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The Moral of Landscape: John Ruskin and John Muir in the Swiss Alps

Patrick Vincent

This essay reads American writer and conservationist John Muir's unpublished letters and journal produced during his 1893 tour of the Swiss Alps in dialogue with British writer and social critic John Ruskin's better-known views on Switzerland in *Modern Painters* and elsewhere. It places their writings within the context of four nineteenth-century transatlantic polemics, all of which involve Switzerland and consider landscape aesthetically but also morally. The first of these was the exceptionalist argument, popular among Transcendentalists, which claimed that American nature was superior to its European counterpart. The second controversy revolved around the movement of glaciers, engaging John Tyndall, James Forbes, Josiah Whitney, Muir, and Ruskin. In the 1860s, Ruskin spearheaded the third dispute in response to Alpine tourism. The fourth debate emerged in Muir's California in tandem with attempts to preserve Yosemite. It surrounded the notion of wilderness and is still alive today. Theodor W. Adorno's concept of "cultural landscape" helps me understand how Muir's visits to the Swiss Alps enabled him to move beyond the idea of pristine wilderness and begin to consider tourism an integral part of nature stewardship. This distinguishes him from Ruskin, for whom the Alps symbolized the civilizational transformation necessary to save man and nature.

The celebrated American writer and conservationist John Muir (1838-1914) visited Switzerland and the Alps between 10 and 27 August 1893. His biographers have written practically nothing on this tour, nor have the eight letters and the twenty-eight-page travel journal that Muir produced in Switzerland, masterfully digitalized as part of the online John

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Muir Papers held at the University of the Pacific, received any attention.¹ This essay examines these unpublished writings in dialogue with the work of John Ruskin and in conjunction with four nineteenth-century transatlantic polemics, all of which involve Switzerland and consider landscape aesthetically but also morally. The first of these polemics was the exceptionalist argument, popular among Transcendentalists including Thomas Cole and Ralph Waldo Emerson, which claimed the superiority of American over European nature. The second controversy concerned the movement of glaciers, pitting John Tyndall and James Forbes, but also Muir, Ruskin, and Josiah Whitney. It was Ruskin who spearheaded the third dispute in the 1860s in response to tourism's impact on the Alps. The fourth, finally, was the debate on wilderness, which originated in Muir's home state of California in response to the preservation of Yosemite and which remains a sensitive policy issue touching on moral and ethical principles.² Borrowing Theodor W. Adorno's concept of "cultural landscape" from his *Aesthetic Theory*, I show how the Swiss Alps helped Muir move beyond the idea of wilderness as pristine and promote tourism as a way to encourage nature stewardship, whereas for Ruskin they came to symbolize the civilizational transformation necessary in order to save man and nature.

Nineteenth-century commentators on natural landscape often combined the Christian tradition of moralized landscape, which viewed nature as a divine second book open to typological interpretation, with Romantic aesthetic theory, enabling them to draw analogies between the experience of nature and moral perception. In paradigmatic Romantic poems such as William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (1798) or *The Prelude* (1805, 1850), love of nature famously leads to love of mankind, whereas the age's greatest authority on landscape aesthetics, John Ruskin, influentially argued in "The Moral of Landscape" (1856) that love of nature or "pure landscape instinct" is an "invariable sign of goodness of heart and justness of moral perception," in other words of the viewer's own moral compass (5: 376). Kantian aesthetic judgement had formalized Rousseau's association between sensibility and morality by suggesting that correct landscape appreciation or taste, which implies mastering the aesthetic categories of the sublime and the beautiful, con-

¹ Turner devotes half a line to the Swiss trip (296), Miller one line (160), and Worster three, managing to wrongly place Louis Agassiz's hometown in Chamonix, and Chamonix erroneously in the Rhone valley (337).

² See Callicott and Nelson (1998, 2008).

tributes to our moral feeling.³ This moralizing of landscape could in turn lead to the intuitive or explicit formulation of an environmental ethic. In an excellent essay on Ruskin and ecology, for instance, Brian J. Day shows how the writer interprets landscape as a “moral index” that reflects human moral activity, reminding the viewing subject of his own moral feelings but also of the Biblical injunction to act as the steward of God’s creation (919).

