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Patrick Vincent

## Europe's Shifting Topographies

### Switzerland and Italy in the Romantic Age

Forty years ago, Isaiah Berlin concluded his series of Mellon lectures entitled "The Roots of Romanticism" with the controversial assertion that "the result of romanticism, then, is liberalism, toleration, decency and the appreciation of the imperfections of life; some degree of increased rational self-understanding." His conclusion may seem counter-intuitive given that romanticism has often been defined, and criticized, as an anti-rational movement. While admitting that an increased rational self-understanding "was very far from the intentions of the romantics," Berlin insists that such an incongruity only confirms his thesis that a greater appreciation of the unpredictability of all human activities was romanticism's most vital contribution to modernity.<sup>1</sup> In this essay I would like to present a single, suggestive epiphenomenon of this passage to modernity to illustrate Berlin's point. Relying on a shift in the conventions of representation opposing Switzerland and Italy in the early nineteenth century, a number of Romantic-period texts map the development of liberal ideals spatially through topographical representations of the passage across Alpine passes, in particular the Simplon. A dramatic threshold between cultures, the Simplon was a common romantic set-piece that enabled travelers and poets to articulate the perceived differences between North and South, romanticism and classicism, sublime and beautiful, and ancient and modern liberty. This last polarity in particular, theorized by Benjamin Constant, helped the post-Revolutionary generation think through a number of burning political questions, including how liberty might survive the double disaster of

1 Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 147.

the French Revolution and the Restoration, and what aspects of republicanism could be salvaged. Looking first at several women poets, then at two canonical male writers, William Wordsworth and Stendhal, I will argue that the passage from Switzerland to Italy registered, consciously but more often unconsciously, the shift away from classical republicanism identified with the Alps. We pass from what Isaiah Berlin in “Two Concepts of Liberty” famously labeled as positive or participatory liberty, to a liberal emphasis on negative liberty, on the protection of the individual and of the private sphere.<sup>2</sup> Despite differences in terms of nation, gender and political ideology, these writers all share a spatial sense of history that unifies personal and social experience into one same structure of feeling, contributing to what George Gusdorf has called romanticism’s “new sense of European cultural unity.”<sup>3</sup>

### Switzerland and Italy in Enlightenment and Romantic Culture

Our lives are Swiss –  
 So still – so Cool –  
 Till some odd afternoon  
 The Alps neglect their Curtains  
 And we look farther on!

*Italy* stands on the other side!  
 While like a guard between –  
 The solemn Alps –  
 The siren Alps  
 Forever intervene!<sup>4</sup>

The striking immediacy of Emily Dickinson’s 1859 lyric on the contrast between Switzerland and Italy surprises on at least two counts:

- 2 Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 166–217.
- 3 George Gusdorf, *Le Romantisme*, 2 vol., Paris, Payot, 1993, vol. 1, p. 297. Raymond Williams defines the structure of feeling as those “meanings and values as actively felt [...] over and above the institutional and ideological organization of society.” See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 132.
- 4 Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1960, pp. 41–42.

first, because the poet rarely strayed beyond Amherst, a familiar story, and certainly never to Europe; second, because she is able, so late in the game, to renew a sentimental cliché and to make it unfamiliar again, transforming a moral landscape into a symbolic one. Dickinson, like so many other Victorian-era writers, is drawing here on a series of stock oppositions that *Corinne* made fashionable almost sixty years beforehand and that can be traced beyond the Coppet Circle to the Enlightenment. Charles Victor de Bonstetten's 1824 treatise on the influence of climate on culture, *L'homme du Nord et l'homme du Sud*, is the breviary on the subject, contributing to the reestablishment of Italy as a respectable land by putting into context Italians' so-called corrupt manners, including mendacity, thirst for vengeance and, that all time favorite, ciccisbeism. Like Dickinson, the author uses the crossing of the Alps to introduce the stark contrast between North and South. Despite its famous claim that the climate of the North breeds liberty and the climate of the South slavery, Bonstetten remains ambivalent in regards to northern culture, and nowhere more so than in his opposition between Italy and Switzerland:

The first perceptible effect of climate on man in Europe is the feeling of renewed life, which every traveler experiences on crossing the Alps to visit the south of Europe. He is conscious of a sudden change, and, if he is watchful of his emotions, he finds himself another being according as he is on this or the other side of these grand barriers [...] I know not why it is one experiences among the Italians, a sentiment of personal independence never completely realized in the North! [...] Now pass the Alps from South to North. On entering Switzerland, the traveller is struck with the repose of its grand masses of mountains [...] which form a solitude in which life is, as it were, suspended [...] like all appertains to the kingdom of death. Even the features of the people of the Alps express repose; their laws and manners denote immobility, every attempt at innovation being received with horror; moral and physical life seems to be paralyzed in the realm of the glaciers.<sup>5</sup>

This is a suggestive passage for several reasons. First, it firmly anchors the shift from Switzerland to Italy in the body and senses, enabling us to speak of a phenomenology of topographical change. Second, it identifies "a sentiment of personal independence" with Italy, an idea in stark contrast with Bonstetten's more commonplace

5 Charles Victor Bonstetten, *The Man of the North, and the Man of the South; or the Influence of Climate*, New York, F. W. Christern, 1864, pp. 11–15.

association of the North with freedom and the Italians' conspicuous lack of political independence when the book was published. Third, it argues for a difference between crossing the Alps from North to South and from South to North. While the former injects a "feeling of renewed life" in the traveler, the latter leads to a sublime, but also death-like feeling, which is tellingly linked to what the author perceives as the torpid, reactionary manners of the Swiss.

