

# Comparative landscapes : the alps vs. the lake districts in Wordsworth's prose and poetry

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Patrick Vincent

## Comparative Landscapes

### The Alps vs. the Lake District in Wordsworth's Prose and Poetry

– Take thy flight; – possess, inherit  
Alps or Andes – they are thine!  
With the morning's roseate Spirit,  
Sweep their length of snowy line.

“To--, on her First Ascent to the Summit of  
Helvellyn”<sup>1</sup>

In the second volume of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, while the Creature goes to Geneva to wreak vengeance on his progenitor's family, Victor Frankenstein and his friend Henry Clerval travel northward through England, briefly stopping in the Derbyshire resort town of Matlock, then spending two pleasant months in the Lake District. At Matlock, Victor notes resemblances with the scenery of Switzerland, although “on a lower scale.” The mountains and lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland, on the other hand, are a familiar sight, allowing him to “almost fancy myself in the Swiss mountains.” During their stay, Frankenstein and Clerval anachronistically befriend some “men of talent,” presumably the group of poets most famously associated with the Lakes, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey. Clerval, the more poetic of the two characters and the one associated in the novel with Wordsworth, is delighted to be in their company, stating enthusiastically that “among these mountains I should scarcely regret Switzerland and the Rhine.”<sup>2</sup>

1 William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, 2 volumes, ed. John O. Hayden, Hammonds-worth, Middlesex, Penguin, 1977, vol. 2, p. 347.

2 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: the original 1818 text*, eds. D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf, Peterborough, Ontario, Broadview, 1994, p. 180.

*Frankenstein* may be read as a novel that renders literal the romantic fantasies and projections of Mary Shelley's male contemporaries, as Margaret Homans has pointed out, leading to potential monstrosities.<sup>3</sup> Among these fantasies one may add William Wordsworth's wish to salvage the ideal republican values that he identified with Switzerland from the monstrous wreck of the French Revolution, and his projection of these values onto the English Lake District. Settling in Grasmere in late 1799 and making it his imaginative home thanks to major works such as "Home at Grasmere," *The Excursion*, and his *Guide to the Lakes*, the poet did more than any other writer to put the Lake District on the map. Yet Wordsworth, an avid traveller, was also very fond of Switzerland, which he toured in 1790 and 1820, and wrote about in almost thirty poems, in several letters as well as in his *Guide*. Critics such as John Barrell and W.J.T. Mitchell have demonstrated at length that landscape in British eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century culture was a form of political discourse.<sup>4</sup> As I will argue in this essay, Switzerland's landscape provided Wordsworth with the cultural and political legitimacy he needed to carry out his project of reinhabitation in the Lake District. Landscape comparison becomes a means of cultural appropriation – Wordsworth's prose and poetry usurps features that were proverbial to Swiss landscape representation in the eighteenth century, including sublimity, republicanism, and local attachment, modifying these in order to apply them to his own, idealized home at Grasmere. Landscape aesthetics play an important role in this cultural practice through what I will call miniaturisation, the tendency to view the Lake District as a smaller, more beautiful and politically more palatable version of Switzerland. As I hope to demonstrate, and as Mary Shelley already hints at in her novel, the many displacements and silencings that Wordsworth deploys in order to fit the landscape of the Alps onto that of the Lake District show the difficulties he faces in resolving the contradictions

3 Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and the Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 100–101.

4 See John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730–1840*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, and W.J.T. Mitchell, ed. *Landscape and Power*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

between Switzerland's democratic republicanism and Britain's constitutional monarchy.

### **“A Strong Infection of the Age”: The Picturesque and Landscape Comparison**

Wordsworth was not the first to compare the Lake District with Switzerland in order to extol the virtues of his native ground. Since the 1760s, more and more middle-class tourists had been seeking cheaper as well as patriotic alternatives to the aristocratic Grand Tour through the Alps. Thomas West's *Guide to the Lakes*, by far the most popular of all the guide books on the region and read by Wordsworth as early as 1787, states in its opening pages that

Those who have traversed the *Alps*, visited the lake of *Geneva*, and viewed mount *Blanc*, the highest of the *Glaciers*, from the valley of *Chamouni*, in *Savoy*, may still find entertainment in this domestic tour. To trace the analogy and differences of mountainous countries, furnishes the observant traveller with amusement; and the travelled visitor in the *Cumbrian* lakes and mountains, will not be disappointed of pleasure in this particular.<sup>5</sup>