Because they were imagined as signs of moral feeling, natural beauty and sublimity also became closely linked with nascent ideologies of nationalism, serving as indices of a nation’s moral exceptionalism. As a result, American and European landscapes were frequently compared, a stock analogy symptomatic of the young republic’s anxiety toward the Old World. The plot of Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* (1798), an early American novel often interpreted as an allegory on the fragility of the republic, is triggered for instance by a dispute on the comparative merits of an American versus a Swiss waterfall (34). In William Cullen Bryant’s sonnet “To Cole, An American Painter, Departing for Europe” (1829), the poet instructs his friend, incidentally of British origin, to gaze on but not be seduced by Europe’s “fair scenes,” which even high up in the Alps show “the trace of men, / Paths, homes, graves, ruins” (ll. 10-12). The coda then urges him to “Keep the earlier, wilder image” of his native land “bright” (l. 14), in other words to remember America’s pristine landscapes, free of all historical associations and hence more expressive of the young nation’s glory, virtue, and freedom. Six years later, Thomas Cole in turn published his “Essay on American Scenery,” in which he too celebrated the moral possibilities of America’s landscapes without lessening the value of those he discovered in Italy. Disputing the commonplace criticism that the New World is not picturesque, the painter identifies wildness as the distinctive attribute of American nature, imparting to the mountains, lakes, waterfalls, and forests of New England their outstanding character (4-10). Cole concludes that America’s “want of associations” should be interpreted not as a defect but on the contrary as an invitation to imagine the nation’s glory in the future tense (12), a transcendental solution to the problem of Europe’s histori-

³ I am grateful to my anonymous reviewer and to the volume’s co-editor, Philipp Schweighauser, for their helpful suggestions regarding the relationship between moralized landscape, aesthetic theory, and ethics. For the relation between aesthetics and moral feeling, see, for example, §29 and §59 in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

cal precedence that echoes Emerson's *Nature*, also published in 1836.⁴ In "Walking" (1862), finally, Henry David Thoreau compares a panorama of the Rhine with one of the Mississippi in order to foreground his famous declaration that "in Wildness is the preservation of the World" (238-39).

Despite the efforts of Cole, Emerson, and Thoreau, Americans at mid-century were still not convinced of the comparative advantages of their wild scenery, handicapped by what James Fenimore Cooper calls its "greater want of finish" (52). American taste was still modeled on a "transatlantic standard" (Pomeroy 32) derived from the discourses of the sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque and marketed toward genteel Eastern audiences (Cohen 244). Furthermore, in "The Moral of Landscape," Ruskin had pronounced that only nature filled with historical and cultural associations, or what Adorno later named "the cultural landscape" (64), could give rise to moral feeling, and hence could "hardly be felt in America" (5: 298-9).⁵ Marked by these European prejudices, Cooper compares American and European landscapes in a posthumously published essay, noting that "any well-delineated view of a high-class Swiss scene, must at once convince even the most provincial mind among us that nothing of the sort is to be found in America, east of the Rocky Mountains" (64). In other words, while landscape aesthetics made it possible for Americans to begin appreciating their natural scenery and to compare it with that overseas, it also gave Europe an unfair advantage, drawing tourists to seek out "the image of the old world" in the new (Pomeroy 33), or better yet, to make the obligatory Grand Tour to the Alps. In *The Yosemite Book*, published in 1868, Josiah Whitney thus estimates that ten times more Californians had travelled

⁴ The passage in Cole is very similar to Emerson's metaphor of the transparent eyeball: "Seated on a pleasant knoll, look down into the pleasant valley [. . .]. And in looking into the yet uncultivated scene, the mind's eye may see far into futurity [. . .] poets yet unborn will sanctify the soil" (12). James Fenimore Cooper also concludes his essay on a transcendental note: "To conclude, we concede to Europe much of the noblest scenery, in its Alps, Pyrenees, and Apennines; in its objects of art, as a matter of course; in all those effects that depend on time and association [. . .]; while we claim for America the freshness of a most promising youth, and a species of natural radiance that carries the mind with reverence to the source of all that is glorious around us" (69).

⁵ Adorno defines the "cultural landscape" as an "artifactual domain" that arose in the nineteenth century in between nature and art, where nature is not perceived as inviolable, and in which historical traces such as ruins contribute to the perception of beauty (64-65).

for pleasure to Switzerland than in their own mountains (78; see Worster 185).⁶

The Swiss Alps were of course one of the nineteenth-century benchmarks by which to measure one's taste for scenery. Switzerland, Whitney writes, is "the very focus of pleasure travel for the civilized world," making the comparison of the Swiss and Californian scenery "not easy" (78-79). The comparison was nevertheless used extremely frequently as a means to give American landscape its *lettres de noblesse*. Cole, for example, calls New Hampshire's White Mountains the "Switzerland of the United States" (6), an analogy transferred to the Colorado Rockies, even to Alaska (Pomeroy 33-34). Like Cooper, Whitney felt that the Sierra Nevada were not as picturesque as the Alps, and hence "will not invite as frequent visits, or as long delay among its hidden recesses," yet still urged "those who wish to see nature in all her variety of mountain gloom and mountain glory" (79) to come to Yosemite. In the same chapter, he rejects the "absurd theory" that glaciers could have shaped the Valley: "Nothing more unlike the real work of ice, as exhibited in the Alps, could be found" (79).