Bonstetten's negative portrayal of Switzerland and the Swiss is striking, especially when we consider his claim in a later chapter that primitive liberty is still preserved in North while it has been extinguished in the South. It is as if, contrary to Hume, he felt that a nation's political institutions were not an essential influence on its manners. What he is opposing is not the value of political liberty per se, but of primitive liberty linked here to the aesthetic category of the sublime, which no longer fit the realities and needs of a modern commercial society or the overall aim of his treatise announced in the last chapter, which is to defend modern liberalism. Primitive liberty was of course a key feature in eighteenth-century representations of Switzerland, often used as a means to highlight Italian slavery. A large number of English loco-descriptive poems, obeying Hume's progressive model of history as the struggle for liberty, give Switzerland the upper-hand, including Thomson's "Liberty" (1734), Collins' "Ode on Liberty" (1746), Keate's "The Alps" (1763) and Goldsmith's "The Traveller" (1764). Liberty always progresses *out of Italy into* the Swiss republics in these poems before reaching its apotheosis in Britain. Drawing on Machiavelli's *Discorsi* as well as on English Commonwealth writers such as Algernon Sidney and John Gordon, their Whig authors assert that Switzerland's hard, primitive form of republicanism based on a citizen militia is more resilient than Italy's now defunct urban, commercial republics.

The proverbial courage of the Swiss, a source of terror in Northern Italy throughout the Renaissance and hence the object of Machiavelli's glowing admiration, became problematic in the eighteenth century, when its small, virtuous republics, adverse to wars of conquest, could no longer be easily reconciled with the modern imperatives of empire, commerce, and manners. After 1760, Rousseau complicated matters further by radicalizing the notion of primitive liberty, preparing the way for its appropriation by the Jacobin *Montagnards*. Nevertheless, as late as 1799, the fashion queen and Whig

campaigner Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, could still celebrate mountain liberty in her poem "The Passage of the Mountain of St. Gothard, to my Children" very much in the same normative tradition as in eighteenth-century Whig progress poems. After bidding farewell to Italy, which she calls a sister, the speaker turns to Switzerland:

Yet pleased Helvetia's rugged brows I see,  
And through their craggy steeps delighted roam;  
Pleased with people, honest, brave, and free,  
Whilst every step conducts me nearer home.<sup>6</sup>

The poet's gendered identification with Italy as what Nanora Sweet has called a "conquered, fragmented, feminized land" anticipates Staël's own feminization of Italy in *Corinne* as a "disestablishment culture," fostering the free development of individual genius.<sup>7</sup> But her admiration for Swiss manners and liberty, linked here with Britain, remains in line with the Enlightenment representations of Switzerland as a seat of republican liberty and of stoic, masculine virtue.

Compare this with a privately published poem entitled "Addressed to Italy," dated 4 May, 1821. In it, Elizabeth Susan Law takes her own leave of Italy at the Simplon: "Farewell, Ausonia! fading from my view, / From Simplon's height receive my last Adieu!". Closely imitating *Corinne*'s improvisations on Italy and writing in the immediate wake of several aborted revolutionary conspiracies in Piedmont and Lombardy, she first praises Italy as a "lov'd, and beautiful land," then laments its "yoke of bondage," reminds us of the nation's glorious republican past before calling on it to awaken once more from its "disgraceful lethargy." Law then transfers her attachment from Italy to Britain in the last part of the poem, seeking the security of Britain's well regimented political institutions. Domestic nationalism is not constructed as in the Duchess of Devonshire's poem by metonymically linking Switzerland's primitive liberty with Britain, but rather by displacing Italy's beauty onto Britain and by

6 Roger Lonsdale, ed. *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 511.

7 Nanora Sweet, "History, Imperialism, and the Aesthetics of the Beautiful: Hemans and the Post-Napoleonic Moment," *At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural and Materialist Criticism*, eds. Mary A. Favret and Nicola J. Watson, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 174.

contrasting this with Switzerland's now completely alien sublimity, reminiscent of Bonstetten's "death-like feeling" among the Alps:

Homeward I turn to greet my native shore,  
 Free from the mountain blast and torrent's roar,  
 Fantastic nature in a foreign clime  
 May pierce the soul with greatness more sublime,  
 Frown from amidst her rocks, ope wide her jaws,  
 Defiance bid to her most sacred laws,  
 Doom her own offspring to the dire embrace,  
 And in one ruin swallow up her race –  
 This has no charms for me – I love her best,  
 When deck'd in smiles, all nature seems at rest,  
 And dearer far to me the peaceful scene  
 Of Britain's fertile valleys, cloth'd in green [...] <sup>8</sup>