A significant subtext in West's guide, the analogy between the Lake District and the Alps resurfaces in Thomas Gray's 1769 journal of his tour of the lakes, included in the guide's appendix. Gray, in one of the best-known episodes in the journal, exaggerates the danger of a passage under Gowdar Crag, comparing it to “those passes in the *Alps*, where the guides tell you to move on with speed, and say nothing, lest the agitation of the air should loosen the snows above, and bring down a mass that would overwhelm a caravan.”<sup>6</sup> It was not Gray's sentimental brand of tourism, however, but picturesque theory that helped make the comparison between the two regions commonplace by the end of the eighteenth century. Earlier adepts of the Picturesque used abstract, universal principles to organize locally distinct landscapes into generalized compositions. These principles, based on the *paysages moralisés* of Claude, Poussin and Rosa, provided

5 Thomas West, *A Guide to the Lakes in Cumberland, Westmoreland and Lancashire* (1784), Oxford, Woodstock Reprints, 1984, pp. 5–6.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

them with a common denominator to judge objects as beautiful.<sup>7</sup> In his *Observations on Cumberland and Westmoreland*, for example, a book published in 1786 but already widely circulating in the 1770s, William Gilpin asserts the general rule that “mountains ... rising in regular, mathematical lines, or in whimsical, grotesque shapes, are displeasing,” allowing him to declare that both Saddleback mountain in Cumberland and “many of the pointed summits of the Alps are objects rather of singularity than of beauty” (see figure 1). A few pages later, Gilpin compares the lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland with those in America and Switzerland, claiming that the latter exhibit more grandeur but lack the right sense of proportion and beauty.<sup>8</sup>

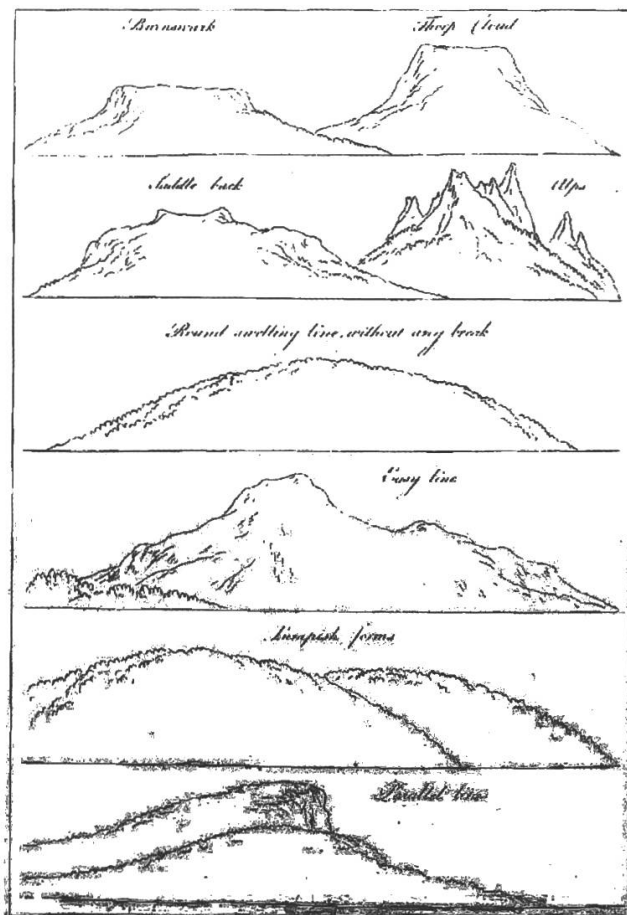


Figure 1:  
Comparative Illustrations of Mountain Summits,  
in William Gilpin,  
*Observations in Cumberland and Westmoreland* (1786)

7 Ann Bermingham, “System, Order, and Abstraction: The Politics of English Landscape Drawing around 1795,” in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, op. cit., pp. 77–101.

8 William Gilpin, *Observations in Cumberland and Westmoreland* (1786), Poole, Woodstock Books, 1996, vol. 1, p. 83, p. 118.

As Gilpin's comment indicates, the picturesque often served to highlight the comparative advantages of Britain's native landscapes, which many travellers claimed not only emulated, but even surpassed in variety, proportion and hence also beauty the landscapes on the Continent or in the United States. Thomas West, for example, argues that the Lake District's form and colouring is "finished in nature's highest tints" and states in a paragraph quoted verbatim thirty years later in Wordsworth's own *Guide* that

[A tour of the lakes] will give in miniature an idea of what they are to meet with there, in traversing the *Alps* and *Appenines*; to which our northern mountains are not inferior in beauty of line, or variety of summit, number of lakes, and transparency of water; not in colouring of rock, or softness of turf, but in height and extent only.<sup>9</sup>

Intimate with West's guide as well as with other picturesque descriptions of the Lake District, Wordsworth necessarily had the idea of his native region as a miniature but not inferior version of the Alps well in mind on his 1790 walking tour through France and Switzerland.

