“Viewed in Prospect or Retrospect”: Dorothy Wordsworth’s “Revisiting” on the 1820 Continental Tour

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In 1790, a young William Wordsworth embarked on a tour of Europe, culminating in a hike across the Swiss Alps. His younger sister Dorothy was back in England, anxiously anticipating letters that assured her of his safety. In a letter to Dorothy from his journey, William writes, “I have thought of you perpetually . . . the scenes of Switzerland have no resemblance to any I have found in England; consequently it may probably never be in your power to form an idea of them” (35; vol. 1). Both Wordsworths thought it improbable that Dorothy would have the opportunity to see these sights for herself, but upon his return from the trip, Dorothy was an eager audience of tales of the journey. Additionally, as an admirer of William’s verse, she read accounts of the trip in his 1793 Descriptive Sketches and the 1805 draft of The Prelude. Elsewhere in his letter from the 1790 journey, William remarked that “At this moment when many of these landscapes are floating before my mind, I feel a high enjoyment in reflecting that perhaps scarce a day of my life will pass in which I shall not derive some happiness from these images” (36; vol. 1). Though she had
not seen these images firsthand, Dorothy saw the landscapes floating before her mind and she, too, was able to derive happiness from them. For thirty years, Dorothy built up images of what these locations must look like and essentially visited them in her imagination.

Finally in 1820, three decades after William’s original trip, Dorothy had the opportunity to see these grand European sights for herself. Traveling in the reverse direction from the 1790 tour, William revisited places he had experienced as a young man while Dorothy and the rest of the party (including Mary Wordsworth; Mary’s cousin Thomas Monkhouse and his new wife, Jane Horrocks; Jane’s sister and her maid; and, for parts of the trip, Henry Crabb Robinson) were physically viewing them for the first time.

Stephen Gill writes in Wordsworth’s Revisitings about returning to a place through textual editing and revision, but I posit that his concept extends to the idea of revisiting scenes of imagination. In this paper, I will argue that Dorothy, as her travel journal illustrates, was essentially “revisiting” these locations; she was already familiar with the sights (such as the Rhine river, the old Spittal, Simplon Pass, and the Arveyron glacier) as she had viewed them in her imagination. Through hearing tales from William and creating the images in her mind, she had essentially already traveled the Continent, but now had the opportunity to experience it physically for the first time. By viewing Dorothy’s tour as a form of revisiting, we can understand how imagining a place before physically seeing it shapes the viewing experience, blurring the line between reality and imagination.

William Wordsworth famously explored this idea in his poem “Yarrow Visited.” Prior to physically visiting Yarrow, the Scottish river valley celebrated in songs and Border ballads, William had undertaken the trip many times through his imagination. When he saw Yarrow physically for the first time, he wrote,

I see—but not by sight alone,  
Loved Yarrow, have I won thee;  
A ray of Fancy still survives—  
Her sunshine plays upon thee! (73–76)

Not only is he viewing the landscape, but he finds his experience is layered by the images he ascribed to the place before. Both his imagination and the reality contribute to making the scene lovelier. A ray of his “fancy” merges with the real scene, adding to the effects of the natural
beauty. Further, his statement that he has “won” Yarrow suggests that all his imaginings of Yarrow that led up to this moment have made his first encounter feel like a victory. There is more significance to him to have finally seen Yarrow after wishing and imagining it than without the anticipation. Likewise, Dorothy’s experience of building up images in her mind about the sights on the Continent amplified her experience of finally visiting it. On the trip, the reality of what she saw merged with her memories and changed the way she perceived what was around her.

In her account of the experience, *Journal of a Tour on the Continent*, Dorothy focuses on places that William has been before and compares her mental images to the real destinations. These instances are relatively few, as her journal is mostly filled with details of their itinerary, interactions with people, and sights; there is so much to cover that she often leaves out her personal feelings on the trip. However, there are occasional, definitive glimpses of her connection to William’s past experience. As Lucy Newlyn aptly writes about the journal, “[Dorothy’s] impressions shade almost imperceptibly into William’s as the narrative shuttles between their shared present and his separate past” (256). These moments give insight into Dorothy’s exploration of both her brother’s past and her own imagination. I will undertake a close reading of a few of these passages to show how imagination and the framing of stories about a location amplify the experience of traveling there.

