there is a bidirectional quality to allegory, although he focuses on the relationship between the referent and the referee. Much as the relationships between signifier and sign suggest that naming an object gives it meaning, and simultaneously that the meaning of the name is the object, Galperin argues that within The Prelude allegory and referentiality go two ways. Furthermore, references gain meaning by referring to specifics, and, in so doing, referring to generalities:

In such a conception, particulars or signifiers are not self-referential any more than they refer immediately to universals. Removed from their literalness to begin with, signifiers in this view literally resist symbolic transformation or their cooptation by what we might term a Romantic imagination. Instead these signifiers refer to other particulars, in this case to the larger book of which they are in a sense still parts. (Galperin 614)

Wordsworth’s allegories ultimately do not refer to specifics but to generalities, at least in the sense that they refer to The Prelude as a whole. That is to say that by being a symbol for one thing, particulars become a symbol for many things in the minds of readers. Therefore, symbols meant to point to broader concepts must necessarily point to themselves, as well. Likewise, while allegory is typically studied
from the perspective of what it is meant to refer to, Galperin argues it is important to look more closely at the actual words the author chooses to use. In a similar vein, Galperin says that Wordsworth the poet and Wordsworth the character in *The Prelude* are the same person. Whether it is the use of allegory alone that removes the poet from the situation, or the ways that the poet “situates himself at critical removal through allegory”—meaning he uses allegory to create a second self, such as the narrator within the poem—is irrelevant (Galperin 615). What is substantial is that because he refers to himself as a character while he writes as a poet, he imagines a bidirectional link between his two selves. By using allegory from his own life, he necessarily connects the two versions of himself: “… the referent, by gradual terms, becomes the referee” (615). Galperin argues that Wordsworth’s use of allegory is not simply one thing representing another, but one thing representing many things, and thus on one level also representing itself.

De Man suggests that symbol and allegory differ in temporal ways (198). Whereas a symbol can refer to an actual object or concept, allegory “designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference” (207). Allegory’s ability to simultaneously represent past and present makes it a valuable tool for Wordsworth. For example, in another poem, “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth writes as if he were facing the abbey in that moment, when in fact he is recalling a particular instance there from years past. Throughout *The Prelude*, as well, Wordsworth uses his imagination to bring past events to the foreground in order to meld them with the present and also to make meaningful
connections between distinctive circumstances. The distinctive circumstances can be simple and temporal, or complicated and created by the imagination. An example of an imaginative distinction is the Simplon Pass episode, in which Wordsworth recognizes the power of the imagination and sees impossible things that are decidedly different from reality and from what he has just described. Though he is at first upset, “The dull and heavy slackening that ensued/ Upon these tidings by the Peasant given/ Was soon dislodged…” (VI: 549-51). As he and his friend continue on their journey, he begins to describe the “woods decaying, never to be decayed,” and “Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side/ As if a voice were in them,” until the frenzy of all the impossible things fully gives way to the imagination:

…all 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. (VI: 557; 563-4; 568-72)

By using language to blend the impossible and the actual, he demonstrates the power of the imagination and gives his readers a better understanding of what he desires from reality. In addition to the imagination, the deeper, symbolic meaning of this passage is key: Wordsworth must come to terms with the disappointment of the hike, an allegory for his coming to terms with many disappointments and unexpected turns in his adult life. Thus, Wordsworth can use situations from the past and from the present, forcing readers to draw meaning from the similarities as well as the
differences. His memory calls to mind situations, and his imagination creatively connects them.

Another facet of Wordsworth’s poetry related to language and the imagination is his command of negative space—that is, in *The Prelude* he effectively controls the inevitable disparities of language and knowledge. He demonstrates this facility in his poetry by creating a distinct distance between the signifier and the sign, as well as in passages that imply a temporal distance. Kneale, for example, writes that oftentimes “…Wordsworth’s interest…seems to be more on what he does not command than on what he does” (111). Wordsworth was aware of the necessary gaps in his poetry: gaps between signifier and sign, gaps in time, and gaps that result from an emotional change. According to Kneale, the discovery of space in his poetry is not a surprising or even unwelcome one for the poet:

…one should remember that the inability of an author to communicate immaculately his “impassioned feelings” is also strategic and conventional, appearing in such guises as the Shakespearean “tongue-tied” muse, the Miltonic “forc’d fingers rude,” and the Wordsworthian consciousness of the difference between his grasp and “the reach of words.” (111)

Indeed, according to some critics, this gap between signifier and sign is a rich source of meaning. Whenever there are indescribable elements or a palpable discordance between meaning and words, readers can recognize that the poet is attempting to convey a difficult and therefore significant idea.
De Man again situates this discussion within the bounds of temporality, and contends that space in Wordsworth’s poetry can be a result of time rather than language. For example, space necessarily develops between an original event and the recollection of that event. This is evident in *The Prelude* as Wordsworth the poet differs from Wordsworth the character. De Man argues that in general we have original emotions in reaction to an event, but that we only later have a need to name these emotions. As time passes, these original emotions no longer exist, and in an attempt to represent them when they are not present, we fictionalize them. De Man’s argument about emotions and space is strongly linked to the imagination—feelings tied to certain places are much different based on whether or not we are in those places, and when we are away the imagination can create an idealized emotion (196-7). The feelings that we later represent are thus “fake” or nonexistent. Wordsworth’s emotions as he wrote about climbing Mount Snowdon are different than the emotions he felt when he actually climbed Mount Snowdon. Wordsworth’s own view of recalled emotion is similar, but not as negative. In the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, he writes that that original feelings disappear in tranquility, but upon recalling an event, “an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind” (611). These emotions are “kindred” but undeniably and inescapably different. This space created between emotions is inevitable due to the passing of time and the inherent weakness of language.

Jacobus argues that since meaning can be found in the gap between signifier and sign, some of the most climactic moments of *The Prelude* occur “when the limits
of comprehension and of language are reached together, and the invisible world is disclosed” (618). Jacobus refers to the loaded symbol of the book in the Arab Dream sequence. The tome signifies the literary canon, reading, education, and the home of Wordsworth’s imagination. And yet, Wordsworth cannot say this. These “shocks of indeterminacy,” as Jacobus calls them, are linked to intermediacy and Wordsworth’s attempts to connect two things or concepts (618). When a word does not fully convey meaning, readers can detect this imperfect link, and glean very important information about what Wordsworth struggles to describe and comprehend. According to Jacobus, Wordsworth’s unconscious crossing of the Alps denotes a time “when the light of sense goes out in flashes and reveals the invisible world” (635). Here Wordsworth explicitly reveals to his reader what exists in the space between the mind and reality, and therefore what exists between the signifier and the sign. As previously noted, when Wordsworth overcomes his disappointment, he sees paradoxical images. This is the realm in which the most stimulating possibilities exist, but it is a realm that is usually hidden from him. Only in overcoming disappointment in nature with the help of nature can he see into this space between imagination and reality. Jacobus also argues that the importance of this space between object and meaning was evident to Wordsworth, who at times chose to represent it thematically. In “Tintern Abbey,” she notes, the poet hopes that the mind will transform itself into a mansion. This area that Wordsworth wants the mind to become is large and has many rooms, making evident the importance of space in Wordsworth’s thinking (620). One can also see this throughout The Prelude, where Wordsworth frequently presents large empty spaces in nature, such as his view of the Alps from a great distance.
Galperin, too, examines negative space. “Meaning, as elsewhere in Wordsworth inevitably lies in what is not said here or what is communicated indirectly,” he states (615). For Galperin, the use of allegory “checks the expansiveness of the idealized object” since that self-same object confines itself. Galperin recognizes that the book in the Arab’s Dream passage represents literature and imagination in their entireties, but he also insists that it must simply represent a book. What matters is what Wordsworth does not say directly: the emphasis is not on the single book but on all the other meanings that book contains. According to Galperin, the indirect meaning of the book detracts from “both The Prelude and its idealized poetical self” (615). There is space between signifier and sign and Wordsworth manipulates it. But by saying one thing and meaning another, Galperin argues that Wordsworth loses some readers and takes away from the original sign. Though Galperin claims that Wordsworth achieves his goal through allegory, the empty space is also a disadvantage because it detracts from the meaning of the word. When Wordsworth mentions a “book” and means something else, he diminishes the power of the actual book (615).

