Art and Poetry

Wordsworth and the Alps

Bicentenary Exhibition at Grasmere, 26 July–18 November 1990

JANET ADAM SMITH and PETER BICKNELL

(*Plates 46–49, 63, 65–70*)

Wordsworth's journey through the Alps in 1790

William Wordsworth was an impressionable twenty-year-old when, in the summer of 1790, he set off for the Alps with his Cambridge friend Robert Jones – 'he too a mountaineer'. As they travelled through France by road and boat, people everywhere in a happy glow of the early revolution were celebrating the new Constitution with garlands, dancing and music.

> All hearts were open, every tongue was loud
> With amity and glee; we bore a name
> Honoured in France, the name of Englishmen.

By the time he arrived in the mountains Wordsworth was uplifted and exhilarated, open to experience from man and Nature.

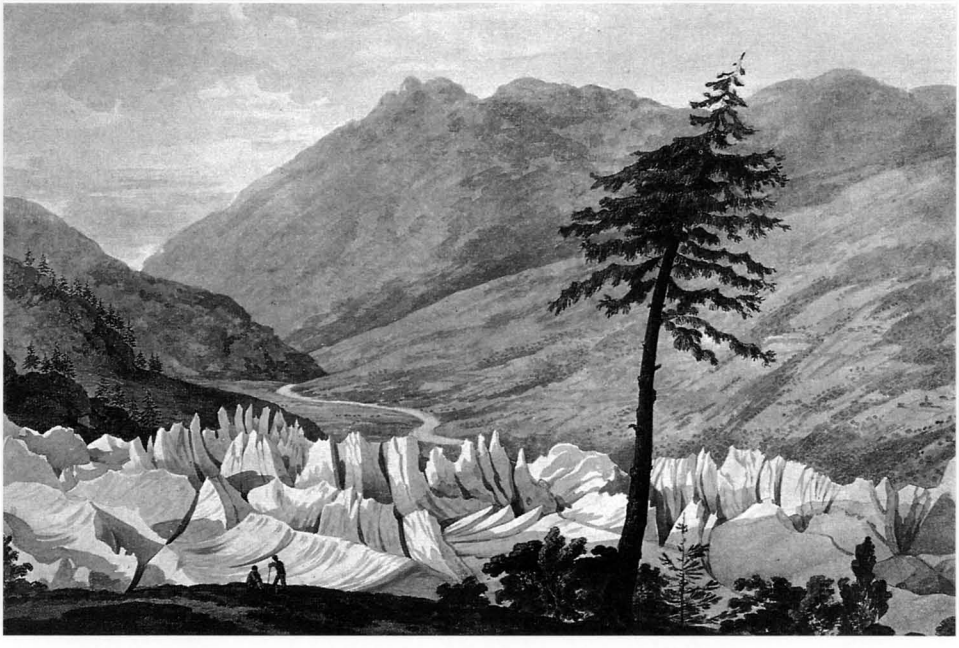
The two pedestrians – 'each with his little knapsack of necessaries upon his shoulders' – went from Geneva to Martigny, over the Col de Balme to Chamonix and back again to the Valais, crossing the Alps by the Simplon down to Como; and homeward through the Grisons and the Oberland. There they had further sights of the Alps, Wetterhorn and Schreckhorn, which the traveller from the Lakes addressed as 'Pikes of darkness named and fear and storms'.

A bicentenary exhibition

To celebrate the bicentenary of this memorable journey, the Wordsworth Trust arranged an exhibition of books and pictures, maps and manuscripts at the Wordsworth Museum at Grasmere from 26 July to 18 November 1990. The final event was a weekend conference on 'The Alps, Poets, Painters and Travellers' when it sometimes seemed as if the Alpine Club had taken over Grasmere. There was Jerry Lovatt reading a paper on 'The First Ascent of Mont Blanc', George Band recalling 'Classic Alpine Climbs'; Charles Warren and Peter Bicknell talking about alpine books and Janet Adam Smith on depictions of the Mer de Glace. Many other Alpine Club members joined the art historians and rare-book dealers in enjoyment of a remarkable occasion to which the Club had contributed so much. Of the 168 exhibits 62 had come from the Club; several more had been lent by members, and the organisers had been able to select freely from the rare books of our library, nearly 300 of which had been



46. *Swiss Alpine Landscape*, watercolour by Samuel Hieronymous Grimm 1733–1794. (*Reproduced by permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum.*) (p203)



47. *Valley and Lower Glacier of Grindelwald*, watercolour by William Pars 1742–1782. (*Reproduced by permission of the British Museum.*) (p203)

deposited for safe keeping in the Wordsworth Library after our departure from South Audley Street. Many members were quite startled by this revelation at Grasmere of the wealth of books and pictures in the Club's possession.