Although Law is nominally describing a well-publicized inundation at Martigny in 1818, she relies on an anachronistic catalogue of anti-Jacobin tropes all pointing back to the French Revolution. These include: mountains as a popular icon of Jacobin liberty; the "torrent's roar," often linked with Jacobin violence in Romantic-period poetry; nature defying its "most sacred laws," a possible allusion to Burke; and finally the figure of Saturn swallowing up his own race, a common revolutionary icon. As the poem indicates, the republican ideal of positive liberty exemplified by the Alps did not survive the Terror, and in spite of its political "bondage" and "lethargy," it is Italy that offers the closest analogy to what was commonly known as *la liberté anglaise*, the right to live in peace and happiness.

### Crossing the Simplon Pass

"C'est ici la borne de deux régions," wrote Hyppolyte Taine crossing the Simplon in 1865, "et il semble que ce soit la borne de deux mondes."<sup>9</sup> More than any other Alpine pass, the Simplon became the locus for the passage to modernity in the post-Revolutionary mind. French Engineer Nicolas Céard's new road, completed in 1805, cut a

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Susan Law, *Miscellaneous Poems*, London, 1832, pp. 31–33.

<sup>9</sup> Hyppolyte Taine, *Voyage en Italie*, Paris, Hachette, 1902, vol. 2, p. 347.



long swath across the Continent from Geneva to Milan, enabling travelers to cross the Alps by post in three days and very quickly becoming a tourist attraction in its own right, the subject of three lavishly illustrated albums portraying it as the eighth wonder of the world.<sup>10</sup> A number of reasons explain its popularity. John Murray's popular *Handbook for Travellers in Switzerland* (1838) calls it "the first example of the triumph of human power and intellect over nature, apparently invincible."<sup>11</sup> Bringing more travelers in close contact with the sublimity of the Alps, the Simplon also democratized romantic expressivity and its correlative, the feeling of individual freedom, to the extent that by 1826 Anna Jameson could exclaim: "What shall I say of the marvelous, the miraculous Simplon? Nothing: every body has said already, everything that can be said and *exclaimed*."<sup>12</sup> The road's juxtaposition of natural and man-made sublimity played as well into the Romantics' fascination with the dialectic of contraries. Thus the noted archeologist Désiré Raoul-Rochette described the pass in 1820 as "une sorte de champ de bataille, où la nature et l'art sont perpétuellement aux prises, sans que l'une ou l'autre [...] y perde aucun de ses avantages [...]. En se choquant sans cesse, ils se surpassent toujours."<sup>13</sup> And while Thomas Jefferson Hogg, crossing the Simplon in 1827, could complain that "the view disappoints most travellers, who expect to see from this great height Italy extended before them, the whole leg as far as the toe, and Vesuvius smoking in the middle, like the chimney of a house," most travelers in fact were also awed by the pass's juxtaposition of sublime and beautiful, Northern and Southern cultures "in such *rapid succession*," as Henry Coxe wrote enthusiastically in 1816.<sup>14</sup> The sudden sensorial overload recorded upon

10 James Cockburn, *Views to Illustrate the Route of the Simplon*, London, 1822; Gabriel Lory and Jean-Frédéric Ostervald, *Picturesque Tour from Geneva to Milan, by way of the Simplon*, London, Ackermann, 1820; William Brockedon, *Illustrations of the Passes of the Alps*, London, J. Moyes, 1827.

11 John Murray, *Murray's Handbook for Travellers in Switzerland* (1838), ed. Jack Simmons, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1970, p. 158.

12 Anna Jameson, *The Diary of an Ennuyée*, Boston, Lilly, West, Colman, 1833, p. 43.

13 Désiré Raoul-Rochette, *Lettres sur la Suisse écrites en 1820 suivies d'un voyage à Chamouny et au Simplon*, Paris, N. Neveu, 1822, p. 375.

14 Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *Two Hundred and Nine Days; or, The Journal of a Traveller on the Continent*, London, Hunt and Clarke, 1827, vol. 1, p. 243; Henry Coxe, *The Traveller's Guide to Switzerland*, London, Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1816, p. 56.



exiting the Gondo ravine, an “almost magical effect” according to Dr. James Johnson, became de rigueur in travel narratives: “This, indeed, is *Italy*,” J.C. Eustace exclaimed in 1802, closely echoing Dickinson’s poem.<sup>15</sup> Murray specifies that the phenomenality of the experience could only be appreciated by those entering Italy, not those leaving it, even though some travelers, including Raoul-Rochette, preferred to turn back at the pass rather than venturing southward: “Hélas! L’Italie ne m’offrira guère, dans sa population dégradée comme ses monuments, que les tristes effets d’une civilisation aussi vieille qu’elle [...] des cabinets et des musées, où l’héroïsme et la vertu n’existent plus que dans les antiques images [...]. J’allais, en repassant le Simplon, revoir des hommes et rentrer dans la nature.”<sup>16</sup>