While most critics accept language as a necessary tool for Wordsworth in terms of mediation, allegory, and negative space, some scholars further this argument by claiming that language is the true focus of The Prelude. Language is vital to Wordsworth because it allows him to express his inner ideas to the outside world. Some poststructuralist critics argue that language is in fact so important to Wordsworth that it becomes the purpose of the poem, which was perhaps
Wordsworth’s conscious decision. Kneale suggests the imagination is actually a trope for language throughout the poem:

   *Language* usurps sense in this passage; and if “Imagination” is put for the power which usurps, we may safely say that here “Imagination” is but a trope for language. The naming of the power is the naming of language; language *is* power; and for language to thus talk about itself is to enter an abyss of linguistic reflexiveness unequaled in *The Prelude*. (119)

This gives language a heavier weight than most critics assign it.

Jacobus, too, writes that the “necessary fiction” of the poem is the “purification of language,” and she says that Wordsworth’s writing and rewriting of the poem, his search for the perfect words, and his creative manipulation of language are ultimately the center of *The Prelude* (623). Kneale argues that language was so pervasive in Wordsworth’s life and writings that as the poet attempted to narrate his own life, he instead ended up narrating the “semiological problems of that narration” (125). The argument for this alternate purpose of the poem can be made in regards to the aforementioned passage in which Wordsworth’s search for the right path becomes the search for the right words and for the proper way to express himself.

Wordsworth’s use of language in *The Prelude* is complex. He thinks through his use of language throughout the poem, meditating on its importance as well as on its shortcomings. Language mediates between his mind and the external world, provides meaning through allegory, and even helps in its failings by creating an advantageous space between signifier and sign. Thus arises the argument that
perhaps *The Prelude* is about language; the tool meant to describe is actually the thing described. Whether or not it is the intended theme of *The Prelude*, language undeniably plays an integral role throughout the work. Poststructuralist critics emphasize language as a central concern for Wordsworth and concentrate on how he uses allegory, hyperbole, and other forms of mediation to bring his private imagination to the public world of the text.
Chapter 2: Historicism

The historicist school of criticism, prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, approaches Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and Romantic poems with themes and techniques centered on history. As a poem that contains “fictional forms within political reality,” *The Prelude* allows such critics to examine biography, autobiography, poetics, politics, fiction, fact, and the imagination all at once (Bainbridge 85). The intangibility of the imagination appeals to historicists just as it does to other critics, but in this program the imagination looks decidedly different. Instead of the poststructuralist emphasis on allegory, historicists are interested in how Wordsworth creates a new sense of history with the use of his imagination. Instead of acting as a mediator between the poet’s mind and reality, Wordsworth’s imagination helps him understand the political turmoil around him. Instead of the imagination filling negative spaces, it denies history. And instead of the extreme claim being that the imagination is a trope for language, it is a trope for Napoleon Bonaparte. Most scholars of Wordsworth maintain that, whether consciously or unconsciously, the imagination helped the poet work through key issues in his life, and for historicists these issues are historical. As I aim to demonstrate in this chapter, historicists differentiate themselves from their predecessors by arguing that the importance of the imagination stems from more than textual examples, and its significance is strongly linked to politics and how Wordsworth interprets and creates the history he sets out to record in *The Prelude*.

The historicists differ from and react to poststructuralists on many key issues. The historicist program prioritizes authorial intent and reader interpretation. They
also seek to bring new works to the forefront of literary criticism and to focus on new aspects of classic texts. Female poets and writers who have been in other ways marginalized gain a new prominence in this school. Wordsworth’s *Prelude* remains significant, but new facets and interpretations of the poem arise. In their introduction to *New Historical Literary Study*, Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds argue that historicism derives from a desire to create something new and to avoid developing “one more text-based interpretive method” (6). Moving away from interpreting a poem based solely on what is on the page is a staple of historicism and a reaction against the preceding movements of literary criticism. Unlike poststructuralism, historicism aims to take into account outside sources. Historicists read texts for historical and social context, and they consider biographical and autobiographical information to learn about the author and inform their assertions. In *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism*, Jerome J. McGann states that with the authority provided to him by the then-new approach of historicism, he will bear in mind the “expressed intentions of the author,” which is an unusual method compared to those of other theories (17).

This school of criticism also allows for contemporary readings of classic works; the authors’ language remains integral, but the ways critics and readers respond to a text are likewise important. Marjorie Levinson, in the introduction to *Rethinking Historicism*, writes that the key to historicism is to accept that “a truly historicist project is also a presentist project” (6). Information about the time period that was not readily available until historical research provided it in modern time is considered valid evidence for interpretation. Similarly, McGann suggests:
From any contemporary point of view, then, each poem we read has—when read as a work which comes to us from the past—two interlocking histories, one that derives from the author’s expressed decisions and purposes, and the other that derives from the critical reactions of the poem’s various readers. (17)

McGann goes on to argue that critics ought to also be concerned with the present and the future, which make the meaning they take away from the poem more universal than the poet’s original intentions (17). This school of criticism, then, acknowledges both the poem as the author himself situated it in history, and the poem as critics and readers come to understand it.

Yet historicism is indebted to poststructuralism in certain ways, such as their lingering interest in language, specifically referentiality and materiality. Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds assert that “new historicism tends to regard texts in materialist terms,” though they go on to add that the texts are objects in the world and therefore pieces of human history (4). Celeste Langan writes of materialism in The Prelude in another sense, arguing that Wordsworth himself “dissociates his materialism from the restrictively formal sphere of linguistic materialism and demands its historicization” (142). Much like poststructuralists, these critics attend to the concept of materiality and to the poet who makes the poem a reality. However, historicists consider what materiality signifies beyond the written document—they consider how the poem, the book, and the poet are situated in the world and the time period.
Additionally, linguistic referentiality is a part of the historicist approach to literature just as it was a part of the poststructuralist approach, but it is definitively different. In McGann’s introduction, which is entitled “A Point of Reference,” he argues that reference does not come simply from language or from the internal workings of the poem. Instead, it originates from the fact that the texts are not “self-enclosed verbal constructors, or looped intertextual fields of autonomous signifiers and signifieds”—they exist in a system of other texts, and thus necessarily refer to those other texts (3). Alan Liu asserts that, for Wordsworth, the apocalypse is reference and the only real power of the imagination is its ability to refer to history (35). The poet’s imagination is required when he creates literature that relates to history, as he must recall the events and creatively alter or refer to them. Reference was also important to Wordsworth as a scholar—he wrote about the necessity of “emotion recollected in tranquility” in his 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (611). Terence Allan Hoagwood, writing about this same preface, argues that “Language is not an alienated aesthetic event but a medium and ground of ideological confrontation,” which for historicist critics always involves an encounter with a real historical context of events and debates (181). While there are some vestiges of poststructuralism in historicism, the historicists’ overarching themes of history, biography, and context alter the significance of the focuses they inherit.