The exhibition was created and put together with notable scholarship and imagination by Robert Woof, Director of the Wordsworth Trust. The display, skilfully arranged by the enthusiastic team at Grasmere, followed the route of Wordsworth's journey, clearly indicated on a series of three-dimensional maps. It was divided into sections – some regional as 'Chamonix', 'Grindelwald' and six of the Cantons; and some covering such topics as 'The Ascent of Mont Blanc', 'Alpine Poets' and 'Alpine Pioneers'. Though there was no catalogue, the exhibition was elucidated by generous captions.

Half the exhibits were books, manuscripts and prints in showcases, and half were framed pictures – mostly landscapes, but a few of them portraits. Some of the pictures and many of the 46 Alpine Club books on display were familiar to members of the Club, having been exhibited at South Audley Street to celebrate the centenary of the foundation of the Club, the bicentenary of the first ascent of Mont Blanc and as 'Treasures of the Alpine Club'. However, thanks to the resources at Grasmere, our treasures could be shown in greater numbers and more beautifully than had ever been possible in our own premises. There were many delightful little flourishes. For instance, Wordsworth's footnote to his poem 'Descriptive Sketches' on the nostalgic effect on Swiss expatriates of the sound of the *ranz de vaches* provided a reason for showing the Alpine Club's copy of Burgdorfer's *Receuil de Ranz de Vaches et Chancons de la Suisse* of 1826, accompanied by five versions of the *ranz* to be heard on headphones.

The availability of so many of the Club's remarkable collection of pre-Wordsworth books about the Alps (Burnet, Windham, Martyn, Coxe, de Saussure, Bourrit, to mention a few of the authors), combined with the Trust's unique collection of Wordsworthiana, enabled the literary and historical aspects of the journey to be magnificently represented. The visual presentation was strikingly enriched by several of the Club's colour-plate volumes, notably the Lorys' aquatints (Plate 69), the *Vues Remarquables* of Caspar Wolf and others, and the sumptuous album of coloured prints of Alpine scenery, assembled, mounted and presented to Queen Charlotte by R. Henzy.

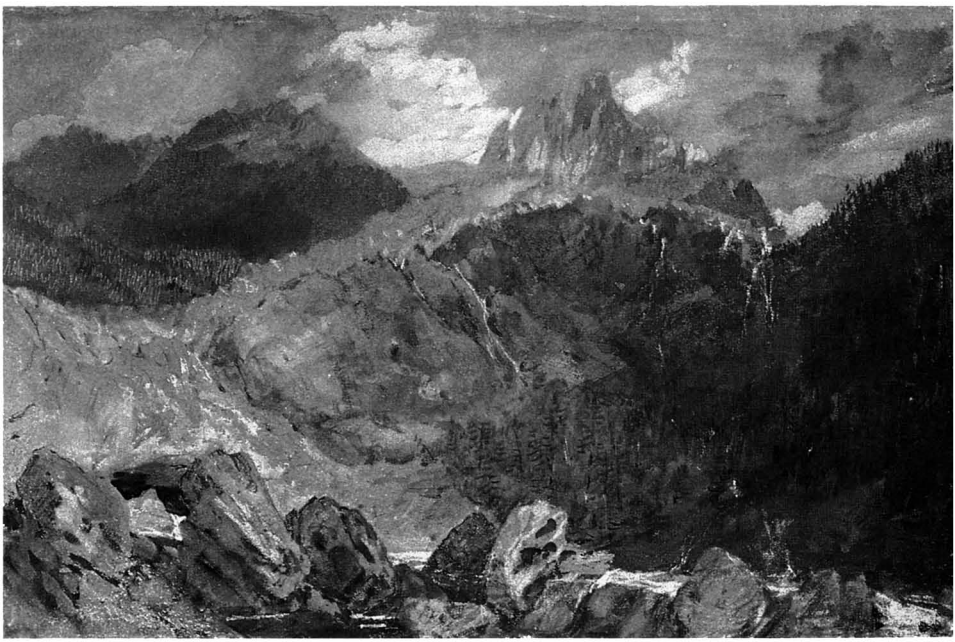
Thanks to the generosity of Charles Warren and his gifts to both the Club and the Trust, it was possible to introduce two interesting themes. The topic of Ruskin and his love of Chamonix was illustrated by some splendid examples of his watercolours (Plate 67). 'The Passage of the Mountain of St Gothard', the poem by Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, was introduced by the relevant books, including Coleridge's poem 'Ode to Georgiana . . . on her "Passage over Mount Gothard" '.

