



Locating the beautiful, picturesque, sublime and majestic: spatially analysing the application of aesthetic terminology in descriptions of the English Lake District



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ABSTRACT

This article introduces and implements an interdisciplinary approach to the examination of historical text corpora. It presents a case study that combines corpus analysis, automated geoparsing and geographic information systems (GIS) to investigate the geographies associated with some of the key aesthetic terms historically used in writing about the English Lake District: a culturally prestigious region of lakes and mountains in northwest England. The basis of this investigation is a corpus of travel writing and topographical literature about the Lake District containing more than 1.5 million words. The corpus mainly consists of works from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In investigating this corpus we identify and analyse a correspondence between eighteenth-century aesthetic theory and the use of the terms beautiful, picturesque, sublime and majestic in contemporaneous and later accounts of the Lakes region. Our analyses afford new insights into the historical use of these four aesthetic terms. Our findings, moreover, reveal how ephemeral publications, such as tourist guidebooks, helped to consolidate the application of the aesthetic principles and vocabulary formulated by canonical thinkers, including William Gilpin and Edmund Burke. In presenting this research, we demonstrate how a hybrid geographical and corpus-based methodology, which we call geographical text analysis, can advance the study of the connections between literature, aesthetics and physical geography.

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In matters of aesthetic judgement much depends on choosing one's words with care. Yet, as an incident in the life of the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) proves, this does not always happen. While visiting the Falls of Clyde in 1803, Coleridge is said to have encountered a 'lady and gentleman' with whom he fell into a friendly exchange about the highest fall, Cora Linn. The gentleman, we are told, 'observed that it was a *majestic* waterfall'. This judgment pleased Coleridge greatly since 'he had been settling in his own mind the precise meaning of the words ... majestic, sublime, etc.', and he happened to agree with the man's opinion. 'Yes, sir', the poet replied, 'it is a majestic waterfall'. To this, however, the lady assented by adding that it was 'sublime and beautiful' as well. Coleridge, disheartened but not a little amused, is said to have turned away from the couple at this point, feeling 'not very

desirous to continue the conversation'.¹

The humour here, of course, comes from the ironic coincidence of Coleridge's desire for precision and the unexpected imprecision of his interlocutors. Beautiful, sublime and majestic are, after all, words with appreciably different meanings, especially when they are used as judgments of appearance. Treatises such as Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) make the differences between these words clear. For Burke (1729–1797), who exerted a strong influence on Coleridge, the terms beautiful, sublime and majestic corresponded to distinctive sensations that different types of phenomena produce in the mind.² Beautiful, in this context, properly signifies forms that are small, smooth and pleasing; sublime, by contrast, usually denotes entities whose incomprehensible

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¹ D. Wordsworth, Sunday, August 21st, in: J.C. Sharp (Ed.), *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland, A.D. 1803*, Edinburgh, 1874, 37.

² C.D. Thorpe, Coleridge on the sublime, in: E.L. Griggs (Ed.), *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Studies in Honor of George McLean Harper*, Princeton, 1939, 192–219.

massiveness terrifies or overawes; majestic, for its part, refers to forms whose impressiveness inspires reverence or admiration. Yet, as the anecdote above confirms, contemporary admirers of landscape scenery did not always use these words with such discrimination. Thus, for instance, one comes across an article in the *European Magazine* for April 1789 that praises the 'beautiful, majestic and sublime' prospect of Skiddaw: an iconic mountain in the English Lake District.³

This indiscriminate mixing of terminology typifies an oft-ridiculed aspect of the Picturesque movement: an influential trend in art criticism and aesthetic taste that arose in Britain during the late eighteenth century. The effects of the Picturesque movement on British culture have been explored at length elsewhere, as have the different ways the term picturesque was defined by the movement's principal exponents.⁴ For some thinkers, the picturesque signified a specific pictorial quality. Notably, the artist and theorist William Gilpin (1724–1804) affirmed that the term was 'expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture'.⁵ Significantly, though, later connoisseurs, including Uvedale Price (1747–1829) and Richard Payne Knight (1750–1824), contended that the picturesque constituted an aesthetic ideal concerned with the appeal of rough and irregular forms.

We shall return to these distinctions below. At present, it is enough to observe that although the sensibilities of the picturesque broadly informed the polite culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Picturesque movement was also often associated with false taste and false feeling. Thus, one finds writers ranging from Tobias Smollett (1721–1771) to Jane Austen (1775–1817) playfully associating the picturesque with vanity and affectation. Edward Ferrars's disavowal of such pretentiousness in Austen's *Sense & Sensibility* (1811) is exemplary: 'I have no knowledge of the picturesque', Edward stolidly asserts when asked his opinion of a tract of countryside; 'You must be satisfied with such admiration as I can *honestly* give'.⁶ Even more typical is Coleridge's later retelling of his encounter at Cora Linn, wherein the gentleman declares that the waterfall 'is very majestic, it is sublime & it is beautiful ... & picturesque' – to which the lady rejoins, 'it is the prettiest thing I ever saw'.⁷