One way in which historicist critics differentiate themselves from their predecessors is their study of two bidirectional relationships that stem from the poet using his imagination to reconstruct history. The first is the relationship between the past and the present; the present imagination both recalls and reconstructs the past.
Wordsworth occasionally constructs a past that is not congruent with historical facts, and this is particularly noteworthy to critics. The second relationship is that between the poet’s personal history and world history. Wordsworth’s background affects how he interprets historical events, and these historical events affect the course of his life. These relationships work in tandem: as the poet recalls historical and personal pasts, this affects his outlook on the present and the future, and simultaneously his present knowledge colors how he sees the past. Levinson writes that Wordsworth, like most Romantic poets, felt a desire to create the age through his poetry, while at the same time the age helped create his poetry (3). Wordsworth’s desire to shape the epoch in which he lived manifests itself in various ways, but from the perspective of the historicist critics, history is always a part of the process and the resulting poem.

Cox and Reynolds argue that what distinguishes this newer wave of historicism from “old” historicism is its “stress not upon the direct recreation of the past, but rather the process by which the past is constructed or invented” (4). Various critics examine the ways in which Wordsworth constructs history. At times Wordsworth presents a fact or event in *The Prelude* that is not necessarily accurate. Nonetheless, the work is inescapably and purposefully situated within the context of history, and he often presents these changed facts or events as history. The lines between fact and fiction and between objective history and subjective memories are blurred. There are two planes on which historicist critics consider Wordsworth’s created history: the personal plane of his biographical history, and the more widely encompassing plane of world history.
The historicist interest in Wordsworth’s creative representation of his personal history manifests itself in queries into the veracity of certain elements of *The Prelude*. For example, in *Napoleon and English Romanticism*, Simon Bainbridge questions the disappointed reactions Wordsworth records at Mont Blanc and Mount Snowdon. Though Bainbridge’s claim is more about how the poem surpasses aesthetic readings, he notes the extreme responses Wordsworth has to nature in these moments. Bainbridge argues that there is no evidence, either in Wordsworth’s personal letters or in his *Descriptive Sketches*, of his ever having been dissatisfied at these instances (58). This use of biographical information to challenge what is in the text of the poem is indicative of the historicist program and their examination of the creative license Wordsworth uses when casting his own history.

Wordsworth’s construction of personal history is not solely related to unverifiable occurrences, but also to the glossing over of important parts of his life in *The Prelude*. Indeed, perhaps the most illustrative examples of his edited history come from what he chose to leave out of *The Prelude*. Celeste Langan argues that Wordsworth deliberately chose to omit his mistress, Annette Vallon, and their illegitimate child, Caroline, despite their importance and the fact that the poem is a self-proclaimed autobiography (148). Nicholas Roe, who likewise focuses on the women’s pointed absence, calls these missing elements Wordsworth’s “unadmitted selves” and says they can be seen only in the spaces between stanzas in *The Prelude* (102). Though Wordsworth was at times quite forthcoming about personal details and experiences, Roe notes his “secretiveness” throughout the 1790s and calls this Wordsworth’s “selective history” (101). The decisions Wordsworth makes about
what to include or omit from his history affect how he and his readers view his past decisions, present actions, and future possibilities; simultaneously, his present knowledge of how issues were resolved causes him to edit how he presents his past to his readers.

In addition to personal history, Wordsworth imaginatively constructs world history throughout the poem, though with less liberty. He writes about the French Revolution in the first version of The Prelude in 1799, but by the time he expands the poem to the full 1805 Prelude, he has taken advantage of fifteen years of historical and scholarly interpretation. Bainbridge argues that over time Wordsworth chose to add moments that were not just the most meaningful to him, but that occurred on key dates or in key places, and which were therefore also more meaningful to an audience that had experienced the Revolution. Once history had been recorded, certain facts had been solidified, and locations had been retrospectively imbued with meaning, Wordsworth was able to situate his poem around what he considered the “clearest historical landmarks” (Bainbridge 67). Some examples of Wordsworth’s purposeful location choices will be discussed in later sections about Napoleon.

Liu connects this selection of historical facts with the imagination by suggesting that before finishing the 1805 version of his poem, Wordsworth went back and added markers of history to the imagination passages of Book VI. Liu postulates that this was Wordsworth’s way of proposing that the mind must be “authorized” or “grounded” in history (23). In addition to giving his poem weight, the history registers make his poem more accessible to a general audience. In another bidirectional relationship, the imagination helps Wordsworth reconstruct the global
occurrences of the past, and at the same time this knowledge of history helps him understand his imagination. For example, in Book IX Wordsworth and his friend Michel de Beaupuy discuss politics and history. Their concept of men who seek change is related strongly to mental faculties, both their own and those of the revolutionaries:

Elate we looked
Upon their virtues, saw in rudest men
Self-sacrifice the firmest, generous love
And continence of mind, and sense of right
Uppermost in the midst of fiercest strife. (IX: 391-5)

Wordsworth’s definition of a good man is influenced by the revolutionary causes that dominated his young adulthood, and this definition is both conceived by and an influence on his imagination.

In *Wordsworth’s Second Nature* James K. Chandler provides an example of a moment in *The Prelude* that shows both the relationship between the past and the present and the relationship between the poet’s history and world history. He writes that in the Book IX passage in which Wordsworth has his first conversation with Beaupuy, the poet desires to speak with his friend about the future but “finds his imagination inexorably drawn to things past” (203). When Wordsworth confronts the war and his imagination, a link exists between past and present that cannot be broken; as much as the two men look to the future, they must recall the past. Additionally, this scene, like the poem as a whole, represents Wordsworth’s personal history and is infused with his personal imagination, and yet he is relaying a conversation he had
with a great general of the French Revolutionary cause, who is a symbol of history that Wordsworth’s original readers would have recognized. Thus, in one small scene he combines his personal memories and global history.

Hoagwood argues that Romantic poems should not be read as either purely personal or purely thematic because they are not that simple (178). The assertions in Wordsworth’s purportedly historical, autobiographical poem are not always historically sound. Wordsworth constructs a poem that is both true and not true, both about himself and about the world as a whole. Liu writes of an “alliance” between text and context; Liu’s word choice suggests that the historical realities and the poetic realities work not against but with each other (25). Most historicists agree that personal history and world history are linked in the poem and that Wordsworth creates both forms of history through the use of his imagination.

Historicist discussions of The Prelude also concern the political climate of the time. The political developments of the late eighteenth and very early nineteenth centuries, as well as general political theory, influenced Wordsworth’s writing and his idea of the imagination. Roe argues that all Romantic poets were influenced by the “inseparability of politics, nature, and the imagination at this time period” (3). As with many elements of Wordsworth’s poetry, the relationship between imagination and politics is a reciprocal one. Hoagwood asserts that much as the historical goings-on of the time influenced the development of the poet’s young mind, his understanding of the theoretical imagination also “informed his political arguments” (185). Hoagwood also maintains that mental structures and political institutions are reciprocal in The Prelude.
The relationship between the imagination and politics was not, according to Hoagwood, a stagnant one for Wordsworth. He argues that the poet changed his opinions of the imagination and of political ideology between the years of 1793 and 1796, and that the evidence is in his only work of theatrical drama, *The Borderers* (1797). Wordsworth released the play just two years before he completed the first version of *The Prelude*, and it indicates the poet’s internal struggle with the relationship between political ideology and imagination, which Hoagwood links to the idea of fiction:

> Wordsworth’s arguments concerning the mind’s activity in the construction of ideology have thus changed. Imaginative construction and deconstruction are in 1796 presented as a nihilistic pit into which the imaginative thinker has fallen; in 1793, such an imaginative deconstruction and reconstruction of the social world had set the thinker free. In 1796, Wordsworth is hostile toward the imagination. (187)

Hoagwood goes on to say that Wordsworth eventually “works his way back to a fondness” for the imagination by rethinking his ideas both of fiction and of ideological formations (187). While Hoagwood’s argument and the time frame to which he refers pertain more to Wordsworth’s drama, this information demonstrates that Wordsworth’s ideas were constantly evolving, much like the political climate of the time.