Six watercolour artists

Robert Woof chose to limit, with a few exceptions, the pictorial illustration of the journey to the works of six artists, who visited the Alps from England between 1770 and 1802. They show us the scene very much as Wordsworth must have seen it.



48. *On the Triente, Savoy*, watercolour by John 'Warwick' Smith 1749–1813. (*Reproduced by permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum.*) (p203)



49. *Source of the Arveiron*, watercolour by J M W Turner 1775–1851. (*Reproduced by permission of the Tate Gallery, Turner Bequest.*) (p203)

The six chosen were:

Samuel Grimm, a Swiss, took up permanent residence in England in about 1768, and made a tour of the Alps in 1774–5;
William Pars, an experienced topographer, visited the Alps in 1770 accompanying Henry Temple, Viscount Palmerston, and was joined for much of the tour by Horace-Bénédict de Saussure;
John Robert Cozens came to the Alps in 1776 with Richard Payne Knight, writer on the theory of the picturesque, and again in 1783 with William Beckford of Fonthill Abbey;
Francis Towne and **'Warwick' Smith** returned through the Alps together from Rome in 1781;
Joseph Mallord William Turner visited the Alps for the first time and Chamonix for the only time in 1802.

The work of five of these artists was discussed by Peter Bicknell in a contribution to the *Alpine Journal* (*AJ* 91, 163–170, 1986), with a few good illustrations. At Grasmere a preliminary selection, including for comparison a few views of the Lake District by Towne and Smith, was shown in the Introductory Room; and at the end of the exhibition there was a separate group of Alpine views by Grimm. These artists had much in common. They were primarily skilled in the art of painting in watercolours. They were visiting similar places in similar circumstances. With the exception of Towne and Turner they were working for and often travelling with well-to-do patrons. They could all have known each other. Pars, Towne and Smith were friends. Turner, before he went to the Alps, had copied Cozens' drawings. But this exhibition demonstrated not so much their similarities as the striking differences of their response to the mountain scene.

Grimm recorded the Alps as a straightforward topographer, making careful transcripts of nature. He almost invariably introduced animated groups of figures (Plate 46) which link the severity of the landscape with human activities, a link with which Cozens, Turner and Towne were not concerned. His tinted drawings show a technique which is tentative compared with the others.

Pars, like Grimm, was essentially transcribing the actual scene. He was not interested in transforming it into picturesque arrangements. He particularly delighted in the wild turbulence of the glaciers at Chamonix, Grindelwald (Plate 47) and the Source of the Rhône – characteristics which his companion, Lord Palmerston, described as 'the immense Waves, Pyramids and Clefts which compose the Surface of the Frozen Sea'. Eight of Pars' pictures of the Alps were exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1771, and five of them were engraved and published as prints in 1773–4. So Pars had brought images of the Alps to London 19 years before Wordsworth's journey.