As the above examples show, crossing the Simplon was as much a social and historical experience as it was a personal one, and the responses and ideas it elicited belonged to the spirit of the age. The strong contrast of scenes, in particular, encouraged travelers to imagine Europe as an organic whole made of distinct but complementary parts, in other words, very much in the same way as in the salon of Coppet. At the same time, the Simplon also led travelers to ponder, sometimes even to symbolically gauge themselves against Coppet’s greatest adversary, Napoleon Bonaparte. Regularly described in travel literature as “a noble monument of Napoleon’s genius and enterprise,” the Simplon begged political interpretation and became a litmus test for one’s attitude toward Napoleon and toward the heritage of the Revolution more generally.<sup>17</sup> For some, it served as an underhand way to express Bonapartist feeling. Marianne Baillie, for example, crossing the pass in 1816, found a piece of paper inserted into the wall written “Viva Napoleone!” leading her to exclaim: “As long as the mountains themselves exist, so must the memory of Bonaparte.”<sup>18</sup> Another influential traveler crossing the pass in the same period, Louis Simond, regretted the “poetry” of the old road

15 Cited in William Beattie, *Switzerland, Illustrated in a Series of Views ... by W. H. Bartlett*, London, George Virtue, 1836, vol. 1, pp. 61–62.

16 John Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 162; Raoul-Rochette, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

17 Charles Joseph Latrobe, *The Alpenstock; or Sketches of Swiss Scenery and Manners*, London, Seeley and Burnside, 1829, p. 125.

18 Marianne Baillie, *First Impressions on a Tour upon the Continent*, London, John Murray, 1819, p. 216.

and predicted that the pass, no longer maintained under the Restoration, would soon fall into "its wild state," suggesting Ozymandias-like the decay of Bonaparte's memory and the impermanence of history.<sup>19</sup> Even at Coppet the political signification of the pass was left open: for Staël, the Simplon was the "only honorable trace" of the Emperor's power, whereas Bonstetten writes that "It was the instinct of despotism which inspired Bonaparte with the idea of removing the great barrier of the Alps by constructing his magnificent roads over them."<sup>20</sup>

Staël's and Bonstetten's contrasting interpretations of the pass point to the ambivalent legacy of Bonaparte, particularly in Italy. On the one hand, the revolutionary wars contributed to the Risorgimento in a manner similar to the Barbarian invasions into Lombardy in the third century: "The conquerors brought energy, the conquered sociability," Sismondi writes in his *Histoire des républiques italiennes* (1818).<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the spirit of conquest in the modern world was anachronistic, as Benjamin Constant argued in his 1813 anti-Napoleonic pamphlet of the same name, and civil liberties imposed from above were simply another form of tyranny. Constant's pamphlet fits into his more general thesis on the liberty of the Ancients and the Moderns, first put down on paper in 1806, in which he famously argues that the political liberty of the ancient republics, in which the individual surrenders his personal sovereignty to the sovereignty of the community in order to participate actively in the public sphere, is irrelevant, even dangerous in large commercial nations: "La liberté des temps modernes, c'est tout ce qui garantit l'indépendance des citoyens contre le pouvoir."<sup>22</sup> For Constant, "the most eloquent of all defenders of freedom and privacy" according to Isaiah Berlin and one of the main sources for his own liberal critique of positive

19 Louis Simond, *Switzerland; or, a journal of a tour and residence in that country in the years 1817, 1818, and 1819*, Boston, Wells and Lilly, 1822, vol. 1, p. 362.

20 Letter from Germaine de Staël to Claire de Duras, cited in Comte d'Haussonville, *Femmes d'autrefois, hommes d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, 1912, p. 204; Bonstetten, *op. cit.*, footnote p. 31.

21 Cited in Adrian Lyttelton, "Sismondi's *Histoire des Républiques italiennes* and the Risorgimento," *Le Groupe de Coppet et l'Histoire*, ed. Marianne Berlinger and Anne Hofmann, Geneva, Slatkine, 2007, p. 363.

22 Benjamin Constant, *Principes de politique*, ed. Etienne Hofmann, Paris, Hachette, 1997, p. 370.

liberty, the ills of the French Revolution stemmed from the failure to protect the private sphere in Rousseau's theory of the General Will: "Elle donna l'exemple de poursuivre l'existence individuelle dans ses retranchements les plus intimes."<sup>23</sup>