Also important to the historicist program is how Wordsworth’s vocabulary allows him to include politics in a more direct way. Historicists attend to diction not
because it consists of signifiers within the system of language, but rather because individual words can be imbued with political significance. Before the French Revolution and Great Britain’s inconsistent ideological support for that movement, there was little cause for poets to include political terms in their work. There are examples of such words appearing in British art by earlier poets such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Charlotte Smith, but Wordsworth’s body of work begins to contain political terms only in response to the French Revolution. In fact, Hoagwood explains, “At about the same time [1798], and enduringly afterward, Wordsworth allows a language of domination, oppression, and authoritarian hierarchy to invade his treatments of fictionality and imagination” (190). Hoagwood calls this Wordsworth’s “more openly ideological frame of reference,” and refers to the “hierarchically organized” moonlit ascent of Mount Snowdon in Book XIII (190). In the Snowdon passage Wordsworth writes of “domination,” which denotes political hierarchies (XIII: 77). The poet also mentions a “mighty mind” and “the grossest minds,” thus comparing mental faculties and creating hierarchies in a politically charged way he may not have done earlier in his career (XIII: 69, 83). As politics became more central to British life during and directly after the French Revolution, they became more central to Wordsworth’s poetry.

A specific political figure that many historicist critics trace throughout The Prelude is Napoleon Bonaparte, a man in whom Wordsworth seems to have been fascinated. Wordsworth’s vocabulary throughout The Prelude often makes deliberate reference to this conqueror with the use of the words “usurper” and “usurpation.” According to Liu,
After 18 Brumaire, “usurper” was applied to Bonaparte in English parliamentary speeches, pamphlets, and newspapers with the consistency of a technical term and irrespective of party affiliation or sympathy with French republicanism. Whether he was thought merely to epitomize republicanism or to break with it, the premise was that Napoleon was a usurper. (26)

Use of the term “usurper” first peaked between 1799 and 1800, around the time that Wordsworth was revising *The Prelude*, and the use of the word is therefore significant throughout the poem (Liu 26). Indeed, much as some poststructuralist critics make the claim that Wordsworth’s imagination is a trope for language, some historicist critics make the parallel claim that Wordsworth’s imagination is a trope for Napoleon. Whether or not critics make this particular assertion, Wordsworth’s concept of the imagination is undeniably linked to Napoleon in the historicist program. Historicist scholars see two main types of evidence that Napoleon is a part of Wordsworth’s concept of the imagination: moments when Wordsworth presents the imagination as a “usurper,” and moments when his musings turn inward as a result of political turmoil.

Bainbridge claims that because Napoleon is linked to the imagination, he occupies “the very heart of Wordsworth’s writing” (54). According to Bainbridge, the repeated moments of usurpation in Book VI allow the poet to “reflect upon, structure, and respond to contemporary history and particularly to ‘the Usurper’, Napoleon Bonaparte” (54). He claims that the following first example of usurpation in *The Prelude* allows Wordsworth to imagine Bonaparte’s *coup d’état* of 1799:
That day we first
Beheld 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… (VI: 452-6, emphasis added)

In this passage Wordsworth represents the battle between his mind and his senses, particularly that of sight, which is seen throughout the poem. The poet depicts the tension with politically charged vocabulary, thus bringing Napoleon to mind (Bainbridge 61). Much as Napoleon overthrew the Directory in 1799, Wordsworth’s unsatisfactory image of reality overthrows the mental image of his expectations. In this instance, the imagination is usurped much as the French government is usurped.

However, Bainbridge contends that the below second instance of usurpation, which grounds Wordsworth back in 1804, allows the poet to regain control:

Imagination! Lifting up itself
Before the eye and progress of my Song
Like an unfathered 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 be young or old. (VI: 535-37,
emphasis added)

Bainbridge writes, “In effect, Wordsworth usurps the usurper”—that is,

Wordsworth’s imagination overtakes Napoleon (55). Unlike the first passage in which a good image is usurped by a bad one, here a bad instance is replaced with a good one by the strength of the mind. For Bainbridge this second instance shows the power of the poet’s mind; Wordsworth begins to find the strength to overcome his grief related to Bonaparte (79). Indeed, even as he wrote The Prelude Wordsworth had lingering feelings of guilt regarding his initial support of the French Revolution and had to come to terms with his past allegiances. Over time he understood that having supported the initial values of the Revolution did not mean that he supported the blood sport. His imagination helps him work through this in political terms. In both instances, according to Bainbridge, “The Imagination is formed both after, and in contention with, Napoleon, and Wordsworth’s method of formulation is itself an act of ‘usurpation’” (55).

Liu, however, argues that in the second passage quoted above, Napoleon is not conquered but rather triumphant yet again. In Liu’s reading, the usurpation is a metaphor for the poet’s triumph over reality and for Napoleon’s victory in France, as opposed to the poet’s mind usurping and therefore replacing Napoleon. In developing his assertion, Liu more directly links the “unfathered vapour” of the
imagination to Napoleon by stating that Napoleon made his return to France, his appearance in front of the Council of Five Hundred, and his eventual coup all in the month of “Brumaire” on the French Revolutionary calendar (VI: 527). Brumaire, Liu explains, was “the month of mists,” since the French word “brume” translates to “mist.” The council in front of which Napoleon reappeared was at Saint-Cloud, often simply called “Cloud.” This is all relevant to Liu’s argument as he sees a link between Wordsworth’s choice of the word “vapor” and Napoleon’s return to France: “In the world’s eye, we might say, Napoleon burst upon the scene as a kind of ‘vapour,’ or cloud, an upstart and illegitimate spirit” (25). Liu also contends that when Wordsworth as narrator proclaims that he recognizes the glory of the spirit that has usurped his reality, he is drawing a parallel to France’s political situation in 1799—the French recognized Napoleon’s power. As Wordsworth acknowledges his mind as the ruler of his reality, France acknowledges Napoleon as the ruler of the country. The link between Napoleon and the “unfathered vapour” then marks Wordsworth’s imagination in politically relevant terms.

Liu goes on to argue that many of the imagination passages in The Prelude, particularly those that mention usurpation, can be traced in geographical terms that relate to Napoleon’s military campaigns. Much as Wordsworth struggles throughout The Prelude to overcome the unexpected sights and experiences, Napoleon battles military opponents. The verse paragraph that contains the above second instance of usurpation ends with Wordsworth describing the mind as “Strong in itself, and in the access of joy/ Which hides it like the Overflowing Nile” (VI: 547-8). Liu asserts that Wordsworth uses this specific place name to deliberately refer to Napoleon. The Nile
and the Swiss Alps, where the Simplon Pass is located, are, according to Liu, “the two most crucial scenes of battle in the Napoleonic Wars prior to Trafalgar in 1805: Switzerland (together with northern Italy) and Egypt” (27). Furthermore, the passage begins with the imagination halted before a blockage but then quickly breaking through, which Liu relates to Napoleon’s 1796 Italian campaign. On this campaign, Napoleon was initially blocked by Austrian troops, but quickly gained control with an effective breakthrough that resulted in his establishing three republics in Italy. Liu also suggests that this carefully detailed stop-and-go pattern could represent Napoleon’s halting 1800 crossing of the Swiss Alps before the Battle of Marengo, which was the “final, decisive instance of halt followed by breakthrough” (27).

Wordsworth’s mention of the Alps and other meaningful geographical markers so soon after Napoleon’s campaign, combined with the political vocabulary such as the “banners militant,” suggest to Liu and other historicist scholars that Wordsworth’s imagination is strongly and purposefully linked to Napoleon Bonaparte (VI: 543).