Cozens, visiting the Alps and Chamonix six years after Pars, responded to mountainous landscape in a totally different way from Grimm or Pars. He was neither topographer nor illustrator, but an imaginative creator of dreamlike images of nature. From the elements which he saw in a prospect he created in sombre blue-grey tones a poetic world of his own. Distant mountains float on clouds; the aiguilles of Chamonix are transformed into strange rocky forms



63. *Pays de Valais*, watercolour by John Robert Cozens 1752–1797. (*Reproduced by permission of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.*) (p203)



64. *View from Phalut on the Singalila ridge*, painted in 1855 by Hermann Schlagintweit. He thought that the mountain was Everest, but in fact it is Makalu. (*From the Royal Geographical Society archive, by permission.*) (p213)

perched upon improbable pyramids of snow. He often produced many versions of the same view for different patrons, painting for instance a view of the Rhône valley, *Pays de Valais* (Plate 63), eight times. Thus he too brought visions of the Alps to connoisseurs in London long before 1790. His work, of which 17 fine examples were exhibited, is as different from the solid reality of Towne's mountain forms, or from the wild drama of Turner's exploration of form, colour and atmosphere, as it is from the accepted topography of the other artists.

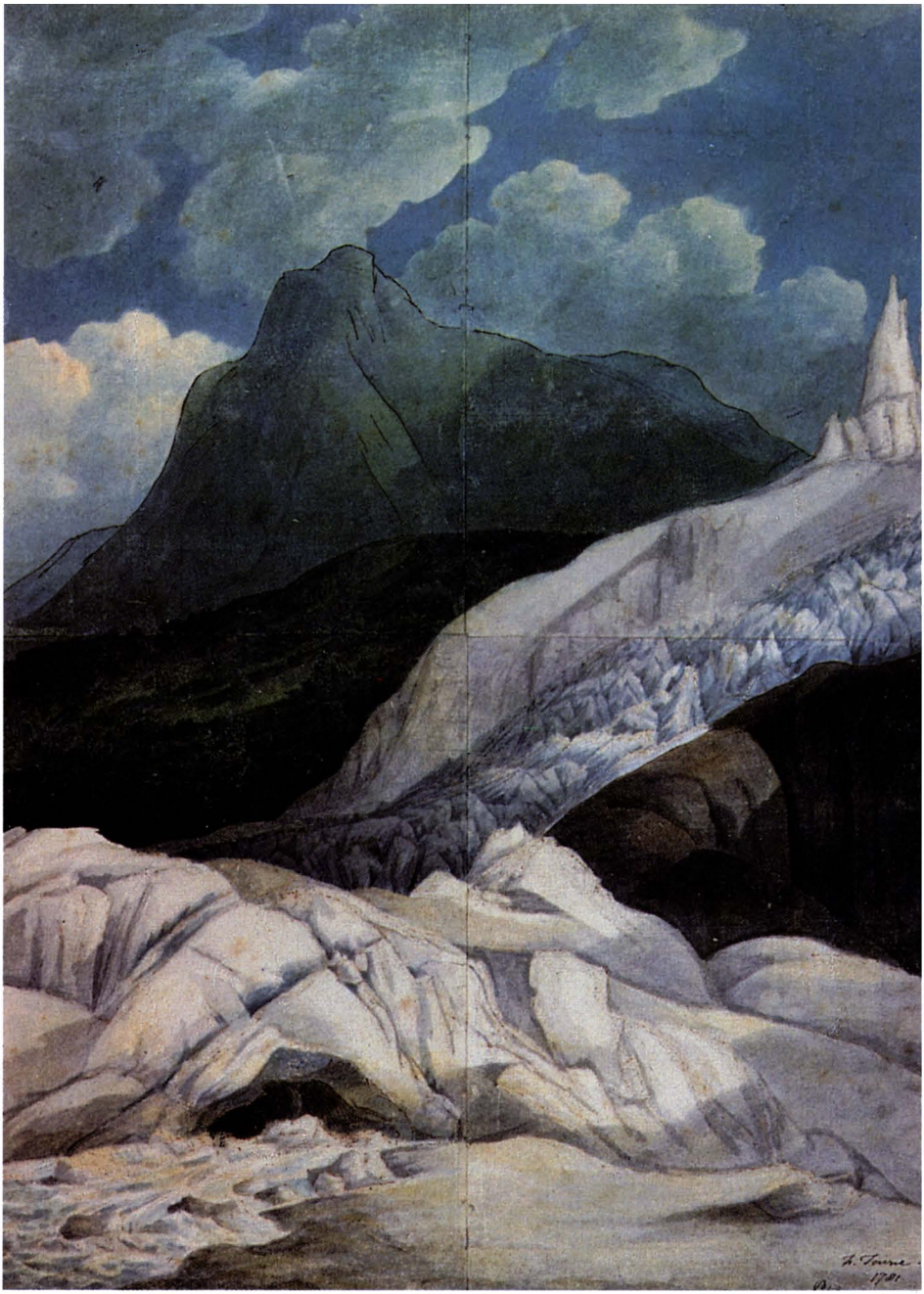
John 'Warwick' Smith, handsomely patronised by Lord Warwick, was a prolific and highly professional topographical artist. He recorded mountainous landscape in Wales and the Lake District as well as the Alps, with drawings that were used for prints and book illustrations. He prepared drawings for the plates in the illustrated edition of Coxe's *Travels in Switzerland*, without having actually accompanied the author. When in Rome in 1780 with his friend Francis Towne they sketched the same subjects, often sitting side by side, and there is some resemblance in their work. But when they returned together through the Alps it is strikingly different. Smith's richly coloured watercolour drawings (Plate 48) have much more in common with the topography of Grimm and Pars than they have with Towne's inspired anatomy of the mountains.