At the same time that Whitney was writing his guide, a thirty-year old Scottish-born inventor and machinist named John Muir was spending his first summer in the Sierra, tending sheep, then operating a sawmill. Yosemite became his base for solitary excursions into the "high temples" (*Nature Writings* 842) of the backcountry where he explored at length "the hidden recesses" (Whitney 79) that Whitney felt did not deserve attention, and where he quickly acquired his legendary sobriquet of "John o' the Mountains." In 1871 Muir toured the Valley with Emerson, trying to make him passionately feel the divine sublimity of the place, but also criticizing tourists as "barbarous" (qtd. in Worster 211). Later that year, he discovered a living glacier in the Sierra and published his first article, "Yosemite Glaciers." This essay, influenced by Swiss-American geologist Louis Agassiz's ice-age theory, the uniformitarian geology of Charles Lyell, and physicist John Tyndall's work on Swiss glaciers, rejects the catastrophist hypothesis advanced by Whitney,

⁶ Landscape comparison in America was not simply an ideological expression of Manifest Destiny. It was also a practical way of attracting Eastern tourists to the Golden West. The Romantic interest in sublime scenery, combined with the so-called closing of the American frontier, led to the setting aside of Yosemite in 1864 as the first wildland park (Cronon 72). Whitney, a Harvard professor who was serving as California's state geologist, published his guide to attract these tourists to the newly protected valley, calling "the higher region of the Sierra Nevada, the Alps of California" (78).

which explained the formation of Yosemite as the result of a sudden upheaval and collapse of the earth's crust (*Nature Writings* 579-80).⁷

Attacked as a result by Whitney as an "ignoramus" and a "mere sheepherder" (Miller 82), Muir wished to publish a credibly scientific book to defend his idea; to do so, however, would have required a visit to the Alps, a trip for which he had neither the money nor the time in the early 1870s (Worster 197). Muir not only rejected Whitney's geological catastrophism, but also his apprehension of mountains as a mixture of "mountain gloom and mountain glory" (Whitney 79). It was not Whitney, of course, but Ruskin who had coined the expression in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters* (1856). While Muir and Ruskin shared the same Scots Presbyterian origins, venerated mountains as natural cathedrals resulting from a divine providentialism, and looked not only at landscape but through it to the presence of God (Muir, *Nature Writings* 238; Ruskin, 6: 425), they did not see eye to eye regarding the moral worth of human nature or the desirability of historical change: whereas the first welcomed progress, the second vehemently rejected it.

These differences may be apprehended in their respective positions in the celebrated Forbes-Tyndall controversy, in which the two scientists openly debated the origins of glacier movement.⁸ Allying himself with John Tyndall, who was himself inspired by Emersonian transcendentalism and rejected the authority of theology (DeYoung 16, 69-71), Muir often uses the metaphor of music to describe the glaciers' long work of erosion and the many traces it left in the granitic Sierra landscape, a slow process of "change from icy darkness and death to life and beauty," which perfectly corresponded to his own secularized Calvinism. Nature, and especially mountains were "predestined" to show the universe's essential beauty and goodness (*Nature Writings* 323-24; see Terrie). Ruskin also celebrated mountain beauty and experienced several epiphanies in the Alps, but he increasingly associated the geological work of erosion with divine wrath and what he perceived as the Alps' gloomy culture. On a sunny summer afternoon in Zermatt, for example, Ruskin notices a white chapel containing moldering bones, one of many signs in the Alps of human "torpor" and "anguish of soul" that the writer represents as the cultural correlative of the mountains' ineluctable decay (6: 385). Informed by Forbes's research, which he preferred over

⁷ It is of course Muir's explanation that was closest to current explanations of Yosemite's formation, and which eventually prevailed in the early twentieth century (Worster 195).

⁸ For Ruskin's role in the controversy, see O'Gorman.