Another historicist claim about the imagination and Napoleon is that when Wordsworth faces Napoleon, he turns inward to his mind. In *Imagination Under Pressure, 1789-1832* John Whale maintains that the “imagination is an important reflex of cultural crisis,” and later describes the imagination as “the term which inhabits the crisis” (2; 13). As Wordsworth confronts Napoleon, political turmoil, and general disappointment, he relies on his imagination. Historicists argue that Wordsworth turns inward because of well-known, global political realities rather than because of personal concerns. Bainbridge further argues that Wordsworth is able to deal with or “transcend” Napoleon by not just looking inward, but by trying to look
“beyond” (82). In Book XI, Wordsworth sees past the “soulless image” in order to
“thwart/ This tyranny” (XI: 179-180). This “sublime seeing,” as Bainbridge calls it,
requires Wordsworth to look beyond reality and to use the inner power of his
imagination to see other, future possibilities in outward reality (82). Wordsworth’s
understanding of history is influenced by his imagination just as his imagination is
influenced by Napoleon, historical facts, and noteworthy occurrences of the time
period. Bainbridge writes that the “imagination acts like a purified and idealized
Napoleon,” helping Wordsworth make sense of the usurper in terms with which he is
familiar (91).

A separate but likewise central issue in the historicist program, which causes
dispute amongst critics, is whether Wordsworth denies or affirms history. This issue
relates to the imagination in that only the imagination can create a sphere in which
history is ignored. Earlier critics within the school postulate that Romantic poets
often deny history by deliberately omitting historical events that would be relevant to
their themes or plots, or that they rewrite such events to fit their programs rather than
to convey accurate information. However, later historicist critics react strongly
against this idea and claim that Romantic poets affirm history by both recording and
creating it in their works. Between these two poles there is an array of critics who
suggest that neither side must be taken since affirmation and denial can happen
simultaneously.

Liu is one of the earliest critics discussed in this chapter, yet even he does not
align completely with the original historicist view of denial. He does suggest that in
some senses Wordsworth denies history: “Where we now have to go in our tour, as is
characteristic of Wordsworth’s own tours, is back from *The Prelude* to retrace the entire itinerary by which the poet learned to create his crowning denial of history: autobiography” (35). Since Wordsworth writes primarily of his own experiences, he denies universal history, and his opinions make his presentation of facts skewed. However, Liu suggests that this denial does not necessarily dismantle history since the poet can deny one thing and concurrently create another. In fact, “the goal of the denial… is to carve the ‘self’ out of history. The theory of denial is Imagination” (Liu 4-5). By denying accepted history Wordsworth creates a personal perception of the time period. This is not to say that he disavows history or works completely against it, but rather that he chooses what he wishes to represent and does not consider his poetry to be a historical record. His autobiography creates a subjective history, which can be viewed as either a denial of standard history or as the creation of a new, individual history.

Furthermore, Liu claims that “strong denials of history are also the deepest realizations of history” and may therefore be beneficial (32). He expands this point by claiming that, due to the nature of history, denial and affirmation can happen simultaneously:

Both these propositions are true: first that Wordsworth’s largest, most sustained theme is the realization of history; and, second, that his largest theme is the denial of history. Both can be true, I suggest, because of the strange status of history as a category of being.

Intuitively, history both *is*, because it is the very source of reality, and *is not*, because, no matter whether it is conceived to extend backward
in time or outward in social space, the stuff of history is manifestly not “here,” available for such ordinary means of verification as sight or touch. (39)

Liu thus began to change the argument by portraying Wordsworth’s denial of history in a more positive light. He set the stage for the eventual repudiation of the idea altogether, though it was once a cornerstone of historicist criticism.

Roe argues that instead of denying, displacing, or deconstructing history, the imagination recovers history (6). In fact, to read Romantic poems as denying or deconstructing history directly “contradicts Coleridge’s argument that imaginative action ‘would do great good’” since to deny or deconstruct is to undo (6). He further argues that the strength of poetry comes from its constitutive acts, not its denial of the past—to focus on the rejection is to miss the greater meaning. He sets out to “establish continuities between history and Romantic imagination,” and he sees the concept of history as strengthened rather than denied by the imagination in Wordsworth’s poetry (11).

Over time, most historicist critics have gravitated toward the claim that history and imagination work together in some form in Wordsworth’s poetry. In certain instances the imagination usurps history, and in others the two aid one another. Either way, the relationship remains. Levinson suggests that in mentally deconstructing history, poets are able to create themselves and formulate retrospective concepts of the age, meaning denial and affirmation can exist jointly (3). Bainbridge argues that Wordsworth’s “imagination takes on Napoleon Bonaparte in both a combative and appropriative sense” (94). He also states his disagreement with
the idea that Wordsworth denied history: “My argument is rather that Liu’s stress on Wordsworth’s denial of history in Book VI can be countered by examining the passage in the context of his obsession with European politics and particularly with Napoleon” (56-7). Wordsworth’s desire to include history, though at times in “delicate” and “subtle” ways, as Bainbridge writes, is evident and purposeful (57). Sometimes imagination trumps history and sometimes it works the other way, but the initial historicist notion that the strength of poetry is the denial of history is very much called into question by later historicist critics.

McGann writes that literary texts “continue to live and move and have their being” (12). As such, historicist critics seek to understand literature both in the past and in the present. They consider texts in terms of both authorial intent and sociopolitical and historical events; they study poems on a textual level and also situate them in the worlds in which they were created; and they consider The Prelude to be both a historical document and a subjective reconstruction of history. Despite certain discrepancies, historicist critics tend to agree that The Prelude is a politically charged document. As many critics note, Wordsworth was himself very much interested in politics; he grew up in a time of political turmoil, and by some accounts expected to pursue a career as a statesman (Bainbridge 85). The historicist approach’s attention to Napoleon Bonaparte, the French Revolution, political theory, and Wordsworth’s biography as they relate to the imagination expands the scope of literary criticism of The Prelude.
Chapter 3: Recent Criticism

Recent critics pay more attention to a wider scope of evidence and facts than do historicists or poststructuralists. Whereas historicist critics make the field broader than their predecessors by bringing historical and biographical information into their assertions, recent critics go even further. In modern criticism, information from any field of study is acceptable evidence to support a claim about *The Prelude*, Romanticism, or literature in general. In this chapter I will discuss how recent critics have not yet cohered into a definitive school but are innovative in two main ways that nonetheless make them a unified group: they span a wide range of topics and use a wide range of evidence, and they all utilize hybrid methods—that is, they do not form their arguments in any one way.

Unlike the poststructuralist and historicist critics I examined in my first two chapters, these scholars bring together literary texts, history, manuscripts, biographical information, maps, and other media. They never use the same two sources, and thus each approach is unique in both its argument and its evidence. Relatedly, because these critics are contemporary they cannot be viewed retrospectively. It is not yet possible to call one work a “cornerstone text” or another an “exemplary book” because it is too soon to tell what will be influential to other critics and what will remain salient over time. This chapter includes texts that demonstrate the varied approach that has been so important in this wave of criticism, as well as texts that seem to be somewhat in dialogue with one another, but these texts are not necessarily the ones that will define the future of criticism.
It is worth noting that themes discussed in this chapter likewise cannot necessarily be taken as indicative of recent criticism, as it is too soon for a canon to dictate what is characteristic and what is not. Nonetheless, there are certain subjects that arise in the works of recent scholars that are less significant in other schools. For example, J. Robert Barth’s *Romanticism and Transcendence*, John G. Rudy’s *Wordsworth and the Zen Mind*, and Carl Thompson’s *The Suffering Traveller and the Romantic Imagination* all explore how Wordsworth’s imagination relates to spirituality, religion, or transcendence. Though recent critics often vary in approach and technique, there are rare instances of subject matter overlap, which are significant because they allow one to see the different ways critics handle the same theme. There is a further commonality in that these critics strive for uniqueness in their methods, and thus become similar in their purposeful distinctiveness.