The Rhine

One of the earliest moments in the journal that alludes to William’s original journey is when the party travels to the Rhine River. In her July 22, 1820 entry, Dorothy writes about how the various aspects of the scenery “compose a most affectingly beautiful scene, whether viewed in prospect or retrospect” (*Journal* 45). These two terms of “prospect” and “retrospect,” taken figuratively, label her different experiences of visiting the Rhine. Prior to her trip, she viewed the Rhine through imagination born out of William’s stories. It was beautiful to Dorothy then, and she claims that it will still be beautiful in the future when she revisits the Rhine through memory — much as William habitually predicted “life and food / For future years” in his memory-focused poems, and much as she would ultimately assert in a poem written later in life: “with Memory I was there” (“Lines Composed a
Few Miles from Tintern Abbey”; “Thoughts on my Sickbed”). Interestingly, while Dorothy is physically encountering the Rhine, she writes about how its beauty is unchanged by whether she is viewing it with her eyes or in imagination. In viewing the prospect, Dorothy uses William’s relayed memories to form an image in her mind. Viewing retroactively, so to speak, destabilizes the distinctions between imagining, seeing, and remembering. For Dorothy Wordsworth, prospect and retrospect are deeply entangled.

Therefore, Dorothy’s encounter with place, which takes the form of imagination colliding with newly experienced realities, blurs the line between past and present. As Pamela Woof astutely writes about this merging, “Wordsworth and Dorothy noticed, even sought, echoes, reflections, and repetitions in time’s shapings and life’s patterns as well as in nature’s. The whole Tour of 1820 itself is a replay, an elegiac memorial” (26). As they travel, both Wordsworths look for scenes of the 1790 tour to replay those memories while merging them with the present. Their moments of interaction with the place are influenced by the first visit, whether through memory or physical travel.

In her moment of interaction with the Rhine, Dorothy blends the timeline of 1790 and 1820. She writes,

Our journey through the narrower and most romantic passages of the Vale of the Rhine was especially endeared to Mary and me by recollections connected with times long past, when my brother and his friend (it is thirty years ago) floated down the stream in their little Bark. Often did my fancy place them with a freight of happiness in the centre of some bending reach overlooked by tower or castle or (when expectation would be most eager) at the turning of a promontory, which had concealed from their view some delicious winding which we had left behind. (Journals 57)

As she floats or walks beside the river in 1820, Dorothy views the river as it is in the present, but augmented by the past. After she has passed a bend that would have been obscured from their view in the river, Dorothy pictures her brother and Robert Jones turning the bend and seeing the rest of the river stretch out before them. She even goes so far as to ascribe feelings to them in her imagination, as having happiness and eagerness to see the next turn of the river. Hearing William’s story repeated over the years made her feel like she could picture them there, and in the moment of interaction she contextualizes her imagination with the place where the story occurred. When Dorothy refers
to “recollections connected with times long past,” she explains the connection between William’s memories, her memories of hearing William tell the story of floating down the Rhine, and the present shared viewing experience. She sees a merging of past and present as well as of reality and imagination.

Torrent and Spittal
In the September 9 entry from Domo d’Ossola, the party encountered a “very striking building” which affected Dorothy before she entirely knew its significance (258). She immediately recognized it as “a spittal of the old times,” meaning a shelter for travelers, but did not realize its significance to the 1790 tour until William pointed it out as the location where he had stayed on a particularly rough night (OED). That night, the travelers had not been able to sleep and had heard a “tremendous torrent (then swoln by rainy weather)” flowing through a chasm (Journals 259).

The way Dorothy writes about this encounter illustrates how the emotions we ascribe to nature are influenced by our imagination and individual experiences. Her imagination of what the river might have been like during William’s first encounter mirrors his description of it in The Prelude, as he personifies it as “sterner” and “sullen” (620, 635). In her 1820 experience, however, she writes that the “Torrent, still keeping the same channel, was now, upon this sunny clear day, a brisk rivulet, that cheerfully bounded down the Vedro” (Journals 259). Based on the way William framed his story, Dorothy imagined the river as harsh and uncompromising, but now she reconciles that view of the river with how she sees it in the moment as cheerful and exuberant. She has a layered perspective and imagines the “cheerful” stream juxtaposed with the “tremendous torrent” of 1790. Dorothy’s way of understanding the differences in their experiences with the river is to use the pathetic fallacy—projecting her own cheer onto the river—to make sense of how nature has changed. As Wordsworth critic Allan Chavkin wrote, “The imagination is not a passive agent that merely reflects the external world, for it actively manipulates reality; it interprets, it creates, it colors an indifferent nature with emotion and moral feeling” (454). Dorothy’s imagination colored the river with her own feelings of joy, contrasting to William’s “sterner” and “sullen” experiences that occurred in the same location.
The travelers then decided to rest beside the spittal but did not go into the building. On this subject, Dorothy writes, “I now regret not having the courage to pass the threshold alone. I had a strong desire to see what was going on within doors for the sake of tales of thirty years gone by: but could not persuade [William] to accompany me” (Journals 259).