In the letter of September 6 and 16, 1790 addressed to his sister Dorothy, however, it is the difference between these two landscapes that the poet dramatizes:

I have thought of you perpetually and never have my eyes burst upon a scene of particular loveliness but I have almost instantly wished that you could for a moment be transported to the place where I stood to enjoy it. I have been more particularly induced to form these wishes because the scenes of Swisserland have no resemblance to any I have found in England, and consequently it may probably never be in your power to form any idea of them.<sup>10</sup>

By arguing for Switzerland's incommensurability, the fact that its scenes "have no resemblance to any I have found in England," the young poet distances himself from the incipient chauvinism of the picturesque guide books in order to self-fashion himself as a philosophical traveler. In book eleven of the 1805 *Prelude*, he reiterates his distaste for the Picturesque, criticizing that "strong infection of the

9 Thomas West, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–6.

10 Dorothy and William Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt. Volume I: The Early Years. Part 1, rev. ed. Chester Shaver, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 35.

age, / ... giving way / To a comparison of scene with scene.”<sup>11</sup> Wordsworth’s first experience of Switzerland is marked above all by sublimity, which he associates in the letter and in his poems of this period with the freedom and strong local attachment distinct to the Swiss. As he later writes in his unpublished 1812 prose fragment on the Sublime and the Beautiful, the Sublime suspends the “comparing power of the mind.”<sup>12</sup>

### Importing the “Aboriginal Vale:” Trient as Grasmere

In the same fragment on aesthetics, reason or “the comparing power” is made an agent of the Beautiful.<sup>13</sup> The 1790 letter gives expression to this comparing power by sympathetically addressing Dorothy, standing in metonymically, as she will do in “Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” for what he has left behind, including his home in the Lake District and his childhood. Dorothy here serves as William’s transcendental point of reference – the poet can never see or think about Switzerland without also being reminded of his attachment to England. This attachment is made explicit in “Septimi Gades,” a free adaptation of a Horatian ode Wordsworth started late in 1790, in which the speaker invites another female figure representing the poet’s youth, Mary Hutchinson, to join him in domestic retirement, either in a sheltered valley above the Rhone, or, “if wayward fates deny / Those purple slopes,” in “Grasmere’s quiet vale.”<sup>14</sup> Not only does the poem follow the same pattern as Wordsworth’s letter to Dorothy, wishing that “for a moment she could be transported” to Switzerland; it is also the first suggestion in Wordsworth’s poetry that Grasmere does in fact resemble the Alps, and, if necessary, can provide a viable alternative to the mountain paradise the poet discovered on his 1790 tour.

11 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, New York, Norton, 1979, p. 424.

12 William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*. Ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1974, vol. 2, p. 356.

13 *Ibid.*

14 William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, *ibid.*, vol. 1, 91.



Figure 2:  
Vale of Trient,  
above Martigny (VS)  
(author's photo)

The sheltered valley above the Rhone that the poet describes in “Septimi Gades,” identified by Ernest de Selincourt as the vale of Trient, provides a key to understanding the imaginative process that enables Wordsworth to displace his experience of Switzerland onto the Lake District (see figure 2). Wordsworth and Jones passed through Trient on 12 August 1790, perhaps inspired by Saint-Preux’s “Lettre sur le Valais,” more likely motivated by Ramond de Carbonnière’s long annotation to letter XXI of Coxe’s *Sketches of Swisserland*:

C’est dans les vallées méridionales, dans ces retraites où les voyageurs ont peu pénétré, qu’il faut chercher cette simplicité, ces mœurs patriarcales, qui ont fourni au peintre de Julie l’un de ses plus touchants tableaux. C’est là que se sont réfugiées ces vertus primitives, qui ont fui devant nos lumières, et qui bientôt abandonneront ce dernier asyle [sic].<sup>15</sup>

15 William Coxe, *Lettres sur l’état politique, civil et naturel de la Suisse, suivi de Observations sur les Alpes*, par L. Ramond de Carbonnières (1781). Monein, France, Editions Pyrémondes, 2003, p. 143.