In addition to certain shared themes and a joint desire to use unique approaches, a general shift amongst critics prioritizes theorizing the imagination as a concept. Recent critics strive to understand what the imagination is and how it works. That is, apart from the imagination as a theme throughout *The Prelude*, these critics pay increased attention to what the imagination is, how to define it in modern terms, what Wordsworth and his contemporaries knew about it, and how Romantics assessed it. This is a stark change from poststructuralists, for example, who took Wordsworth’s definition of the imagination in the preface to *Poems* as fact and set out to connect it to their interpretations rather than to define it in their own terms. Recent critics expand Wordsworth’s definition with new knowledge based on research that would not have been available in Wordsworth’s time.
For example, in “Cognition and Representation in Wordsworth’s London,” Mark J. Bruhn compares modern science to Wordsworth’s opinion that imagination does more than bring an image to mind in its absence. Neuroscientists, too, are currently aiming to prove that the imagination is more than image memory (170). In this and another article entitled “Romanticism and the Cognitive Science of Imagination,” Bruhn writes of similarities between Wordsworth’s concept of the imagination—which was based on the philosophy of his epoch and on his own observations—and modern scientific theories of the imagination, informed by new data courtesy of fMRI scans and other such technologies. For instance, Wordsworth was interested in the distinction between what the imagination is and how it works. This is a minute but significant detail that scientists today likewise examine. Bruhn also argues that a “key macro-structural principle of The Prelude” is the “imaginative power of conjunction and opposition,” and says these functions form the basis of modern scientific explanations of the imagination (173-4). More than two hundred years after Wordsworth drafted The Prelude, many of his definitions inform our current notions of the imagination, and they can help us realize why and to what end scientists study it.

As critics reimagine the imagination as a concept, the literary analysis of it must also change. Thus, this new wave of criticism is unique both in its hybrid methodological approach and in its content. One way of understanding how recent critics handle the imagination is to see their analyses on three different planes. The first is Wordsworth’s imaginative process in writing The Prelude—the intellectual climate in which he was thinking about his poem and developing his concept of the
imagination gains a new importance in this criticism. The second plane is the imagination as Wordsworth represents it in the poem. All schools of criticism attend to this plane, but these scholars offer new lenses for looking at the representations. And, finally, the third plane is the ways in which readers of The Prelude must use their imaginations to decipher the events and concepts Wordsworth puts forth, which is a level of analysis unique to modern criticism. Poststructuralists attend to the reader’s role in interpreting the imagination, but less so and in the context of language. These three levels on which critics see the imagination speak to a new trend in criticism in that the imagination is not just what the author writes or refers to, but a concept that is worth studying from the time it is formed to the way it is presented to how it is received by the audience. After a discussion of the unique methodologies of modern critics, in the remaining portions of this chapter I will examine how contemporary scholars address these three planes.

One trend specific to the methodology of recent critics is that they are especially conscious of where they are positioned in the canon of literary criticism and of who and what came before them. Almost all of these critics mention their indebtedness to earlier schools. For example, in the introduction to Literature and the New Interdisciplinarity, Roger D. Sell writes, “The New Critics’ veto on accounts of the literary text as the product of a particular writer at a particular time, and of its impact on a particular audience at a particular time, was immensely influential” (12). Modern critics value the interpretive flexibility that the New Critics introduced, but seek even greater freedom of methodology. In the same introduction Sell also mentions poststructuralism and deconstructionism (14, for example).
Of course, the authors often disagree with a claim made before them. One of many examples comes from Susan J. Wolfson, whose book *Formal Charges* was published at the apex of historicism’s prominence, but marks a shift toward modern criticism. She contests Terry Eagleton’s claim that literary form is shaped and limited by the social form of its historical moment (2-3). This is not to say that one school of criticism referring to another is unusual; in any wave of criticism, there is at least some reaction to and some inheritance from earlier ones. The historicists, for example, show a residual interest in language inherited from the poststructuralists. What is unique about the critics in this chapter, though, is the frequency with which they refer to prior critics. There is less dialogue among contemporaries, but more allusion to their predecessors. In the introduction to Wolfson’s *Formal Charges* alone, she refers to Eagleton, McGann, Gallagher, Abrams, and various Marxist critics.

In addition to explicitly acknowledging their place in literary criticism, critics are very much aware of their own methodologies. An example of this comes from Barth’s introduction, a paragraph typical in recent criticism:

> One further confession is perhaps called for, concerning my own methodology in this work. Although I am aware, as one must be, of the shifting tides of Romantic criticism in recent decades—poststructuralism, deconstructionism, the New Historicism—my approach to the work of these poets remains rather conventional, accepting the principle that meaning can inhere in poetry, and that words do sometimes stand still enough for us to take in at least some
measure of their meaning… In this book, which admits to being a personal statement as well as a critical study, I trust this Prologue—and the book as a whole—will make apparent my own suppositions and point of view. (3-4)

Barth’s proclamation of his approach is standard amongst these critics—Thompson, for another example, starts a paragraph in his introduction with “This is how this study will proceed…” (11).

Barth calling his approach “conventional,” however, is certainly not standard. In general, these critics both recognize and champion the uniqueness of their methods. Julia Sandstrom Carlson, in her article “The Map at the Limits of His Paper: A Cartographic Reading of The Prelude, Book 6: ‘Cambridge and the Alps,’” for example, states that her study is uncommon. She writes, “Despite the scholarly fascination with the crossing of the Pass, relatively little attention has been paid to one of the most fundamental and at the time richest contexts informing both the event and its reinscription in The Prelude—cartography” (376). After labeling cartography a rare topic, she spells out her methodology:

In the first section of my argument I consider the relations between writing and mapping that are implicit in Wordsworth’s 1790 letter and in Dorothy’s response to that letter. I then discuss the cartographical discourse of the period, including several maps that represent the Alps according to rival notational conventions for illustrating altitude and three-dimensional space, or relief… (377)
Carlson explicitly tells her audience that she is studying a subject matter that has concerned few other critics, and that she is going to do so with various types of sources. Similarly, Rudy states in his introduction that his “effort crosses disciplines as well as cultures” (xi). These critics directly assert the uniqueness or hybridity of their methodologies in order to emphasize this aspect of their scholarship, which they particularly value.

Another methodological similarity amongst these critics is their interest in manuscripts. In this chapter there is an increase in critics who choose to focus on the 1850 Prelude, whereas the poststructuralists and historicists referred almost exclusively to the 1805 version. Barth argues that readers who construct their own renditions of the poem with “a bit from 1805, a snippet from 1799, a swatch from 1850” deny themselves a genuine reading of the poem (16). He maintains The Prelude should be read as the author intended it to be, and that the closest option is the last version Wordsworth revised. Notably, both Barth and Wolfson quote a letter Wordsworth wrote to Alexander Dyce in 1830 in which he says, “You know what importance I attach to following strictly the last copy of the text of an author” (Barth 16; Wolfson 100).

For Wolfson, the issue of manuscripts is complicated in interesting ways by the fact that the poem is autobiographical. Autobiography, she writes, “escapes revision only when the writer dies” (129). Similarly, Rudy argues that it is possible that Wordsworth did not publish The Prelude in his lifetime because he understood that “true expression of mind must accrue through a moving continuum,” which suggests that the work could not be complete while he was still living (206). Thus,
for Rudy the manuscript that Wordsworth left behind in 1805 is even less complete than the one he left behind at the time of his death. This wave of criticism, however, does not have a collective understanding of the importance of manuscripts. While Barth, Wolfson, and Rudy largely maintain that the finished version is the true poem, other critics find the availability of multiple finished manuscripts of the same work to be beneficial, as they allow for various levels of interpretation. Recent critics are inconsistent in which versions they cite and in whether or not they study more than one version of the poem. They are consistent, though, in that they all attend to the multiple versions—even Barth refers to the earlier manuscripts, if only to discount them.