Tyndall's because of its religious underpinnings, he transformed this "instruction of the hills" (385) into a theogico-scientific myth in which mountains served as emblems of God's glory but also of man's fallen state. For Ruskin, mountain life, marked by an endless cycle of "black bread, rude roof, dark night, laborious day, weary arm at sunset," served as an apocalyptic manifestation of divine power (388).

Muir's biographers have seized on Ruskin's chapter on mountain gloom to argue that the American writer regarded his own age with more optimism and read nature less ambivalently than did his European counterpart (Cohen 39; Turner 222; Worster 85). Although one may attribute Ruskin's pessimism to his Biblical reading of geological processes, his melancholy vision of the Alps' primitive Catholic culture, or old age and incipient mental illness, an even more compelling explanation lies in his acute awareness of modernity's destructive impact on the natural environment, which he believed reflected man's moral corruption and alienation from God. In "The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century" (1884), after attacking the reliability of modern science by again challenging Tyndall, Ruskin blames what he perceives as a change in the climate on a combination of industrial and moral pollution, which he calls "Manchester's devil darkness" (34: 17-18, 37). Identifying "the signs of the times" (40) ominously with "blanched sun, — blighted grass, — blinded man," he calls in jeremiad fashion on his fellow humans to mend their ways (40-1; Day 918-22; see also Gifford 78). Day labels this holistic vision of divine, human, and natural economies Ruskin's "moral ecology," an intuitive apprehension of nature that is aesthetic and moral rather than scientific, and requires of the moral agent or viewer a correct ethical practice to harmonize the three economies (918, 928).

Like industrial pollution, tourism was one of those phenomena Ruskin considered a blasphemy against God and hence also a bane on both man and nature. Because the Alps were one of the earliest modern tourist destinations, Ruskin makes them into a bellwether for modernity's impact more generally, regularly criticizing tourism's negative effect on Switzerland's noble scenery and virtuous manners, starting in *Modern Painters*: "I believe that every franc now spent by travelers among the Alps tends more or less to the undermining of whatever special greatness there is in the Swiss character" (6: 454-55).⁹ Beholding the

⁹ Among the many other examples, one can cite an 1860 letter in which Ruskin writes that "Chamouni itself and all the rest of Switzerland are completely spoiled by railroads, huge hotels, and architects out of employ" (36: 340), and his 1865 Preface to *Sesame and Lilies*, in which he famously regrets the loss "of all real understanding of the character and beauty of Switzerland, by the country's being now regarded as half-watering place,

Alps in 1869, the same year that Muir discovered the California Sierra, he decries modernity's defilement of the divine landscape he first set his eyes on twenty-five years beforehand. For him, this landscape no longer symbolizes light, purity, and hope (19: 292-93). Mountains in Ruskin's later writings are demoralized if not de-moralized, geological erosion serving as an apt metaphor for the age's decaying values and faith, which he associates with the devil's work. Thus, in *Fors Clavigera III*, written in October 1873, he compares the melting of the glaciers to the passing away of traditional Swiss life, an omen of the evil to come (27: 635).

When John Muir did finally make it to Europe in the summer of 1893, he was a well-respected author of articles on natural history and the president of the newly founded Sierra Club in addition to being a family man and owner of a large fruit ranch. The principle aim of the trip was to study glaciers in Norway and the Alps in order to finally confirm his theory of glacier formation in the Sierra (letter to Louie Strentzel Muir, 28 August 1893).¹⁰ But by contrasting his own Range of Light, still wild and pure, with Ruskin's later vision of the Alps as a defiled, de-moralized landscape, Muir also had a golden opportunity to assert the comparative advantage of American versus European scenery, to decry the ill effects of tourism, and to make a powerful argument in favor of wilderness preservation. On his voyage to Europe he stopped at the Chicago World's Fair, then made a pilgrimage to Walden Pond (Turner 294-95), both sites revealing in their own distinct way the author's characteristically American confidence in human improvement, the first outer, the second inner. After visiting his native Scotland, then Norway, he left London on 8 August for a seventeen-day whirlwind solo tour of Switzerland.¹¹

half gymnasium" (18: 25). The best study of Ruskin's rich and complex relationship with Switzerland is Hayman.

¹⁰ See also John Muir's letter of 17 September to David Douglas, his letter of 19 December 1893 to Mary Muir, and the letters of 31 December 1893 to Alfred Sellers and to Charles Sargent, all of which confirm that Muir went to Switzerland to collect scientific facts on glaciation.