According to Mark Reed, Trient is where the two young travellers first encountered the mountain shepherd memorialised in the 1793 poem *Descriptive Sketches* and in Book VI of the 1805 *Prelude*.<sup>16</sup> On their 1820 Continental tour, the Wordsworth party, including Dorothy and Mary, made a pilgrimage back to Trient, remembering it as the first truly alpine valley that Wordsworth and Jones passed through thirty years earlier. Describing the valley from the Col de la Tête-Noir in her journal record of the tour, Dorothy Wordsworth writes,

I do not speak of the Needles of Montanvert, behind; nor of other pikes uprising before us. Such sights belong not to Westmoreland; and I could fancy that I then paid them little regard, it being for the sake of Westmoreland alone that I like to dwell on this short passage of our journey, which brought us in view of one of the most interesting vallies of the Alps.<sup>17</sup>

The interest of this small valley for Dorothy lies in the fact that it “transports” her backward to her brother’s earlier tour as well as back to Westmoreland with its more gentle topography, which she opposes to the jagged alpine peaks that are abstracted to make the scene more picturesque. But it also points backward to Wordsworth’s 1790 letter. Written on 16 September, the same day as the letter, and borrowing some of the same wording, the above journal entry revises William’s assertion that Swiss scenes cannot be compared with those in England. For Dorothy, Trient stands for the Lake District, for the Beautiful in contrast to the Sublime, for home as opposed to travel, and, more generally, for what Elizabeth Bohls has identified as her emphasis on “the practical realities of dwelling in a place.”<sup>18</sup>

William, on the other hand, is more ambivalent at the outset about viewing Trient as a symbol of domesticity and, therefore, as a reminder of home. First, there were intrinsic differences between Switzerland and the Lake District that complicated any comparison between the two. As Benjamin Barber has shown, political freedom

16 Mark Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years, 1770–1779*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 104.

17 Dorothy Wordsworth, *Continental Journals* (1820), Bristol, Thoemmes Press, 1995, p. 291.

18 Elizabeth Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716–1818*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 170.

in the Swiss Alpine regions was based more on communal liberty than on constitutional right. This communal liberty was reflected in land ownership practices different from those in Britain and inscribed in the landscape itself.<sup>19</sup> Land in the higher mountain valleys of Switzerland was often held communally, or as small private holdings; in the Lake District, despite a strong yeoman tradition, there was a growing concentration of land in the eighteenth century, made visible by larger enclosures and country manors.<sup>20</sup> Second, the valley he discovered in 1790 seemed to answer not only to the ideal mountain republic he had imagined as a boy, but also to his new revolutionary sympathies. Wordsworth's passage on the Trient shepherd in the 1793 edition of the *Descriptive Sketches* draws heavily on Ramond to depict a composite landscape reuniting features from many different parts of Switzerland, including the mountains of Uri, the Graubünden and the Valais itself:

Ev'n so, by vestal Nature guarded, here  
The traces of primeval Man appear.  
The native dignity no forms debase,  
The eye sublime, and surely lion-grace.  
The slave of none, of beasts alone the lord,  
He marches with his flute, his book, and sword,  
Well taught by that to feel his rights, prepar'd  
With this "the blessings he enjoys to guard." <sup>21</sup>

An idealized Rousseauvian topos, the passage celebrates Switzerland's proverbial attributes, including a heroic past, primitive simplicity, attachment to place and democratic freedom, here explicitly associated with the absence of land ownership: "of beasts alone the lord." The historical context in which the valley was first visited gives the passage added political meaning. Revolution was in the air in the Valais in the summer of 1790: an uprising in Martigny on 11 August, the day before they visited, was followed by the expulsion of the governor of Monthey on 8 September, sparking the revolt of the Lower Valais

19 Benjamin R. Barber, *The Death of Communal Liberty: A History of Freedom in a Swiss Mountain Canton*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1974.

20 J.V. Beckett, "The Pattern of Landownership in England and Wales, 1660–1880," *The Economic History Review*, New Series, vol. 37, no. 1 (Feb. 1984), p. 16

21 William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 911.

against their Upper Valais rulers.<sup>22</sup> The shepherd's "eye sublime" and "lion-grace" therefore take on radical republican overtones here, accentuated by the fact that Wordsworth wrote the poem in France still under the thrall of revolutionary politics.