This attention to revision and manuscripts leads many critics to consider the issue of authorial intent. Amongst recent scholars, questions of what Wordsworth did or did not aim to say, and whether or not this affects critical arguments, are prevalent. Some of the lenses through which critics study the poem and Wordsworth’s imagination, such as neuroscience, are lenses that could not possibly have existed in the poet’s time. These new perspectives, combined with the interest in unpublished versions of the poem, bring to the forefront a dialogue about how to study a poem—a dialogue that resurfaces throughout this chapter. I divide the issues of authorial intent as recent critics approach it along two axes: (1) whether the author of the poem intended to say what the critic reads from it, and (2) whether this matters—is an analysis any more or less valid if the author likely intended his work to be read as such? Though all these critics’ methods are hybrid, they are greatly varied amongst themselves, and their inconsistent conclusions and use of an assortment of outside
sources and comparisons prompt them to consider authorial intent more frequently than do authors who belong to other schools of criticism. In poststructuralism, for example, criticism is bound by what can be seen in the text on the page, so what the author meant to say is not nearly as important as what he said and how he said it. Many authors in this recent wave of criticism at least address concerns of authorial intent, much like they at least address the issue of manuscripts.

Thompson raises questions of intent as early as his introduction. He begins with a quotation from the 1805 version of The Prelude, “A traveller I am,/ And all my tale is of myself,” and in a later chapter he writes that “contemporary readers may not have been familiar with the lines from the unpublished Prelude cited in my introduction” (III: 196-7; Thompson 187). These lines are central to Thompson’s study, and yet Wordsworth eventually cut them from his project. Is Thompson’s argument about Wordsworth considering himself a traveler valid, even though it is based on these eventually deleted lines? Thompson argues that it is because Wordsworth originally wrote the lines and thus believed them at the time he first constructed his poem.

Other critics address issues of authorial intent by stating that Wordsworth probably never purposefully wrote into the poem the meanings they take from it, but that their arguments are still pertinent. Most evidently, Rudy, who connects Wordsworth’s spirituality with Buddhist and Zen theories, writes that although there is no reason Wordsworth would have known anything about Zen Buddhism, the doctrine can inform a reading of The Prelude. Rudy does not aim to prove that Wordsworth was Buddhist; rather, he “seeks to provide a Zen context for
understanding the spirituality of the English poet” (xi). Similarly, Barth acknowledges that Wordsworth was not particularly religious. But as Barth himself is a Jesuit priest, he finds many similarities between Wordworth’s spirituality and that of Ignatius Loyola, though he knows that Wordworth may have known very little about him. Barth believes that a reading of The Prelude from a Jesuit perspective can help one analyze Wordworth’s overarching beliefs, and that the poem can bolster a reader’s own religious beliefs.

Bruhn, too, must dismiss authorial intent because of what he studies to inform his readings of The Prelude. Bruhn recognizes that the neuroscience aspects of his analysis did not exist two decades ago let alone two centuries ago. He grapples not with confusion caused by deleted lines, but rather with a clear case of the lack of authorial intent, and thus he is able to make a resolute claim against the importance of understanding Wordworth’s intentions. Since no one would argue that computerized brain maps influenced Wordworth, Bruhn’s argument needs to address why authorial intent is not relevant to him, not whether or not it supports his claims. Bruhn’s assertions exemplify this wave of criticism because he studies something that Wordworth also studied—the imagination as a concept—and because the new information Bruhn provides is congruent with Wordworth’s idea of the imagination in what he finds if not in how he finds it. Nothing Bruhn argues contradicts Wordworth’s theory of the imagination; he just explains it in different, newer ways.

Carlson, conversely, aims to validate her claims with what she considers to be evidence of Wordworth’s intentions. With proof from letters that Wordworth wrote to his sister Dorothy, Carlson suggests that Wordworth had been learning about
mapmaking. Carlson states that "Maps, as figures in Wordsworth’s verse—and as representational pages that themselves bear figures on their surfaces—shed light on Wordsworth’s rendering of journeying on the two-dimensional pages of The Prelude" because they influenced Wordsworth as he wrote the poem (376). Whether or not Wordsworth actually studied maps and consciously used this information to write his poem, Carlson maintains a right, in the realm of this recent criticism, to take as fact that he did and to write her study accordingly.

Recent critics regularly consider whether or not to support their claims with proof—or alleged proof—of Wordsworth’s intentions. Other schools of criticism have also been aware of this question, but in a less complicated and less multidimensional fashion. This emphasis on the grounds of their interpretations seems to arise from the unprecedented ways in which recent critics examine The Prelude. Because the connections between the poem and the other materials they bring into conversation with it are weaker than those made by poststructuralist and historicist critics, these scholars return repeatedly to questions of authorial intention.

In understanding recent critics’ attention to the imagination, the aforementioned first plane of their interpretation is the intellectual context in which Wordsworth conceptualized the imagination. Thompson especially attends to this plane, and he asserts that his method is to “survey some of the source material that effectively scripted these ‘romantic situations’ for the Romantic traveller and his audience,” and finds that “it is ultimately a vast matrix of prior texts, anecdotes, and images that thus underpins and informs Romantic ideas” (11). For many critics, including Thompson, it is imperative to learn about the intellectual climate in which
Wordsworth was working and the other intellectual climates from which he inherited ideas in order to understand how he came to view the imagination.

In particular, Thompson is concerned with the concept of the traveler. Due to the walking tours Wordsworth took, his many letters about his misadventures, and the amount of attention paid to his travels throughout *The Prelude*, Wordsworth had “an imagined sense of himself as a traveller,” according to Thompson (200). Thus, to inform his argument about Wordsworth as a suffering traveler, Thompson discusses the travel stories Wordsworth would have read that were popular when he was a boy and while he was composing *The Prelude*, and notes that “The age witnessed a dramatic upsurge in the number of accounts of tours being published and consumed” (13). For Thompson, this “Voyages and Travels genre” is especially linked to the subgenres of the shipwreck narrative and the captivity narrative (15). Thompson argues that Wordsworth read these stories frequently in his youth and that they had a lasting effect on his writing style and his idea of the imagination. Imagery from the shipwreck tales “continued to haunt Wordsworth’s imagination” as he wrote about Mount Snowdon in *The Prelude*, and it “forms part of the deep grammar of Wordsworth’s imagination” (197, 206). The influence of the dramatic and inventive travel genre is evident in scenes in which the imagination prevails over disappointment or turmoil, and when the poet imagines a new reality for himself.

Additionally, many critics examine what Wordsworth may have been reading as a youth and as a poet in order to further understand the intellectual atmosphere in which he came to formulate his view of the imagination. Carlson cites evidence that Wordsworth may have learned about making maps of journeys from texts written by
prolific travelers (381). Like Thompson, Carlson sees the imagination and travel as connected; when one imagines new places, and then desires to see them in reality or associates them with old, familiar places, the imagination is forging these associations. Carlson studies letters Wordsworth wrote and read, maps from the 1790s that would have influenced his travel plans, and biographical information about his academic interests in order to further comprehend not only the connection between imagination and travel, but also Wordsworth’s motivation to create these links.

The second plane on which to study recent critics’ approach to the imagination is Wordsworth’s representation of it throughout *The Prelude*; this plane is decidedly less divergent from other schools than the first and third. Barth argues that Coleridge was perhaps the “great theorist of the imagination” but that “Wordsworth was, among their contemporaries, its supreme practitioner” (1-2). He also writes that Wordsworth begins *The Prelude* by indirectly stating that the imagination is a “higher power than Fancy,” which links his conception of the imagination to its representation in the poem (59). The poet himself simultaneously sees the imagination as a concept and as a theme.