¹¹ Based on his journals and letters, one can roughly reconstruct Muir's itinerary in Switzerland: 10 August, arrival in Basle; 11, Lucerne and Rigi; 12, Lucerne, Meiringen, Interlaken; 13, Grindelwald; 14, Lausanne; 15, Lausanne, Martigny, Zermatt; 16, Zermatt, Gornergrat; 17, Zermatt, Martigny, Chamonix; 18, Chamonix; 19, Geneva, Neuchâtel; 20, Basle, Zurich; 21, Chur; 22, Splügen Pass, Chiavenna; 23, Chiavenna, Menaggio; 24, Chiavenna, St. Moritz; 25, St. Moritz; 26, St. Moritz, Rhine Falls, Basle; 27, Basle; 28, arrival in London.

The unique combination of wild nature, historic culture, and modern infrastructure that Muir discovered in Switzerland, so different from his own still primitively developed Yosemite Valley, might well have disturbed him, as it did Ruskin. Instead, the man famous for hiking alone for weeks on end with only a blanket and dry bread admired the picturesque towns, which he qualified as “quaint” (letter to Wanda Muir, 25 August 1893), and took full advantage of all the tourist conveniences, even if he sometimes cast a bemused eye on these. At Lucerne’s luxury Hotel Victoria, for example, he relished the incongruity of having to spend the night on a cot in a bathroom, and after ascending the Rigi, jotted down in his journal: “Queer steam and cograil mountaineering” (Journal 48: 5). The speed of modern travel did not dazzle him, however, even if he complained of not being able to climb the mountains around Chamonix due to time constraints and blisters (letter to Louie Strentzel Muir, 17 August 1893). In Como, he even enjoyed the presence of fashionable tourists, particularly of the female variety (Journal 48: 24). His main complaint was not being able to speak French in order to better communicate with the locals (letter to Wanda Muir, 25 August 1893).

Like Switzerland’s juxtaposition of wildness and domesticity, Muir’s twenty-eight-page Swiss journal and eight letters, which on occasion repeat verbatim the former, mixes sometimes staid aesthetic formulae with the author’s own trademark style based on scientific observation, scripture, and lyric expressiveness. The picturesque mode, in particular, helps him frame many of his descriptions in the same manner that illustrations frame the text in his postcards. In a card sent to his daughter Wanda from the Rigi, Switzerland’s most visited peak (Fig. 1), Muir writes for example that the view is

one of the very finest I ever enjoyed – hundreds of peaks and hills and mountains and glaciers with hundreds of little farms and cottages and lakes in the valleys far below, clouds of every form and color lingering, marching, rising, sinking, forming, fading. (postcard of 11 August 1893)

This conventional scene painting shows how Muir’s experience of the Alps is mediated by technologies of the picturesque such as postcards, photographs, panoramas, and relief models that helped frame, domesticate, and commodify wild nature through miniaturization and mechanical reproduction. Deploring tourism’s transformation of natural beauty into a sentimentalized and commodified caricature of itself, Adorno writes that nature loses its critical edge and becomes “a nature reserve and an alibi [. . .] disguis[ing] its mediatedness as immediacy” (68).

Muir's own cards and letters adhere in many places to such conventional tourist practices, as do the flowers collected as sentimental keepsakes for his children on the Rigi, then at Grindelwald, Zermatt, Chamonix, and the Rhine Falls (letters of 12, 15, and 28 August).



Fig. 1: Postcard from John Muir to Wanda Muir, 11 August 1893. MSS. 201 Shone, John Muir Papers, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library. ©1984 Muir-Hanna Trust. Reprinted with permission.

The writer breaks away from this picturesque frame in his journal, however, when he doodles details of various glaciers and waterfalls in the margins, and adds geological descriptions whose tone of awe is more representative of Muir's style. The Rigi, Muir writes, is "one mass of coarse stratified glacial conglomerate [. . .] never before saw gravel deposit 6000 feet thick and 1000 of miles in extent. What a sublime expression of glacial action and of running singing water. What sheets of music are these gravel beds. Sermons in stones, ay and songs in stone" (Journal 48: 7-8). While the author's portrayal of natural sublimity seeks to recapture what Adorno calls the "essence of the experience of nature" (69), his blending of nature and culture echoes the latter's remark that "in natural beauty, natural and historical elements interact in a musical and kaleidoscopically changing fashion" (71). For Adorno, the appreciation of natural beauty requires cultural or historical memory. As in his writings on the Sierra Nevada, Muir literally inscribes that story in

the stones, suggesting that even in wild scenery he makes no distinction between nature and culture. As with music, these historical, or in this case Biblical associations give natural beauty its enigmatic and expressive character (Adorno 65, 72-73), interpreted by Ruskin but also by Muir as moral truths.