Seen from such a liberal perspective, the "sentiment of personal independence" that Bonstetten describes upon reaching the land of lemon trees takes on a sudden political urgency, whereas Corinne's apparent jibe at Italians' absence of civic virtue in Staël's novel comes across as eminently wise: "Mais souvent, il faut l'avouer, ils aiment mieux la vie que des intérêts politiques, qui ne les touchent guère, parce qu'ils n'ont point de patrie."<sup>24</sup> Italy comes to stand in post-Revolutionary Europe for what Charles Taylor has called "the affirmation of ordinary life," for the pursuit of happiness in the private sphere that is an essential component of modern identity in opposition to the stoic moral code of the ancients or the heroism of the aristocracy (211).<sup>25</sup> This "source of the modern self," to pursue Taylor's terminology, is not limited to Staël and to the female tradition of writers she engenders, but is shared by many later male Romantics, including Byron, Shelley, and Stendhal. Inspired in particular by Sismondi's republican history and its last chapter announcing the rebirth of liberty and justice, this post-Revolutionary generation defended its liberal politics and distinguished itself from its conservative elders, notably Wordsworth, Coleridge and, in France, Chateaubriand, by embracing Italy's domesticity through what Marilyn Butler has influentially labeled a "Cult of the South."<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the Revolution, but also, more immediately, the 1798 invasion of Switzerland precipitously lowered the symbolic value of the Alps as the seat of primitive liberty. As Martin Thom writes, "the doctrine of the liberty of the Ancients and the Moderns [...] may be seen as a response not only to Jacobinism but also to the annihilation of the

23 Berlin, *Liberty*, *op. cit.*, p. 173 ; Constant, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

24 Germaine de Staël, *Corinne ou l'Italie*, ed. Simon Balayé, collection folio, Paris, Gallimard, p. 162.

25 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 211.

26 Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760–1830*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 121.

*Kleinstaaten* [...] in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods.”<sup>27</sup> Thus the sublime, but also death-like feeling produced by Switzerland in Bonstetten's text and in Law's poem may be said to mirror the anachronism of its republican institutions as well as its chilling symbolic associations with Rousseau and Robespierre.

### Wordsworth and Stendhal between Switzerland and Italy

This last section focuses on two writers born only thirteen years apart yet whose opposed worldviews reflect on which side of the Revolutionary divide they stood. Wordsworth's spell with political radicalism did not outlive the eighteenth century, and he became closely associated in Victorian England with the ideals of Burke and of Toryism. Henri Beyle, on the other hand, launched his career in the *Grande armée* and remained throughout his life a staunch liberal. Despite obvious ideological differences, however, Wordsworth and Stendhal's numerous texts on Switzerland and Italy register the same cultural shift from positive to negative liberty. Stendhal's attachment to Italy and to the cause of Italian independence is, of course, common knowledge, and his initial responses to Italy are clearly felt. In Milan on 7 September 1813, for example, he writes in his journal: “Au moment où, ce matin, à 10 heures, nous avons aperçu le dôme de Milan, je songeais que mes voyages en Italie me rendent plus original, plus *moi-même*. J'apprends à chercher le bonheur avec plus d'intelligence. Tous les traits des Italiens que je rencontre me plaisent.”<sup>28</sup> This feeling of greater originality, linked with Italians' more natural manners, is connected as we saw above with their affirmation of ordinary life, which is also an essential feature of Beylisme. But Stendhal knows he cannot separate his ideal of the *conquête du bonheur* from the public sphere. As a junior officer in Napoleon's *Campagne d'Italie*, then as an exile in Milan after the Emperor's downfall in 1814, he developed his

27 Martin Thom, *Republics, Nations and Tribes*, London, Verso, 1995, p. 92. See also Patrick Vincent, “Switzerland No More: Turner, Wordsworth and the Changed Landscape of Revolution,” *The Space of English*, eds. David Spurr and Cornelia Tschichold, Tübingen, Gunter Narr, 2005, pp. 135–151.

28 Stendhal, *Journal*, ed. V. del Litto, *Œuvres Complètes* 31, Paris, Honoré Champion, 1969, vol. 4, p. 88.

politics alongside his aesthetic appreciation for Italy, making the two difficult to disentangle. Stendhal notes in the 1817 edition of *Rome, Naples et Florence*, a book meant to promote Italian manners among the French: “On ne peut plus, au milieu de la grande révolution qui nous travaille, étudier les mœurs d’un peuple sans tomber dans la *politique*.” Like Italy’s liberals, Stendhal was mainly preoccupied in 1817 with keeping alight the “feu sacré de la liberté” ignited by Bonaparte and with finding the right political framework to guarantee that liberty (18 July 1817).<sup>29</sup>

Although a committed republican in his youth, Stendhal’s views on republicanism shifted markedly in the aftermath of Napoleon. This shift is reflected in his descriptions of the city at the northern end of the Simplon road, Geneva. Stendhal records that he was sleeping like a child when he crossed the Simplon from Italy to Switzerland on 28 July 1817, suggesting that he found the sublime landscape on the Swiss side less than captivating. “A Genève, j’ai été réveillé par les ridicules de la liberté,” he notes before launching into a blistering, and quite brilliant attack on Geneva’s so-called free institutions and manners. He dismisses the city-republic’s proverbial virtue as petrified – the author writes that “malgré mon horreur pour la vie morale à Naples, je la préférerais à celle de Genève; il y a au moins du naturel.” He then satirizes its republican institutions, commenting ironically on how the government had sought a solution to the food shortage “avec cet esprit de calme et de prudence, et cette liberté de pensées qu’on trouve si rarement ailleurs que dans les républiques,” finally deciding after three weeks of deliberation on the absurd non-sequitur of closing the theatres and destroying a monument to Rousseau (2–4 August 1817).<sup>30</sup> Stendhal’s first visit to Geneva in 1801 had been devoted to two days of Rousseau-worship, but after reading the *Ideologues*, he resolved in 1804 “de se dérousseauiser.”<sup>31</sup> One way of destroying Rousseau’s monumental shadow is to remark in 1817 that Lac Léman, famously allegorizing Swiss

29 Stendhal, *Voyages en Italie*, ed. V. del Litto, collection La Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard, 1973, p. 139.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 153–154.