Interestingly, Dorothy has more inclination to see the inside of the spittal than William does. Perhaps William has already seen the inside of the spittal and wants to keep his memory of the stormy night spent there untouched. If revisiting the location will layer his first gloomy experience with a more cheerful one, William would rather keep that memory untouched; he would rather keep the memory as it was than merging it with the newer, more joyful one. Lucy Newlyn offers another interpretation of this moment, writing that “William’s memory of this night spent among the precipices and vapours was so disturbing that he chose not to re-enter the building” (256). Either way, William’s choice not to re-enter the building conflicts with Dorothy’s desire to see it.

William and Dorothy are both interested in revisiting places of past memories, but Dorothy is especially motivated by a desire to contextualize the “tales” she has been told with reality. She seeks to compare her second-hand images of the place with primary ones. Imagination is not enough, and she feels like she will not get the full experience until she can explore the real place. She wishes not merely to revisit William’s past memories, but also to make her own memories with the place by revisiting it together. Ultimately,
Dorothy did not have the courage to go to the spittal unaccompanied, or perhaps did not want to trespass on a place William himself did not want to revisit, but seeing both the spittal and the torrent epitomizes Dorothy’s desire to make sense of her imagination in contrast with reality.

The Swiss Alps and Simplon Pass

The climax of Dorothy’s journal is when the party crosses the Alps, specifically the Simplon Pass. Dorothy writes that “Switzerland was [her] end and aim” and that hiking there will fulfill “wishes cherished from the days of youth, when that romantic country was first shut out from the traveller” (Journals 23). Because of the emotional nature of this section of the trip, these pages in the journal have the most reflective passages referring to William’s original trip. Pamela Woof astutely notes that “their proposed movement into the future, ‘to cross the Alps on foot’ was simultaneously a movement into the past” (1). This section, more than anything else, attests to Dorothy’s desire to explore William’s past, which she’s imagined so vividly.

When the party catches their first glimpse of Switzerland, the postilion tells them “what a glorious sight they might have seen” if they had come at a different time of day (Journals 86). At the time of day that they arrive, the Swiss mountains are hidden. Upon this view, Dorothy says,

The first sight of that country so dear to the imagination, though then of no peculiar grandeur, affected me with various emotions. I remembered the shapeless wishes of my youth—wishes without hope—my brother’s wanderings thirty years ago, and the tales brought to me the following Christmas holidays at Forncett; and often repeated while we paced together on the gravel walk in the parsonage garden, by moon or star light. (Journals 86)

There is significance to the fact that even when confronted with the image she has been waiting for all these years, she still is not getting the full view and experiences a moment of loss. But because the country is “so dear” to her imagination, she is not immensely disappointed by the loss of the full picture. In a sense, she had seen it already. Further, this obscuring of the full
picture brings her mind back to visiting Switzerland through imagination and of all the times she has heard of it from William. But now seeing the view in reality for the first time is made all the sweeter by the “often repeated” stories of it she has already heard and the images in her mind that those stories have produced. She recalls the exact time and place where she had heard these stories, and the present moment is layered by each different rendition of them. She also remembers the person she was at all of the times she had heard it and how that contributes to her view of it in middle age.

While seeing the Alps from a distance affected Dorothy, it was even more impactful to her to retrace the steps where William had hiked across the Alps. Lucy Newlyn rightly argues that Dorothy revisiting William’s 1790 hike was an attempt “to enter empathetically into his past” and that “she shows particular attentiveness to moments of disappointment, anxiety, and loss in The Prelude’s narrative” (256). Dorothy is attuned to locations of emotional significance for William—“spots of time,” as he calls them in The Prelude—because she has vividly imagined them and is very familiar with the events in this section of the journey. Through hearing his stories, Dorothy has empathetically felt the same emotions.