That Muir was able, thanks to his previous studies, to draw on the same musical metaphor and to recognize the same geological processes in the Alps as in the Sierra Nevada enabled him to regard Switzerland as “familiar ground” (letter to Louie Strentzel Muir, 16/17 August 1863) and, despite its patent lack of pristine nature, to intuit in the Swiss landscape the same moral laws as back home. As he traveled from London to the Alps, the writer carefully scanned the landscape for signs of glacial action, providing answers to some of the geological puzzles of his age, including the causes of the sudden bend in the Rhone valley at Martigny (letter to Louie Strentzel Muir, 15 August 1893),¹² or the mistaken relation between the beauty of Lake Como and its height (letter to Wanda Muir, 25 August 1893). Switzerland’s “wilderness of gigantic peaks” (letter to Louie Strentzel Muir, 15 August 1893), which had left its mark all the way to the plains of Belgium, not only confirmed the author’s theory of glacial formation of the California Sierra. It also allowed him to consider the Alps to be as wild and glorious as his native mountains despite their modern development and the fact that he found its glaciers almost everywhere receding. Muir noted the unique wildness and strangeness of the Matterhorn, for example, “a huge savage pyramid a triumphant monument of nature’s glacial sculpture piercing the heavens in a lonely serene majesty” (letter to Louie Strentzel Muir, 15 August 1893).¹³ Even where glaciers rubbed shoulders with hotels and where roads crossed mountains, at the Tête Noire and Splügen Passes for example, he was struck by their wild sublimity (“the wildest pass and the wildest road I ever saw”) and expressed his frustration at not having the

¹² In this letter, Muir writes that he had solved the problem of the bed in the Rhone valley that Tyndall had presented even before leaving California by simply looking at a map of Switzerland. Based on his wide reading of all the leading geologic theories, Muir was therefore able to interpret the glacial formation of the Alps *before* his European tour, presenting his conclusions in “Living Glaciers of California” (1875), much of which was then reprinted in chapter two of *The Mountains of California* (1893), whose prospective title was *The California Alps* (Cohen 80). This included his discussion of Swiss glaciers, which he derived in part from his reading of the German geologists Adolf and Hermann Schlagintweit, as well as from his own first-hand experience of the Sierra (*Nature Writings* 326, 626).

¹³ Muir’s description of the Matterhorn merits comparison with Ruskin’s epiphany in front of the Dôme du Gouter (4: 364).

time to write about all the things he had seen during his tour. Nowhere, in other words, did Muir seek to belittle the Alps in order to magnify his own Californian mountains' unspoiled wilderness and sublimity. When he does compare the two, it is to argue for geological parallels between the ranges, and more particularly between Yosemite and various alpine valleys, including, most obviously, Lauterbrunnen ("Lauterbrunnen is a Yo valley," Journal 48: 9) but also the valley of Chur, the Via Mala and the cliffs around Chiavenna (letter to Louie Strentzel Muir, 25 August 1893).¹⁴

The Alps' familiar geology allowed Muir to regard Switzerland with the transcendental optimism he viewed his own Sierra, both ranges symbolizing the universe's divinely willed goodness. At the same time, he could also use them to express his disapproval of Ruskin's darker religious and moral vision. Muir's descriptions of the indigenous population, in particular, are altogether positive, Ruskinian gloom nowhere to be found. At the Kleine Scheidegg, for instance, Muir sympathetically takes note of the children and young people happily playing (Journal 48: 10), while the mountain peasants who work slowly along its steep slopes are equally viewed as happy (11). On his way to Chamonix he lovingly describes a twelve-year old fruit seller who walks in front of his carriage with a basket on her head (14). Even Muir's reaction to the swarms of tourists in Zermatt, Chamonix, and elsewhere is surprisingly upbeat. In a remarkable letter to his wife Louie, he writes:

I hardly ever saw a grander mountain view than the one I enjoyed from this famous standpoint of Gorner Grat. I met and passed hundreds in ascending and descending, many women were bravely going afoot, though the day was warm, and young girls and boys, — a climb of 5,000 from Zermatt. A dozen or so of sick or weak men and women were being carried up by four porters, as if this mountaintop were a healing fountain or sacred shrine where sins and diseases were sure to be washed away and healed. Certainly a hopeful sign of the times — such love of mountain beauty and wildness [. . .] The crowds of all kinds of tourists I have found everywhere in Switzerland shows a wonderful growth in love of nature. (letter to Louie Strentzel Muir, 16 August 1893)