31 Cited in Raymond Trousson, *Stendhal et Rousseau: Continuité et ruptures*, Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1999, p. 3.

liberty in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, is inferior to the Italian Lake District.<sup>32</sup> “Je voudrais bien savoir quel est le voyageur qui a dit le premier qu’il y avait de la liberté en Suisse,” he writes, extending his critique of Genevan republicanism to Bern and to the rest of Switzerland where one is everywhere spied on and persecuted (5 August 1817).<sup>33</sup>

The solution to Italy’s problems, according to Stendhal, lies not in developing more positive liberty, but rather in guaranteeing its citizens’ negative liberty. In some unpublished fragments titled “L’Italie en 1818,” the writer bases himself on Sismondi’s history to defend Napoleon’s destruction of Italy’s *ancien régime* governments “qui n’étaient bons qu’à déshonorer le nom de république.” His rationale, that these republics’ historical liberties are anachronistic, is very similar to Constant’s theory of the Ancients and Moderns:

Mais qu’est-ce que cette *liberté italienne* qui expira en 1530 et qui a commencé la civilisation du monde? [...] En 1819, l’Europe appelle LIBERTE la protection du repos (voir la définition de Tracy), du bonheur, de l’indépendance domestique. La liberté des Grecs, des Romains, la ci-devant liberté des Suisses, la liberté des Italiens ne fut que la participation à la souveraineté du pays. On ne pouvait être heureux qu’au *Forum*, nous, nous voulons être heureux au fond de notre maison.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike the republic imagined by Mazzini, Stendhal calls for a liberal form of constitutional monarchy which he outlines in his 1814 essay “Sur la Constitution,” a key document in understanding what Henri Imbert has labelled his metamorphoses of liberty. Stendhal’s thesis is that honour, institutionalized in the form of a king and a house of lords, must replace virtue as a way to safeguard liberty, which to him is mainly negative: “Nos vertus ne sont plus des vertus politiques : notre bonheur se compose de plaisirs que nous procurent l’industrie et l’intérieur de nos sociétés et de nos familles. Il n’y a que la république ou le despotisme guerrier qui peuvent exiger de nous des sacrifices qui s’étendent au-delà de ce qui est nécessaire à notre genre de bonheur.”<sup>35</sup> Stendhal’s lifelong admiration for the Italian lakes, so

32 Stendhal, *Voyages*, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

34 Stendhal, *Voyages*, *op. cit.*, pp. 198.

35 Stendhal, *Mélanges I: Politique, Histoire, Economie Politique*, ed. V. del Litto, Œuvres complètes 45, Paris, Honoré Champion, 1971, p. 45.



splendidly described in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, but also for the Italian side of the Simplon, is the subjective correlative of his *beau idéal* of politics, the combination of negative liberty with a modicum of aristocratic honour: “Rien n’est plus pittoresque que les aspects de la vallée d’Iselle [...] où commence la belle Italie.”<sup>36</sup>

William Wordsworth belongs to the first generation of Romantics usually associated with northern sublimity and virtue rather than with southern beauty and passion. He too greatly admired the Italian lakes on his 1790 walking tour of Switzerland, nevertheless, writing to his sister that “at the lake of Como my mind ran thro a thousand dreams of happiness which might be enjoyed upon its banks, if heightened by conversation and the exercise of the social affections.”<sup>37</sup> Yet his first poem to address the tour, the 1793 *Descriptive Sketches*, progresses like earlier topographical poems such as Thomson’s *Liberty* away from Italy’s sociability to the primitive freedom of Switzerland before reaching its apotheosis in Revolutionary France as the fullest achievement of the young poet’s republican ideals. His next poem to revisit the 1790 tour, the Simplon Pass episode of *The Prelude*, was begun in 1799 and finished in 1804. This was the year that the Pope crowned Napoleon, marking the apogee of the poet’s disavowal of republican politics, initiated in 1798 after the French invasion of Switzerland. But it is also the year that Staël and Sismondi toured Italy, making the South fashionable among liberal intellectuals and artists, and only two years before Constant’s *Principes de politique*. Most critics have focused on the lines in the poem which describe what Wordsworth in his 1790 letter conventionally calls “the more awful scenes of the Alps,” the Gondo ravine passage where the young man “had not a thought of man, or a single created being.”<sup>38</sup> This sublime scene is central to the definition of romanticism as faith in the trans-

36 Stendhal, *Voyages, op. cit.*, pp. 783–784. Elsewhere he writes about the same landscape: “Ces montagnes, vues ainsi par-dessus une plaine fertile, sont d’une beauté frappante, mais rassurante comme l’architecture grecque. Les montagnes de la Suisse, au contraire, me rappellent toujours la faiblesse de l’homme et le pauvre diable de voyageur emporté par une avalanche” (p. 323).