When Wordsworth imaginatively revisits the Trient topos in 1804, the political situation on the Continent had changed dramatically alongside the poet's own politics. After the French invasion of Switzerland in 1798, in particular, there was a growing feeling among Britons that Switzerland would never be the same.<sup>23</sup> As Michael Friedman writes, the poet no longer believed by the late 1790s that his ideal mountain republic "be limited to the Alps or that it ought to be so limited."<sup>24</sup> In the 1805 *Prelude*, we see Wordsworth moving gradually away from Switzerland as a sublime, incommensurable and politically radical landscape, in order to emphasize its domestic qualities, the "love & gentleness" associated in the fragment on aesthetics with the category of the Beautiful.<sup>25</sup> The passage on Trient in Book VI thus revises his description of the Trient shepherd, representing him as part of a chastened, even subdued community, the "sanctified abodes of peaceful man" which inspire in the viewer a more conservative "patriarchal dignity" rather than a "native dignity" that is difficult to export. At the same time, and as Michael Wiley has noted, he conceals the actual shepherd or "primeval man," replacing him only with his habitations:

My heart leaped up when first I did look down  
On that which was first seen of those deep haunts,  
A green recess, an aboriginal vale,  
Quiet, and lorded over and possessed  
By naked huts, wood-built, and sown like tents

22 Pierre Devanthey, *La Révolution bas-valaisanne de 1790*, Bibliotheca Vallesiana 11, Lausanne, Payot, 1972, p. 38.

23 For more on the effects of the 1798 invasion on British Romantic culture, see Patrick Vincent, "Switzerland No More: Turner, Wordsworth and the changed Landscape of Revolution," *The Space of English*, eds. David Spurr and Cornelia Tschichold (SPELL 17), Tübingen, Gunter Narr, 2005, pp. 135–152.

24 Michael Friedman, *The Making of a Tory Humanist: William Wordsworth and the Idea of Community*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1979, p. 90.

25 William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 349.

Or Indian cabins over the fresh lawns  
And by the river-side.<sup>26</sup>

Although Wiley argues that the Trient passage transports the poet away to the utopian space of America, I see it on the contrary as a means to bring the poet closer to home, in other words, as a step toward assimilating and inscribing the Swiss topos onto the English landscape.<sup>27</sup> By revising Trient's aesthetics, shifting it from the Sublime to the Beautiful, and by displacing the shepherd, the poet can defuse the Swiss landscape's overly radical signification: as he writes a few lines further, the "lion" is "taméd."

In late 1799, disillusioned by politics and tired of being constantly on the move, William Wordsworth and his sister gravitated north back to their native Lake District, settling in the vale of Grasmere (see figure 3). William hoped to transform Grasmere into the kind of mountain republic he had first admired in Switzerland. This required a conscious effort on his part: Kenneth Johnston writes that "in 1800, the Wordsworths were not returning to Grasmere but going to Grasmere *as if* it were home."<sup>28</sup> In "Home at Grasmere," the poem begun in 1800 to make the Lake District into his spiritual and political home, the description of the poet's first view of Grasmere valley echoes the above passage on Trient:

The Station whence he looked was soft and green,  
Not giddy yet aërial, with a depth  
Of Vale below, a height of hills above,  
All that luxurious nature could desire,  
But stirring to the Spirit ...<sup>29</sup>

Jonathan Bate has claimed that "the Lake District is seen as the nearest approach to [Swiss pastoral republicanism] in Britain."<sup>30</sup> Yet the ideal of republican liberty incarnated in the Trient topos is here inter-

26 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, op. cit., p. 212.

27 Michael Wiley, *Romantic Geography: Wordsworth and Anglo-European Spaces*, London, Macmillan, 1998, pp. 110–113.

28 Kenneth Johnston, *Wordsworth and the Recluse*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984, p. 82.

29 William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 697.

30 Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, London, Routledge, 1991, p. 25.

nalized and made an attribute of the poet's imaginative powers : "The illusion strengthening as he gazed, he felt / That such unfettered liberty was his, / Such power and joy ..." <sup>31</sup> Wordsworth claims the Vale of Grasmere as his new home and imaginative center, at the same time acknowledging his status as a "Newcomer" (l. 471). He admires the "untutored Shepherds," the small freeholders of the Lake District whose labour is sweet because of their sanctuary-like liberty and independence (ll. 445–470). But he also realizes his difference from them, leading him in a later version of the poem to make an awkward but telling analogy between his situation and that of a traveler in a Swiss vale:

... A pensive stranger journeying at his leisure  
 Through some Helvetian Dell, when low-hung mists  
 Break up, and are beginning to recede [...]  
 How pleased he is where thin and thinner grows  
 The veil, or where it parts at once, to spy  
 The dark pines thrusting forth their spiky heads;  
 To watch the spreading lawns with cattle grazed,  
 Then to be greeted by the scattered huts [...]  
 In every quarter something visible,  
 Half-seen or wholly, lost and found again,  
 Alternate progress and impediment  
 And yet a growing prospect in the main.<sup>32</sup>

Trient clearly resurfaces in this passage, emptied of its inhabitants, expressing only the most generic pastoral ideal of community. At the center of this landscape is the stranger, curiously detached through his pensiveness and leisure from an authentic relation to place, yet given power over it thanks to his "growing prospect."