Muir's Whitmanian embrace of the crowd is very different from his earlier criticism of Yosemite tourists or from the romantic image we have

¹⁴ Waterfalls were another common feature of comparison between Swiss and American landscapes. Muir compares the Staubbach falls to Bridal Veil, and Lake of Brienz to Lake Tahoe (Journal 48: 7, 9).

of him as a solitary nature worshipper. The fifty-five year old writer here finds spiritual succor in the hundreds of tourists climbing or being carried up the Gornergrat, an image meant to remind us of a medieval pilgrimage or ritual bath. As the pioneer historian of alpinism Claire Eliane Engel writes, “the great peaks were brought down to the level of humanity” in the second half of the nineteenth century (99). For Ruskin, as we saw, this democratization of mountains was an ominous sign of the age’s moral and physical corruption, whereas here it fills Muir with joy and hope in humanity.¹⁵ Muir very likely had “The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century” in mind when writing this passage. He not only interprets this “sign of the times” antithetically to Ruskin, but also rebuffs the latter’s association of progress with devilry (34: 40). As he wrote in his journal on the same day, “Some belief in the virtues and charms of clean wildness is to be found in some measure in everybody and it is surely growing however confused with frivolity and sham and fear of the devil” (Journal 48: 14). In sharp contrast with Ruskin, Muir *re-moralizes* the Alps, imagining them both as the literal and symbolic setting for humanity’s progressive ascent toward psychological, moral, and aesthetic well-being. This is what Michael P. Nelson has called the “Cathedral argument” for wilderness conservation (420).

As biographers and critics have frequently remarked, Muir came in later years to accept tourism as essential to this conservation argument. Daniel Philippon in particular associates his shift in his thinking with his embrace of family life and realization that nature had to be humanized in order to be protected: “Muir makes wilderness seem more like home in order to show that sacred places were inseparable from domestic places” (149-52). While he began to think of wilderness in terms of home starting in the 1870s, his life on the Martinez ranch in the 1880s gave additional weight to the analogy (Philippon 151-53; Cohen 221-22). I would like to suggest, however, that Muir’s 1893 Swiss tour contributed to his conviction that wilderness needed tourists, and this for two reasons. As we have seen, the Alps enjoyed more cultural authority than American landscapes, and therefore would have served as a model in Muir’s mind, notably giving him added confidence to publish his ideas. Second, as we saw, Muir enjoyed the Alps’ mixture of wildness and culture, the fact that glaciers cohabited with hotels, and farms enameled the mountain landscape, a humanized environment that no doubt reminded

¹⁵ It would be worthwhile to compare Muir’s forthright account of the Gornergrat with Mark Twain’s splendid satire of alpine tourism in *A Tramp Abroad*, in which his “expedition” takes seven days instead of three hours to reach the summit of the Riffelberg, where they discover a luxury hotel filled with tourists (213-43).

him of his native Scotland and where he felt immediately at home. Muir indeed perceived no essential difference between Switzerland's "cultured landscape" and the so-called virgin landscape of the Sierra Nevada: mountains for him, as for Ruskin, constituted a text whose meaning was derived from nature, culture, and God. Much like Ruskin, he believed that "love of mountain beauty and wildness" would inspire his fellow citizens to get closer to God and obey his moral injunction by becoming better stewards of the land. Unlike Ruskin, however, he felt that for this to happen, they needed to go into the hills rather than to admire them from a distance.

In his first book, *The Mountains of California*, which he fully rewrote upon his return from Europe and finished on 3 April 1894, affectionately calling it "his little alpine thing" (Letter to Robert Underwood Johnson, 3 April 1894), Muir famously states of the Sierra Nevada that "every feature became more rigidly alpine, without, however, producing any chilling effect; for going to the mountains is like going home" (*Nature Writings* 352). He now recognized the Alps in the Sierra, just as he had recognized the Sierra in the Alps,¹⁶ neither of the two landscapes producing the "chilling effect" or mountain gloom described by Ruskin. Upon his return to California, Muir also began to sell the idea of parks to the American public, what Michael Cohen has called his "spiritual lobbying" (298). Despite being under state protection, Yosemite Valley was in a desolate condition in 1894, overgrazing and lumbering having made it unattractive to tourists (Letter to Robert Underwood Johnson, 1 October 1895). Muir wanted to place the park under Federal management, and for this to happen it needed more visitors. In his 1895 speech to the Sierra Club, he recycles some of the images and diction from the Zermatt letter to praise a hundred-fold increase in young men and women visiting the Yosemite backcountry "with the sparkle and exhilaration of the mountains in their eyes – a fine, hopeful sign of the times" ("National Parks"). Muir's conviction that tourism would encourage land stewardship, and was therefore essential to the conservation cause is set forth most forcefully in *Our National Parks*, published in 1901, in which he generously welcomes the "thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people who are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home," yet again a "hopeful sign of the times" (Na-