These examples raise important sociopolitical issues, of course.⁸ Indicatively, in both versions of Coleridge's anecdote the couple's lack of discernment implies a lack of cultivation and refinement. The obtuseness attributed to the lady, moreover, chauvinistically

suggests that women are less aesthetically intelligent than men. For the purposes of this article, however, we are less concerned with such issues than with ascertaining whether or not the sort of verbal fastidiousness that compelled Coleridge finds a counterpart in the works of other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors. Do other authors indiscriminately apply terms such as beautiful, picturesque, sublime and majestic to similar geographical features and locations? Or do they use these terms to describe distinctive types of features and locations? If so, what do the geographies of these features and locations tell us historically about the way these terms were understood? Do these geographies indicate any correlation between the ways these terms were defined by thinkers such as Burke and Gilpin and the ways they were applied in contemporary guidebooks, travelogues and topographical literature?

In what follows we propose to address these questions by implementing an interdisciplinary approach called geographical text analysis to examine the application of beautiful, picturesque, sublime and majestic in writing about the English Lake District: a region of lakes and mountains in northwest England, which has long been represented in different genres of travel writing and topographical literature.⁹ We have chosen to focus on these terms not merely because of the interest they held for Coleridge, but rather because they are exemplary of the 'new language of [landscape] appreciation' that emerged in Britain during the later eighteenth century.¹⁰ Combining methods from corpus linguistics, cultural history and geographic information science, our objective is to explore the ways this 'new language' was used to describe the Lakeland's landforms. Specifically, our goal is to determine whether or not eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers used the terms beautiful, picturesque, sublime and majestic in relation to different parts of the Lake District. More than this, though, our intention is also to demonstrate what a geographically orientated interpretation of aesthetic diction can reveal about the ways regions like the Lake District were perceived in the past.

The basis of this investigation is a corpus of writing about the Lake District and its immediate environs. The composition of this corpus, which has been assembled through the support of the European Research Council and the Leverhulme Trust, has already been described elsewhere.¹¹ It is worth noting here, though, that the corpus consists of eighty works (comprising over 1.5 million words), which have been manually transcribed and georeferenced using a modified version of the Edinburgh Geoparser. The texts included in this corpus were mostly identified using Peter Bicknell's bibliography *The Picturesque Scenery of the Lake District* and Martin and Jean Norgate's *Guides to the Lakes*, which contain records of works written about the Lake District from several different

³ Skiddaw, *The European Magazine* 15 (1789) 343.

⁴ See, for example, C. Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View*, London, 1927; W. Hipple, *The Sublime, the Beautiful and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetics*, Carbondale, 1957; M. Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800*, Stanford, 1986; I. Ousby, *The Englishman's England: Taste, Travel and the Rise of Tourism*, Cambridge, 1990 and J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, New York, 1997.

⁵ W. Gilpin, *An Essay upon Prints: Containing Remarks upon the Principles of Picturesque Beauty*, London, 1768, x and W. Gilpin, *Observations on the Western Parts of England, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty*, London, 1798, 328.

⁶ J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, volume 1, London, 1811, 225–226 (emphasis added).

⁷ J.P. Collier, Collier's diary: transcripts of lectures 1 and 2, in: R.A. Foakes (Ed.), *Coleridge on Shakespeare: The Text of the Lectures of 1811–12*, London, 1971, 49.

⁸ On the sociopolitical and socioeconomic implications of the Picturesque movement see J. Barrell, *The Dark Side of Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting*, Cambridge, 1980; D. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Beckenham, 1984; W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, London, 1994; S. Copley and P. Garside (Eds), *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics Since 1770*, Cambridge, 1994. A different perspective is provided by R. Mayhew, *Landscape, Literature and English Religious Culture, 1660–1800: Samuel Johnson and Languages of Natural Description*, Basingstoke, 2004, which offers a critical assessment of certain tendencies of this body of scholarship.

⁹ I.N. Gregory and C. Donaldson, Geographical text analysis: digital cartographies of Lake District literature, in: D. Cooper, C. Donaldson and P. Murrieta-Flores (Eds), *Literary Mapping in the Digital Age*, Abingdon, 2016, 67–87; and I.N. Gregory, C. Donaldson, A. Hardie and P. Rayson, Modelling space in historical texts, in: F. Flanders and F. Jannidis (Eds), *The Shape of Data in Digital Humanities: Modeling Text and Text-based Resources*, London, 2017 (in press).

¹⁰ Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, 634.

¹¹ C. Donaldson, I.N. Gregory and P. Murrieta-Flores, Mapping Wordsworthshire: a GIS study of literary tourism in Victorian Lakeland, *Journal of Victorian Culture* 20 (2015) 287–307; Gregory and Donaldson, Geographical text analysis; P. Murrieta-Flores, C. Donaldson and I.N. Gregory, GIS and literary history: advancing Digital Humanities research through the spatial analysis of historical travel writing and topographical literature, *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 11 (2017) 39 paragraphs, <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/11/1/000283/000283.html/> last accessed 17 November 2016. For additional information, see *Spatial Humanities: Texts, GIS, Places*, Lancaster University, 2012–2016, <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/spatialhum.wordpress/> last accessed 17 November 2016.

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