Barth is also one of the many recent critics to study the representation of the imagination and religion in *The Prelude*. This “recent attention to the religious dimension of Romantic texts” is a new trend in criticism that has become a major theme in many contemporary works, and is thus indicative of the unique perspective that these critics manage to find in a poem as constantly and consistently studied as *The Prelude* (Barth 3). Barth argues that Wordsworth occupied a “middle ground” between a Christian and a secular poet, and was imaginatively “never fully a
Christian” as Coleridge was (27). Barth also contends that the use of the imagination is in general a religious act and that the inverse is also true—religion “almost by definition” is linked to human imagination (12). Despite the poet’s aversion to religion, Barth argues that the imagination helps Wordsworth achieve communion with the divine in *The Prelude*; so while he may not have attended church, Wordsworth still has spiritual and even religious moments throughout the poem (56). Additionally, Barth reads a link between the imagination and “spiritual love” in Book XIV of the 1850 version of *The Prelude* (56). Though Barth says this moment is religious, he also recognizes that Wordsworth likely intended it to convey a more general sense of spirituality.

The section of *The Prelude* most frequently discussed by scholars concerned with the imagination as it relates to religion, though, is Book VI, which is likewise an integral passage for scholars of other schools. Many recent critics regard the initially anticlimactic crossing of the Simplon Pass as a spiritual or even religious occurrence for Wordsworth. Barth claims that even though Wordsworth may not have thought of it at the time as a religious experience, he still presents a transcendent episode in the poem (56-7). Barth’s argument is again related to the important question of authorial intent; though Wordsworth was not a religious man either at the time of the experience or of the writing, Barth still reads the passage in religious terms. When Wordsworth suffers disappointment and his imagination takes over, the moment is “beyond his control, beyond time, beyond sense experience” (Barth 64). This moment of transcending the corporeal, physical world to a higher dimension is necessarily religious for Barth.
Rudy, too, sees this moment as transcendent, and makes direct comparisons to Buddhist and Zen thought. He considers this episode in which Wordsworth overcomes disappointment to be a “spiritual breakthrough,” a representation of “infinitude of cosmic being” (78). He also argues that Wordsworth is particularly overcome by the vastness and unexpectedness of the imaginative experience—the poet “halts before the sourcelessness of his own Imagination”—much as the Zen student seeks to “overcome” the basic world by appreciating his own mind and the concept of emptiness (Rudy 79). Across schools, critics have nearly universally read the Simplon Pass section of The Prelude as imaginative and as having some sort of higher meaning, but no other wave of criticism that I have studied is as quick to describe it in religious diction as these recent scholars.

Recent critics also differ from their predecessors in their basic perception of the imagination in the Simplon Pass passage. Rudy refers to Hartman only to disagree with him about this episode: “…the genius of Wordsworth’s response to the Imagination, then, is not in his restraining it and in his subsequent binding of himself to nature,” but rather in “his complete immersion in it, in his giving himself up to the impulse” (81). This is a major change from readings proposed by historicist critics, who early on argue that Wordsworth denied history, and who use similar verbs of negation to discuss the imagination. Instead, Rudy argues that it is Wordsworth’s acceptance of, attachment to, and celebration of the imaginative experience that allow him to fully enjoy and eventually understand the imagination. Like a Zen student, when Wordsworth is able to accept the scene for what it is and stop looking for
answers or rejecting what his imagination experiences, he is able to see the extraordinary (81).

Many recent critics also pay attention to how Wordsworth presents his imagination as a journey throughout *The Prelude*. For Barth, the concept of the poem as a sojourn is naturally related to the theme of religion; he sees the poem as an ongoing religious journey that is left incomplete (12). As previously mentioned, Barth focuses on the posthumously published 1850 version of *The Prelude*, and the fact that the poet never chose to publish the poem suggests to Barth that it was incomplete. Wordsworth learns and grows during the events described in the poem and while composing it; the poet moves “more and more deeply into the imaginative experience” (Barth 59). This imaginative trajectory and mental growth was leading toward transcendence or some lofty knowledge, but it ended with Wordsworth’s death. Rudy also sees the poem as a journey of the mind or a movement down a path of the mind’s awakening (57). Buddhism emphasizes that the Zen student walks down a path toward enlightenment, and thus for Rudy it is natural, if unparalleled, to make the connection between Zen Buddhism and Wordsworth’s *Prelude*. The journey is key in both.

Throughout his book Thompson studies Wordsworth as a traveler, so he, too, studies the ways in which *The Prelude* is a journey, and the ways in which the journey relates to the imagination. Thompson argues that Wordsworth’s voyage is deliberately spatially situated since the poet explicitly notes where sections are located: London, Cambridge, France, various mountains, and everywhere in between—indeed, with great emphasis on the travel between places. Thompson says
his own familiarity with how and why travel is represented in literature helps him interpret what Wordsworth’s imaginative journeying means in *The Prelude* (190-1).

Curiously, like his more avowedly religious contemporaries, Thompson links Wordsworth’s journey to spirituality in calling it a “move toward an intimation of immortality or transcendence” (193). Thompson’s reading of transcendence is less focused on the religious possibilities in the poem, however, especially in that there is no tie to organized religion. Though he sees a spiritual quality in *The Prelude*, he does not go on to argue that this means Wordsworth’s overall message is religious, or to link the message to any particular god or doctrine. Nonetheless, the fact that Thompson includes such a statement in his argument about Wordsworth’s journeying suggests that readings of some otherworldly or otherwise ethereal quality of *The Prelude* have become more pervasive in recent criticism.

Finally, the third plane on which modern critics study the imagination in *The Prelude* is the ways in which the audience experiences the imagination while reading the poem. As Wordsworth describes places, people, things, events, and feelings, readers subsequently use their imaginations to conceptualize his words. According to Thompson, “moments of great imaginitative power arise, both for the travellers themselves and also (as seems to be the principal burden of Wordsworth’s argument here) for those who subsequently read of these events” (200-1). Of Book VII: Residence in London and Wordsworth’s description of the theater and the familiar stock characters, Bruhn says that we imagine in our own minds what Wordsworth is describing and “repeat the process of figural substitution” (165). We picture Wordsworth’s suggestions with images we have seen before, or composite images of
things with which we are familiar either from real life or from paintings or other visual art. Though our brains must use prior knowledge in order to establish the framework for understanding Wordsworth’s descriptions, it is the imagination that then steps in and makes something new out of this old information in order to comprehend what Wordsworth describes. The poet does not show us his reality or our reality, since that would be impossible, but rather prompts a new and different internal vision that is both constructed and sustained by the imagination (Bruhn 173). How Wordsworth creatively transfers his imagination from his mind to the minds of his readers is a unique focus of recent criticism.

In *Formal Charges*, Wolfson describes her method as an “intensive reading of poetic events within a context of questions about poetic form and formalist criticism” (1). While these recent critics may not share a single set of goals, they certainly share a regard for form. Modern critics investigate not just the form that authors use while writing, but also their own forms and their own methodologies. This group of critics varies greatly in themes and sources, and only a small selection of current scholars has been discussed in this chapter. Nonetheless, their unique approaches and somewhat interrelated topics of exploration make this sampling of critics interesting to compare to one another. Furthermore, the selected critics aid one in considering the changes that have been occurring in criticism over the last twenty years and in contemplating where literary criticism is likely to go in the future.

In the present, these critics have expanded our understanding of the imagination in Wordsworth’s *Prelude* to include insights about the poet’s development of his personal concept of the imagination, and they have placed a new
value on studying one’s own imaginative response to the poem. They bring in entirely new information, which ultimately generates an informed confusion rather than a definitive clarity: the vast scope of recent critics’ approaches suggests that the imagination remains intangible, debatable, open to further study, and therefore important in literary criticism and elsewhere.
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