¹⁶ Cohen argues that Muir cut the Alps from the book's title because he no longer needed to rely on picturesque conventions after his European trip: "He had learned not to make this false comparison" (285). I would claim on the contrary that he changed the title because he felt sufficiently at ease with the analogy to consider the Alps and the Sierra as interchangeable.

ture Writing 721). Indeed, Muir became so convinced of the need for *more* people in the wilderness that by 1912 he was advocating roads to improve access to the Yosemite backcountry (Cohen 308; Philippon 161). Both the Sierra Club and Muir saw the car, ironically, as way to expand support for parks, and hence to preserve wilderness.¹⁷

Although some recent environmental writers, including Cohen, have attempted to defend Muir's position, arguing that tourists, after all, "were better than sheep" (257), most today agree that Muir's encouragement of wilderness tourism contributed to what William Cronon has titled the "trouble with wilderness." According to the historian, Muir helped promote the idea of wilderness as a pristine, safe place separate from and above civilization, offering visitors the illusion of escape, while allowing them to ignore their own backyards. As Roderick Nash has argued, this is a quintessentially American notion, which, in the end, proved too successful: "the very success in appreciation of wilderness threatened to prove its undoing" (264).¹⁸ The "Great New Wilderness Debate" (Callicott and Nelson) of the late twentieth century not only challenged Muir's conservation philosophy, which had enabled the creation of the national park system and the 1964 Wilderness Act, but also the idea of wilderness upon which such conservationism was founded. A leading voice in this debate, environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott has criticized the exceptionalist myth of America as virgin land that we saw in Bryant and Cole, among other reasons, for ignoring the historical and biological evidence that man has never existed apart from nature. He reasons that it is better to integrate humans harmoniously into the natural world through ecological concepts such as the biosphere reserve than to keep them out (Callicott 438-40).

Much like Terry Gifford, who has argued for a "post-pastoral" Muir, who, in his later writings, does not set up wilderness against culture (19-36), I believe Muir also realized that the human/nature dualism was detrimental to nature, notably through his discovery of Switzerland's integration of wild and domestic landscapes. Such a discovery would have confirmed what Ruskin had argued in "The Moral of Landscape," what Muir no doubt had already intuitively perceived in California's so-called wilderness, and what Adorno later theorized: the aesthetic appreciation

¹⁷ According to Roderick Nash, Eric Julber, a Los Angeles attorney, again used the comparison with Switzerland to make the case for more wilderness access before a Senate subcommittee on Parks and Recreation in 1972, pointing to the tension in the Park Service Act of 1916 between preserving nature and advancing public recreation (264-65).

¹⁸ Despite extensive fires, 3,691,191 people visited Yosemite National Park in 2013, or just under half the number of visitors to the Eiffel Tower.

of natural beauty is necessarily mediated by culture, and even the most pristine landscapes are historical. As we have seen, Ruskin and Muir applied the same human-centered, aesthetic and moral outlook to natural landscape, the purpose of which was to encourage humans to become more spiritual and to act more humbly. Because they disagreed on the moral status of humans and on the value of their own age, however, they prescribed two different approaches to nature that might today be understood as two different environmental ethics. Thanks to his more optimistic vision of man and history, Muir believed it was sufficient to democratically invite his fellow citizens to visit nature *as if* at home in order to protect nature, a formula close to what we would call “light Green,” or environmentalist thinking. Ruskin, on the other hand, would now qualify as a “dark Green” or deep ecologist (Bate 36-37). He believed that a radical moral transformation was needed in order to redress the blighted human and natural environment; until then, people had to admire wild nature at a distance, or else live in it frozen in time, somewhat like in today’s biospheres. If Ruskin’s moralized, or rather demoralized reading of the Alps is much gloomier and more elitist than that of John Muir, our current ecological crisis unfortunately makes it the most prescient.

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