One of the great delights of the exhibition was the display of 20 watercolours by **Francis Towne**. These were mostly little-known drawings from private collections. They included two of the artist's greatest works. *Glaciere taken from Montanvert* (Plate 66), lent by Janet Adam Smith, is probably the finest example of Towne's magical conversion of his direct observation of a mountain scene into a brilliant work of art. He said that he found the mountains full of 'terrible adventure', a feeling which he has passed on in his two remarkable visions of *The Source of the Arveiron*, only one of which was exhibited (Plate 65). In simple stark areas of intense blues, browns and gleaming white, he created almost abstract patterns which convey an overpowering sense of the mysterious grandeur of the mountains – a mood which contrasts strikingly with his own sensitive delineation of the Mer de Glace.

Turner was gloriously represented by 16 masterpieces. His work transcends topography. His technique is brilliant and widely varied (Plates 49, 68 and 70). It was highly appropriate that the grand climax of the journey, the final crossing of the Alps, was celebrated by Turner's great oil painting *The Pass of St Gothard* (Plate 70).

In the way the artists represented the Alps – particularly in watercolour – they created a British tradition, almost a 'British School'. But the exhibition also included several works by continental artists (Plate 69) to illustrate different aspects of similar scenes. Such differences were discussed by Michael Kitson in his illuminating and wide-ranging paper at the weekend conference 'British and Continental Traditions in Depicting the Alps'.

The exhibition in its presentation of the Alps as seen through British eyes at the end of the 18th century was something which had never been attempted before. The correlation of poetry, prose and painting was original. The gathering together and exhibition of more than 50 images of the Alps by Cozens, Towne and Turner was in itself a major achievement. So it is most



65. *The Source of the Arveiron*, watercolour by Francis Towne 1740–1816. (*Reproduced by permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum.*) (p203)

regrettable that, owing to lack of funds, there is no catalogue – no published record for posterity – of such an original, informative, imaginative and important exhibition.

Chamonix and the Mer de Glace

Four years before Wordsworth's journey, Paccard and Balmat had climbed Mont Blanc, followed the next year by de Saussure's party and then by the Englishman Mark Beaufoy – events which gave Chamonix a particular glamour for tourists. For most travellers, however, the Alps meant passes to be crossed rather than summits to be climbed or glaciers to be explored. Among the scenes which drew the artists – the gorges, the cascades, the daring bridges (Plate 48) of the travellers' Alps – there was yet one which belonged to the climbers' Alps: the Mer de Glace, first described in English in 1741 by William Windham, who likened it to the frozen seas of Greenland. It was subsequently visited by many enterprising tourists, including Goethe who walked up to the Montanvert in 1779.