31 Wordsworth, *The Poems*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 698.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 710. This passage was added in Msc. D, composed in the 1820s. See the Introduction to William Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere: Part First, Book First of the Recluse*, The Cornell Wordsworth, ed. Beth Darlington, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1977.



Figure 3: Estate Farms in Grasmere Valley (photo by author)

The word “prospect” points back to the prospect poem tradition, poetry that describes the surrounding physical world from a single perspective in order to symbolically confer authority on the landowner. As Tim Fulford has argued, “Home at Grasmere” usurps the power of the landowner, but also of the local inhabitants, in order to empower the poet himself. This authority is not based on actual ownership, but on the spiritual possession of place.<sup>33</sup> The passage reminds us, however, that the poem also usurps the authority of Switzerland’s landscape. No longer is it the shepherd, or even the huts who lord over and possess the vale: it is the poet-traveller who is given that prerogative thanks to his aesthetic training, described in his aesthetic fragment as a gradual opening of the mind from the perception of sublimity to that of beauty.<sup>34</sup> An appreciation of the Beautiful, for the later Wordsworth, reflects a viewer’s maturity.

33 Tim Fulford, *Landscape, Liberty and Authority: Poetry, Criticism and Politics from Thomson to Wordsworth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 169–178.

34 William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 360.

As Wordsworth grew in maturity, meeting success as a poet, receiving the patronage of Sir George Beaumont and befriending the new Earl of Lonsdale, he moved even further away from his youthful republican ideals, in the end completely revising the original political signification of the Trient topos in his description of Grasmere in Book Five of *The Excursion*, written around 1809 or 1810. Not only does he use similar imagery as in the Trient passage in *The Prelude*; he directly compares it with “some happy valley of the Alps.” If Grasmere is given all the same features as the Swiss valley, however, it is also represented as superior to that valley because it manages to remain free, unlike Switzerland where tyranny has intruded upon the “unoffending commonwealth.” Grasmere’s “little platoon” of cottages, a direct allusion to Edmund Burke’s idealization of domesticity as a model for the British nation as a whole, resists invasion because protected by Church and King: “A popular equality reigns here, / Save for yon stately House beneath whose roof / A rural lord might dwell.”<sup>35</sup> Thanks in part to an aesthetic revisioning from sublime to beautiful, but also to a series of displacements and idealizations of Grasmere itself, the “aboriginal vale” that began its trajectory in 1790 as a Swiss republican topos comes by 1810 to symbolize the British and Tory ideals of a paternalist society dominated by a landed gentry.

### **Making it Beautiful: The Guide to the Lakes**

To best understand how the poet attempts to reinhabit the Lake District through an aesthetic appropriation and nationalisation of the landscapes he discovered on his 1790 tour, one needs to look at his *Guide to the Lakes*, published in several different versions starting in 1810. The first edition, appearing without Wordsworth’s name on the title page, opens with a description of General Pfyffer’s relief-model of Central Switzerland, which Wordsworth had likely seen in Lucerne in 1790 or had at least read about in Coxe (see figure 4). According to François Walter, the model enables an aristocratic, solitary reading of the world, in which “miniaturisation incontestably goes hand in hand

35 William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, op. cit., vol.2, p. 110.

with the pleasure of domination.”<sup>36</sup> Wordsworth makes a similar observation, claiming that by overlooking the scenery from a “little platform,” which reproduces the effect both of Picturesque tourism and of prospect poetry, the spectator receives aesthetic pleasure, “exquisite delight to the imagination,” but also, and more importantly, utilitarian pleasure by apprehending all the landscape “at once.”<sup>37</sup>



Figure 4:  
*Relief-Map of Lake of Four Cantons, by Franz Ludwig Pfiffer von Wyher (1716–1802)*  
Photo courtesy of the Glacier Garden, Lucerne

Wordsworth draws an analogy between the relief-model and his *Guide to the Lakes*, also a form of panoptical or totalizing vision meant to empower the reader. As both Theresa Kelley and Michael Wiley have claimed, this totalising vision approximates that of the mapmaker, who configures a landscape to fit a prescribed ideological and aesthetic mold. Kelley makes the additional point that map making

36 François Walter, *Les Figures paysagères de la nation: Territoire et paysage en Europe, 16e–20e siècle*, Paris, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2004, pp. 98–100 (my translation).