Along the Simplon Pass, the travelers see one of these locations of emotional significance for William which was documented in book six of The Prelude. After splitting up from a group, the young William Wordsworth and Robert Jones took a wrong path and were lost but found another traveler on the road. The man told them that “The Alps were crossed” already, so they had to process this anticlimax instead of a triumphant awareness of completing the journey (Journals 260). “The ambition of youth was disappointed at these tidings; and they remeasured their steps with sadness,” Dorothy describes in her journal (260). Dorothy recounts this experience from the past to show how the emotions of the wrong path have come back to him. Speaking about William, Dorothy writes,

It was impossible for me to say how much [the path] had moved him when he discovered it was the very same which had tempted him in his youth. The feelings of that time came back with the freshness of yesterday, accompanied with a dim vision of thirty years of life between. We traced the path together, with our eyes . . . (Journals 260–61)

Here we see a prime example of Wordsworthian revisiting, echoed in many of William’s verses. William has a manifold awareness of the present
moment and the past, as well as all of the time and growth that has transpired in between. Revisiting brings his first emotions associated with the place flooding back, even as it mixes them with other reflections from over the years. Place has become a measurement of selfhood, because the location has not changed but he has grown and become a new, more mature person.

But where does Dorothy’s revisiting factor into all of this? She writes about William’s feelings upon seeing this location, but not her own—though we sense her sympathy and joy in looking “together” (261). While she does not state how revisiting it affected her, she has empathy for her brother and it can be inferred that she was also “moved” (260). The physical location brings back “the feelings of that time” and in being there Dorothy can also feel them (261). For Dorothy now, too, “the Alps have been crossed,” and she can more fully understand this important moment in William’s life by being where it happened.

It is significant, I suggest, that Dorothy focuses on William’s emotional response to the location and then writes about the action they took together to revisit this place, by tracking the path. Dorothy gives William the space to process, then retraces the famous path with him, being an active participant in revisiting the place. In her journal, she switches from the pronoun “he” to “we” to explain how they came “together” to revisit this place (261). Also significant is the inclusion of how they revisited the path “with their eyes,” bringing to mind the dual awareness that blurs their past experience with the present (261). They do not physically traverse the wrong path that William had taken, but they imagine themselves along the path as they trace it with their eyes from afar.

The Arveyron: Glacier Arch and the Shapings of Time

This paper has examined how people who have changed over the years revisit a place, but it is also important to note how these sites, too, have changed over time. Dorothy’s experience revisiting the Continent helped her better understand how she and William had aged, for not all of the sights
were the same as they had been when William had first toured them and gushed to Dorothy. Years of political change had shaped the landscape and the culture. France had changed its political structure multiple times and was not the same country William had once toured. Napoleon had created a new road for travelers, which the 1820 tour party followed instead of the original path for most of the journey (Newlyn 256–57). The Continent had changed, as had the travelers viewing it.

The Continent’s change mirrors how Dorothy and William had aged as they viewed what had decayed and what had remained. Further, this illustrates how revisiting helped Dorothy to come to terms with her own aging. Lucy Newlyn rightly observes that, in her journal, Dorothy is “preoccupied by the passage of time” (256). Dorothy is now 48 and will never have the same experience as William, a 20-year-old bounding across Europe. Instead of walking the entire journey, she rides in carriages for parts of it because she is not capable of walking the nearly 1500 miles of the original tour (though she often writes about her pride in her walking abilities). She commemorated the start of the tour by getting her remaining teeth extracted and replaced by artificial ones, while William had to get his eyes checked (Hayden 41). But although she has lost some things with age, she has had years to move beyond the “unripe state of intellect and heart” that William had during the 1790 trip (The Prelude Book 6, 470–71). She is mature and can appreciate the tour after all the time it took to get there.