The nearest Wordsworth came to the Mer de Glace was when he passed through the Vale of Chamonix, noted how 'five streams of ice amid her cots descend', but kept to the valley. Several English artists made their way to the Montanvert, and there were many pictures in the exhibition to show how they responded to the stupendous sight. Towne and 'Warwick' Smith, who had been together in Rome, came up in 1781 with their drawing equipment. Smith's watercolour conveys the grandeur of the scene, with a human touch where he introduces a quaint little building in the foreground, 'Blair's Hut', erected by an Englishman for the convenience of tourists. Towne's line and wash drawing made on 'Sept. 16 . . . 12 o'clock, light from the right hand' filled a double spread of his sketchbook. He ignored the foreground of the Montanvert, depicting nothing but glacier, snow, peaks and sky; and he carefully wrote in the names of the aiguilles – 'Charmoz', 'Geant', 'Moine', 'Aig. du Dru', and also noted 'glaciere running down', 'gravel' and suchlike. He was concerned to render the structure and stuff of the mountains without picturesque distraction, and let their majesty speak through their solid reality. This drawing hung at the exhibition near a larger finished watercolour of the same scene which Towne worked on after his return home, when, no doubt to meet the taste of possible purchasers, he made a concession to the Picturesque by introducing a foreground of grass and trees, and two tiny figures with their backs to the scene – perhaps one of them is viewing the prospect, framed as a picture, in his reflecting landscape glass.

When in 1802 Turner went up to the Montanvert he must have crossed the Mer de Glace and made his way towards the Couvercle. He sketched from the heart of the glacier showing us an icy sea in turbulence, all frozen breakers and heaving ice, overlooked by menacing aiguilles. It has often been said that two of Turner's principal sources of inspiration were the sea and mountains. And here in the Mer de Glace they coincided. Turner was the only one of these artists who penetrated the glacier. His images are created from within the turbulent sea, as though he was once again lashed to the mast to observe the storm; those of the



66. Above *Glaciere taken from Montanvert*, watercolour by Francis Towne. (*Janet Adam Smith Collection*) (p203)

68. Opposite, above *Mer de Glace*, watercolour by J M W Turner 1775–1851. (*Reproduced by permission of the Tate Gallery, Turner Bequest.*) (p203)



67. *Mer de Glace by Moonlight*, watercolour by John Ruskin 1819–1900. (*Alpine Club Collection*) (p203)

other painters are from without. Pars was fascinated by the dramatic architecture of serac and crevasse, but it was, as his companion described it, a 'frozen' sea. He was viewing the drama as a spectator, safely on dry land. Towne in his sketch is recording the reality of what he saw from the Montanvert. With its help you could make your way up the glacier – a mountaineer could almost plan his route from it. Turner's watercolour *Mer de Glace* (Plate 68), which he chose to engrave himself in 1812 for a plate in his *Liber Studiorum*, would be no help in planning a route up the Aiguille de Charmoz. It transports the viewer into an awe-inspiring scene of storm-racked rock and ice.

We had crossed the Alps

In Book VI of *The Prelude*, written many years after the journey, comes the great cry '*We had crossed the Alps*' – but it is a cry not of triumph but of bewilderment. Wordsworth and Jones had walked up the Simplon with a band of travellers and their guide, lingered at the inn after the others had moved on, taken the road again till it seemed to end in a stream and the only visible track was up 'a lofty Mountain'. So up they went till they met a peasant who told them to go back down to the stream and follow it down to Italy, for they were indeed already over the watershed – they 'had crossed the Alps'. It was an anticlimax; they had been robbed of the excitement they should have felt at crossing that historic divide. But the bewilderment, the displacement, may have heightened Wordsworth's perceptions and etched them on his memory; for the lines in *The Prelude* that describe their descent of the Vale of Gondo are among the finest that poets have ever written about mountains:

> The immeasurable height
> Of woods decaying, never to be decay'd,
> The stationary blasts of water-falls,
> And every where along the hollow rent
> Winds thwarting winds, bewilder'd and forlorn,
> The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
> The rocks that mutter'd close upon our ears,
> Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
> As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
> And giddy prospect of the raging stream,
> The unfetter'd clouds, and region of the Heavens,
> Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
> Were 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.

Turner did not paint this particular scene; but the cliffs and torrents and rising vapour of his great *The Pass of St Gothard* (Plate 70) convey sensations



69. *Mer de Glace and Blair's Hut*, aquatint by Mathias Gabriel Lory 1784–1846. (*Alpine Club Collection*) (p203)

akin to Wordsworth's: awe and exhilaration in the face of vast natural forces and wonder at the crossing of the Alps. To bring Wordsworth and Turner into such juxtaposition was a triumph – as indeed was the whole of the exhibition.



70. *The Pass of St Gothard*, oil painting by J M W Turner. (*Reproduced by permission of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.*) (p203)