37 William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 170.

approximates the ideological work of the Beautiful.<sup>38</sup> Hence the *Guide*, as Wiley puts it, “subsumes the utopian qualities of the Lake District to the ideological structures of the nation around it.”<sup>39</sup> As I have been arguing, however, Wordsworth first had to displace those utopian qualities onto the Lake District from another landscape, that of the Alps. Just as Pfyffer’s model helped General Lecourbe defeat the Russians in 1799 and keep France’s military hold on Switzerland, the *Guide* provides an aesthetic and moral vantage point from which to “possess, inherit” (the speaker in the epigraph poem is not quite certain) those sublime values figured by the “Alps or Andes.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, by comparing Switzerland to the Lake District using the language of the Picturesque, the *Guide* refigures these sublime features as beautiful to make them more compatible with Britain’s national identity. Deploying a familiar rhetoric of national character, that of Englishness as a combination of individualism, tradition, and sense of proportion, and defining this national character, as was usually the case, at the expense of another nationality, Wordsworth uses the category of the Beautiful to give the moral advantage to a British version of the Sublime that is smaller, safer and, therefore, both aesthetically and politically more satisfying.

Introducing his subject in 1820 with the warning that “nothing is more injurious to genuine feeling than the practice of hastily and ungraciously depreciating the face of one country by comparing it with that of another [...] fastidiousness is a wretched travelling companion,” Wordsworth enters into a particularly fastidious 100-line long comparison between the Lake District and the Alps, to which he adds another 280 lines in his 1822 edition. Describing the Alps, the poet writes of “the fury of the gigantic torrents” that provoke a feeling of “almost irresistible violence,” while at the same resulting in a “monotony of their foaming course” and a disgusting “muddiness of the water.” In contrast to the sterile sublimity of revolutionary republicanism, which leads to a leveling of social classes paradoxically viewed as chaotic and monotonous, the author opposes the Lake District’s “unrivalled brilliancy of the water,” “variety of motion, mood, and

38 Theresa Kelley, *Wordsworth’s Revisionary Aesthetics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 13–42.

39 Wiley, *Romantic Geography*, op. cit., p. 151.

40 William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, op. cit., vol.2, p. 347.

character,” and “sense of stability and permanence” – the Beautiful comes in aid of the Sublime, just as Dorothy Wordsworth entered William’s mind in 1790 at the very moment when he was describing the apparent incommensurability and solitude of the Alps. This produces what Wordsworth here calls a “feeling of tranquil sublimity,” in other words a category of the Sublime disarmed of its politically radical signification.<sup>41</sup>

Wordsworth’s re-visionary aesthetics, to borrow Theresa Kelley’s invaluable concept, relies on the author’s disassociation of “grandeur” from “magnitude,” a notion he develops at length in the 1822 addition to the *Guide*.<sup>42</sup> The landscape of Switzerland and of the Lake District is not obviously comparable, however, the first boasting more forests and much higher mountains, so that the poet is obliged here to employ a dubious strategy to make his point. By pushing the comparison back to an undefined moment in the past, when the Lake District was still covered in forests, he can then claim that one country “represent[s] the other in miniature.”<sup>43</sup> This miniaturization, like map making, is hardly value neutral: Wordsworth uses it to show how authentic grandeur stems from the relation between parts. He writes, for example, of the “mellow tone, ... finer gradations, ... and delicate blending of hues” visible in the Lake District’s colors, of the greater “variety ... [and] rich and harmonious distribution” of trees that would have been in Grasmere had they not all been chopped down, of the English lakes which are “infinitely more pellucid, and less subject to agitation from winds,” and of the effect of an individual cataract in the Alps which is diminished by “the general fury of the stream of which it is part.” Even Switzerland’s oaks, the author makes a point of stating, are “greatly inferior to those in Britain.”<sup>44</sup> Unabashedly chauvinist, Wordsworth’s *Guide to the Lakes* allegorizes his Burkean ideal of an organic British society by opposing it to what he perceives as the murkier social relations on the Continent. The “happy proportion of component parts,” he writes, so noticeable “among the landscapes of the North of England ... surpass the scenes of Scotland, and, in a still greater degree, those of Switzer-

41 William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works*, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 230–239.