37 William and Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, I: The Early Years, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Chester Shaver, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 34.

38 *Ibid.*



cidental power of the imagination, or, according to New Historicism, as romantic ideology, interpretive approaches that usually ignore the Italian, beautiful half of the diptych, site of the poet's self-described "complacency of spirit."<sup>39</sup> By making his speaker progress from Switzerland into Italy, however, Wordsworth participates in the cultural shift from sublime to beautiful, positive to negative liberty contextualized above.

Setting off to see the Alps at a time when "Nature [...] was sovereign in my heart, / And mighty forms seizing a youthful fancy, / Had given charter to irregular hopes" (ll. 346-348), the poet with fourteen years hindsight can safely associate his earlier self with Rousseau and with republican liberty, implied in the word "charter."<sup>40</sup> But Rousseau's primitive republicanism, still potent in the *Descriptive Sketches*, is now recast as the delusions of an "unripe state / Of intellect and heart" (l. 470-1) which the poet juxtaposes with the climactic disappointments of Mont Blanc and of the Simplon itself. Mountains no longer can signify liberty – the Alps have been crossed, all their course is downwards to Italy. The famous apostrophe to the imagination which follows tells us that the sublime is located in the mind rather than in nature, as Kant had already theorized, and its affirmation of the transcendental self suggests an ideal of stoicism, what Berlin calls "the retreat to the inner citadel" essential, he argues, to the development of liberal political theory in the eighteenth century.<sup>41</sup> But the passage's diction of patriotic self-sacrifice ("Effort, and expectation, and desire ..."; "The mind beneath such banners militant / Thinks not of spoils or trophies ...") relies on a world-renouncing, death-like code that Berlin also points out is the antithesis of modern freedom.<sup>42</sup> It is Italy's "golden days" (l. 655) beckoning on the other side of the pass that help the narrator progress from a ethic of heroic

39 *Ibid.* The two best known examples of such a reading can be found in Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1987, and Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1988.

40 All parenthetical line references are to book VI of the 1805 text of William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill, New York, Norton, 1979.

41 Berlin, *Liberty*, *op. cit.*, pp. 181, 185.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

virtue toward what Berlin calls an ethic of individual “self-realization” to be discovered in a feminized and sexualized private sphere: “And Como thou – a treasure by the earth / Kept to itself, a darling bosomed up / In Abyssinian privacy” (ll. 590–593).<sup>43</sup> Here the speaker praises Italy’s “enduring language” (l. 605), a felicitous mix of art and nature recalling the Italian liberals’ ideal of *incivilimento*<sup>44</sup>:

Ye have left  
Your beauty with me, and impassioned sight  
Of colours and forms, whose power is sweet  
And gracious, almost, might I dare to say,  
As virtue is, or goodness [...] (ll. 607–611)

While charmed by Italy’s forms, Wordsworth marks with the adverb “almost” his reluctance to abandon those other “mighty forms” associated earlier in the poem with the Alps and with republican virtue. The poet increasingly addresses Italy in his later poetry and letters, but does so, as Martha Hale Shackford writes, with “an almost cautious mood of anticipated disappointment.”<sup>45</sup> His later poems and letters often place Italy side by side with Switzerland, as if still undecided which of these two countries best emblemizes the poet’s values. In “Stanzas Composed in the Simplon Pass,” a poem that records Wordsworth’s second crossing of the Simplon on his 1820 walking tour of Switzerland, he prefers like Désiré Raoul-Rochette to turn back at the pass without having seen Italy, in his case to be able to keep “The beauty of Florence, the grandeur of Rome” safely in the distance as an unfulfilled “yearning.”<sup>46</sup> Considering a possible trip to Italy in 1830, the poet states to Henry Crabb Robinson that “whenever I venture upon a *wish* it carries me no further than dear Switzerland.”<sup>47</sup> And in his 1844 letter on the Kendal and Winder-

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>44</sup> See Lyttelton, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

<sup>45</sup> Martha Hale Shackford, “Wordsworth’s Italy,” *PMLA*, vol. 38, n. 2 (June 1923), p. 248.

<sup>46</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin, 1977, vol. 2, p. 434.