Dorothy reflected on this concept of time and impermanence, “duration and decay,” after seeing a particularly unique site on the tour. After the group had hiked the Alps, they traveled to Chamonix, France, a place well-known for its glaciers. At the mouth of the Arve River, the Arveyron, stood a glacier in the shape of an arch which the water flowed through. The party “descended below the green arch” and sat beside it to admire the view (Journals 286). On this sight, Dorothy wrote,

> It is very curious, perhaps more curious than beautiful . . . No spectacle that I ever beheld– not even the ocean itself– has had an equal power over my mind in bringing together thoughts connected with duration and decay—eternity, and perpetual wasting—the visible and invisible power of God and Nature. (286)

The arch, resolving itself into a symbol, brought to mind what decays and what remains, an apt description of how nature and the travelers had
lost things over the 30-year interval between tours. Dorothy and William had aged and changed over time, but their relationship remained paramount in their lives, a fixed point of permanence. John Wyatt writes that in this passage Dorothy was “recording sensations of long-term change balanced by permanence” (69). Water is fluid and constantly moving, but at the Arveyron, the water was frozen into a permanent fixture. Between all the stages of their lives—times of fluidity, movement, travel, and change—William and Dorothy’s reliance on each other was constant and steadfast like the ice of the arch.

In the decades following Dorothy’s meditations at the arch, the glacier gradually melted until it ultimately disappeared in 1873 (Shaw 246). This fact captures, more than anything else, the loss that comes with time and how places never stay the same. The beautiful arch that struck Dorothy is no longer available to be seen by modern travelers. But because of her written account of it, we are able to visit in our imaginations the only image left of this natural wonder. Dorothy provides, in her own way, a mechanism for those who have “shapeless wishes . . . without hope” to visit through imagination (Journals 86). Although the glacier is lost to time, we travel there through Dorothy’s words, replicating the experience she had reading or hearing

Fig. 2. Johann Ludwig Bleuler, Arveyron Cave, Nineteenth Century.
William’s words. Although it would be incredible for pilgrims to see this sight and compare it to their imagination conjured from reading Dorothy’s journal, they can be contented with these images and “find strength in what remains behind” (“Ode” 183).

The End of Our Journey

The Wordsworth travel party returned home in November 1820. The following January, Dorothy took the notes she had gathered on her journey and expanded them into the Journal of a Tour on the Continent. William started seriously writing poems about the trip in November 1821 (characteristically removed from the situation, he wrote from “emotion recollected in tranquility”) and refreshed his memory by reading entries from Dorothy’s journal (Lyrical Ballads 260). At first, they sought to combine Dorothy’s journal entries with a few complementary poems in one volume, but William wrote more poems than expected and released them separately as Memorials of a Tour, 1820 (Newlyn 245). In a letter, Dorothy wrote, “[William’s work] has grown to such importance . . . that I have long ceased to consider it in connection with my own narrative” (Letters 104). Though William’s had grown in importance, I believe that Dorothy’s writing of the tour is no less important than her brother’s.

Journal of a Tour on the Continent is not as widely read as the Alfoxden or the Grasmere Journals, but its insight into revisiting makes it deserving of a larger audience. Study of this journal, alongside William’s Memorials of a Tour, 1820, provides deeper insight into the Wordsworths’ relationship and their later years. The Rhine, spittal, Alps, and Arveyron glacier are representative examples among many that establish Dorothy revisiting the physical locations of her imagination. Numerous other instances reinforce this concept, such as the “aboriginal vale” as described in The Prelude and “so often mentioned” by William (Journals 280). Further study could be undertaken on this moment or various others.

In her journal, Dorothy still included some of William’s poems about the trip as well as quotes from his poems of the 1790 trip. She textually layered both of their experiences, past and present, into one. Dorothy was urged to shorten her journal so it could be published, but Dorothy responded, “As to
compressing or re-writing, I shall never do it, for it well answers the purpose intended, of reviving recollections” (Letters 337; vol. 4). Indeed, her purpose in creating the journal was to have a written account to remind herself of these locations, and to visit them once again through memory. The process of writing itself was an act of revisiting through memory because she was removed and was retrospectively reliving it as she wrote. As she did this, the experiences of imagining, seeing, and remembering the places became conflated into one image. Journal of a Tour on the Continent is written as a fusion of all her experiences, prospective and retrospective. It is the story of the young woman who heard and dreamed of faraway places and the older, more mature woman who finally traveled there. It is the story of a sister exploring a formerly inaccessible part of her brother’s life alongside him. It is the story of Dorothy Wordsworth finally revisiting places she had only seen through imagination and the ultimate fulfillment of “wishes cherished from the days of youth” (Journals 23).
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