42 *Ibid*, p. 180.

43 *Ibid*, p. 232.

44 *Ibid*, pp. 234–236.

land,” echoing Burke’s remark that “happy if they all continued to know their indissoluble union and their proper place.”<sup>45</sup>

That Wordsworth needs to conclude his section on Switzerland by seeking the support of the aforementioned passage in Thomas West’s guide, a guide he rejected in 1790, suggests that a dramatic change took place between his first perception of the Alps and his understanding of that same landscape thirty years later. Nevertheless, as I hope to have made clear, Wordsworth’s perception of the Alps was, from the very outset, divided. On the one hand, he saw the Alps as the sublime symbol of Swiss republicanism, and on the other hand, he hoped that a more beautiful, domesticated version of this republicanism, incarnated by the vale of Trient, might be transferred to the North of England. Wordsworth’s repeated efforts to resolve this dilemma in “Home at Grasmere,” *The Guide to the Lakes* and in later poems such as *The Excursion* reveal the ideological nature of his imaginative work, as well as a keen self-awareness regarding his failure to construct an ideal mountain republic at Grasmere. Richard Cronin has pointed out that the poet’s “pure Commonwealth” in the Lake District, meant to serve as a model for the English nation as a whole, ultimately broke down because the Lake District statesmen whom Wordsworth celebrates were unable to defend themselves against the encroaching vices of capitalism.<sup>46</sup> I am suggesting that it also failed because the poet was ultimately unable to apply the Swiss republican model to an English context. In an 1825 letter to Jacob Fletcher, Wordsworth suggests his awareness of this incompatibility:

It seems next to impossible to discriminate between the claims of two countries to admiration with the impartiality of a *Judge*; in one’s mind one may be just to both, but something of the *advocate* will creep into the language – as an office of this kind is generally undertaken with a view to rectify some injustice. This was the case with myself in respect to a comparison which I have drawn between our

45 Edmund Burke, *The Works of Edmund Burke*, 3 volumes, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1860, 1, p. 488.

46 Richard Cronin, “Wordsworth’s Poems of 1807 and the War against Napoleon,” *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 48, n. 189 (Feb. 1997), pp. 33–50.

Mountains etc and the Alps; the general impression is, I am afraid, that I give the preference to my native region, which was far from the truth.<sup>47</sup>

The older Wordsworth still waffles between his wanderlust for travel, and for the politics that go with this wanderlust, and his love of home and country. In the end, he rejects landscape comparison because he realizes that it necessarily destroys the specificity, or spirit of the places being compared. Because of his *Guide*, however, the analogy between the Alps and the Lake District has survived, resurfacing regularly in titles such as *The British Switzerland, or picturesque rambles in the English Lake District* (1856–60), in parodic versions of these such as the above quoted passage in *Frankenstein*, or even in tourist literature today, all of which ignore the ideologically-freighted origin of the analogy in the French Revolution.

47 Dorothy and William Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt. Volume IV: The Later Years, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967, 1, p. 303.

## Abstract

William Wordsworth (1770–1850), certainement le plus anglais de tous les poètes, chantre de la nature anglaise et précurseur du *National Trust*, fournit une étude de cas utile pour comprendre la dimension politique de la représentation paysagère. Le poète qui a rendu célèbre le *Lake District* était aussi très attaché à la Suisse, qu’il visita en 1790 et en 1820 et qui a en partie nourri son imaginaire politique et esthétique durant toute sa carrière. Dans *Le Prélude*, Wordsworth critique la manie chez les écrivains du pittoresque de vouloir comparer les paysages, tuant ainsi ce qu’il appelle “l’esprit du lieu”. Mais il développe lui-même l’analogie entre les Alpes et le *Lake District* dans plusieurs de ses poèmes ainsi que dans son *Guide des lacs* pour justifier son ambition de transformer la vallée de Grasmere en une république montagnarde exemplaire et en un modèle social qu’il voudrait voir appliquer au reste de l’Angleterre. Il s’approprie dans ses écrits des éléments clés du mythe helvétique, y compris le sublime, l’ethos républicain, et l’attachement au lieu d’origine, pour ensuite les transférer au Cumberland. Les différences intrinsèques entre la Suisse et l’Angleterre, tant dans les institutions sociales et politiques que dans l’aménagement du territoire, montrent cependant les limites de la comparaison des paysages ainsi que la dimension idéologique des textes de Wordsworth.