<sup>47</sup> William and Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, V: The Later Years, Part 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Alan G. Hill, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 242.

mere Railway, he can still write nostalgically about the Simplon's "forms and powers" partly destroyed by Céard's road:

But, though the road and torrent continued to run parallel to each other, their fellowship was put an end to. The stream had dwindled into comparative insignificance, so much has Art interfered with and taken the lead of Nature; and although the utility of the new work, as facilitating the intercourse of great nations, was readily acquiesced in, and the workmanship, in some places, could not but excite admiration, it was impossible to suppress regret for what had vanished for ever.<sup>48</sup>

Wordsworth, like Chateaubriand in an uncannily similar passage in Book 35 of his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, especially deplores the loss of the oratories and simple bridges that marked the heroic age of alpine travel.<sup>49</sup> The new road destroys the carefully counterpointed play of contraries between nature and art, primitive republicanism and urban sociability that he had admired in 1790. By resisting Italy's artful seductions, the "intercourse of great nations" marked by "facility" and "acquiescence," he continues to resist the passage to a liberal form of modernity viewed as overly petty and self-indulgent.

Wordsworth finally did tour Italy in 1837, only three years after Mazzini and Garibaldi's unsuccessful revolt, and although the resulting sequence of poems entitled *Memorials of a Tour in Italy* is slight, several political sonnets in the collection enable him, aided by Sismondi's history, to re-articulate the republican tradition of his youth as a liberal form of nationalism solidly grounded in civil liberties and in history. At the same time, like Sismondi who opposed any form of violent revolution, the poet can safely defer these republican princi-

48 William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, eds. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1974, vol. 3, p. 354.

49 "Les chemins modernes, que le Simplon a enseignés et que le Simplon efface, n'ont pas l'effet pittoresque des anciens chemins. Ces derniers, plus hardis et plus naturels, n'évitaient aucune difficulté; ils ne s'écartèrent guère du cours des torrents; ils montaient et descendaient avec le terrain, gravissaient les rochers, plongeaient dans les précipices, passaient sous les avalanches, n'ôtant rien au plaisir de l'imagination et à la joie des périls." Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, eds. Maurice Levailant et Georges Moulinier, collection la Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard, 1951, vol. 2, p. 585.

ples, prophetically voicing a “third stage of thy great destiny.”<sup>50</sup> As we discover in two sonnets entitled “After Leaving Italy,” he cannot easily overcome his latent prejudices concerning Italy’s potential for political virtue and freedom. Much like in Susan Law’s farewell to Italy, however, the alternative model of republicanism figured by the Alps now appears even more alien to him:

[...] that unwelcome shock  
That followed the first sound of German speech,  
Caught the far-winding barrier Alps among.  
In that announcement, greeting seemed to mock  
Parting; the casual word had power to reach  
My heart, and filled that heart with conflict strong.<sup>51</sup>

The conflict between North and South takes on the same private intensity and ambiguity in the above lines as in Dickinson’s symbolic landscape, with its “siren Alps” that always call us back. It is a moral topography internalized by all those who yearn for the seductions of individual freedom or, on the contrary, beckon back nostalgically to a greater emphasis on community. Wordsworth’s gradual drift away from sublime Switzerland to beautiful Italy is of course only a token aspect of what Theresa Kelley has crucially defined as the poet’s revisionary aesthetics.<sup>52</sup> Yet the Simplon Pass echoes and concentrates many of the ideological conflicts rife in post-Revolutionary Europe and may be read as a shorthand way to represent the transition in the Romantic period from city-republic to nation-state and from positive to negative liberty. If, as Stendhal writes, the conquest of happiness is “la direction de l’esprit européen,” then that direction definitely pointed southward.<sup>53</sup> Whether or not we can decisively say on which side of the pass, Swiss or Italian, Wordsworth himself chose to dwell remains a moot point. In a late letter giving advice to a young man on which itinerary to follow, the poet recommends that “the best thing

50 Wordsworth, *The Poems*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 854.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 864.

52 See Theresa Kelley, *Wordsworth’s Revisionary Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

53 Stendhal, *Mélanges I*, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

to be done is to cross the Alps by as many passes as you conveniently can, descending into Italy and back again – to and fro.”<sup>54</sup>

54 Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, op. cit.*, V: The Later Years, Part 4, p. 44.

## Abstract

Cette contribution a pour objectif d'identifier le passage d'une idéologie républicaine à une idéologie libérale à l'époque romantique à travers l'étude d'un échantillon de représentations de la traversée des Alpes puisées dans la poésie et la littérature de voyage. Ces représentations, qui confondent souvent esthétique et politique, expriment de façon littérale les idées véhiculées par le groupe de Coppet, en particulier l'opposition entre le Nord et le Sud et entre la liberté des Anciens et celle des Modernes. Après avoir donné un aperçu de la signification politique de la Suisse et de l'Italie au siècle des Lumières, nous la comparons avec celle courante au dix-neuvième siècle, notamment dans la poésie sentimentale de plusieurs femmes-poètes. Le col du Simplon, en tant que gage de modernité et monument à la mémoire de l'Empereur déchu, donne lieu à un grand nombre de commentaires de voyageurs qui illustrent une nouvelle valorisation de la liberté individuelle libérale aux dépens de la vertu civique républicaine. Ce sentiment moderne est partagé par des auteurs aussi différents que William Wordsworth et Stendhal, confirmant ce qu'Isaiah Berlin et Georges Gusdorf ont décrit comme le rôle fédérateur du romantisme dans la culture européenne.