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Romantic Writers and Mountaineering

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I: ROMANTIC MOUNTAINEERS _____

On 9 August 1802, Samuel Taylor Coleridge returned to his Keswick home at the end of his famous nine-day ‘Circumcursion’ of the more remote parts of the Lake District, a vigorous tour that had included a ground-breaking ascent of Scafell and had left the poet’s trousers in tatters and his boots in need of repair.¹ That evening Coleridge sent an excited account of his adventures to Robert Southey in which he made the first recorded use of the verb ‘mountaineering’, writing that he had ‘Spent the greater part of the next Day mountaineering’ (*Collected Letters*, ii. 846).² Coleridge was using a new word for a new activity; the ascending of mountains for pleasure, rather than for economic or military purposes, was a pursuit that had originated in Britain and Europe in the previous few decades. The invention of this pursuit is illustrated by another etymological development; while Coleridge was the first to use ‘mountaineer’ as a verb, the noun form of the word was also undergoing a transformation of meaning. Long used to define ‘a person who is native to or lives in a mountainous region’, ‘mountaineer’ was also coming to denote ‘a person who engages in or is skilled at mountain climbing’.³ In 1792, for

example, the pioneering mountain climber and travel writer Captain Joseph Budworth described his guide Paul Partridge in *A Fortnight’s Ramble to the Lakes* as ‘so bold a mountaineer, he can go any where that a sheep can; and I dare say thinks every person can do the same’.⁴ Here Partridge’s identity as one from a mountainous region is also being used to describe his skill at negotiating the environment’s challenging terrain and his ability to reach places not normally accessible to people. By the third edition of *Rambles*, when Budworth recounts what he claims to be the first ascent for pleasure of Pike o’ Stickle in 1797, he tests the applicability of the word to himself, describing how he and his guide ‘started like hardy mountaineers’.⁵ William Wordsworth plays on the word’s emergent double meaning in *The Prelude* when he describes himself and Robert Jones as ‘mountaineers’; both come from mountainous regions and both are intent upon climbing peaks.⁶ By 1837, when Wordsworth describes himself as ‘an Islander by birth,/ A Mountaineer by habit’,⁷ the word has become capable of referring specifically to an individual who participates in mountain climbing rather than one who lives in mountainous regions.

The Romantic period, then, saw the emergence of a new activity—mountaineering—and a new identity—the mountaineer—and both, I want to argue in this essay, are crucial to Romanticism, to the

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writers' senses of their identities and to their literary outputs. While the mountain has long been recognised as a key symbol in the writing of the period, there has been surprisingly little critical analysis of the links between the physical activity of mountaineering and Romantic literature.⁸ Yet, almost all the major male Romantic poets were active mountaineers at some point in their lives, or were keen to present themselves as such, and it is worth briefly recounting their climbing histories and detailing how the poets themselves saw their exploits as linked to their identities as writers.

William Wordsworth was a self-proclaimed 'mountaineer', as noted above, both a 'Child of the mountains' (*Prelude* X. 1006) who felt that the mountainous environment in which he grew up was the ideal classroom for a poet's education, and an active climber of mountains throughout his life. The highlights of his climbing career included his schoolboy scrambling for birds' eggs on Yewdale Crags, his 1790 Tour of the Alps, his 1791 summiting of Wales's highest peak, Snowdon, and his 1805 ascent with Humphry Davy and Walter Scott of Helvellyn, a mountain he continued to climb for the rest of his life, including an ascent in 1840 when he was aged 70. A fitting illustration of Wordsworth's mountaineering identity is Benjamin Robert Haydon's painting *Wordsworth on Helvellyn*, which can be seen in the Wordsworth Trust Museum.

While Wordsworth was a lifelong mountaineer, Coleridge—whom Molly Lefebure has called the 'patron saint of fellwalkers'⁹—had his own brief but glorious golden age of mountaineering, from the walking tour of the Lake District he undertook with Wordsworth in November 1799, which included an ascent of Helvellyn, until his departure for Malta in early 1804. During this period Coleridge's climbing exploits included the first known traverse of the ridge that runs from Keswick to Grasmere, by way of

the Dodds and Helvellyn; the exploration of the mountains in the Newlands Valley, including his pioneering completion of what is now known as the Coledale horseshoe; the 'Circumcision' of the Lake District, including the first recorded ascent of Scafell and the famous life-threatening descent of Broad Stand; and his scramble up Moss Force in Buttermere. Unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge never made it to the Alps, but he did plan such a trip, carefully designing a nailed boot for the purpose.

Wordsworth and Coleridge are crucial figures in this essay, but while second-generation Romantics may not have been quite as dedicated or outstanding mountaineers, they still felt the need to participate in mountain climbing, or at least present themselves as doing so. Mountains are, of course, a key feature of Percy Shelley's poetry—we think of *Alastor*, 'Mont Blanc' and *Prometheus Unbound*—though other than 'Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills', which makes excellent poetic use of an elevated viewpoint, Shelley writes mainly from below and seems to lack the ambition to ascend to summits that characterises the other poets and their works. For Shelley, Mont Blanc remains a symbol of inaccessibility even though its summit had been reached several times since the first ascent in 1786 (by contrast the mountain was the subject of John Keats's climbing fantasies). All the same, Shelley was keen to present himself as a mountaineer in both senses of the word, and while he had visited the Mer de Glace and the Glacier des Bossons near Chamonix in 1816, he rather overstated his mountain experience in the 'Author's Preface' to *The Revolt of Islam* when writing that 'I have been familiar from boyhood with mountains and lakes, and the sea, and the solitude of forests: Danger, which sports upon the brink of precipices, has been my playmate. I have trodden the glaciers of the Alps, and lived under the eye of Mont Blanc'.¹⁰ These activities, Shelley states, are part of an

‘education peculiarly fitted for a poet’, illustrating both Wordsworth’s influence and the increasing perceived link between sublime experience and poetic production.

John Keats too saw mountaineering adventure as crucial preparation for the poetic role. He described his planned pedestrian tour of 1818 through Northern England and Scotland, which was ‘to make a sort of Prologue to the Life I intend to pursue’, as follows:

I will clamber through Clouds and exist. I will get such an accumulation of stupendous recollections that as I walk through the suburbs of London I may not see them—I will stand upon Mount Blanc and remember this coming Summer when I intend to straddle ben Lomond—with my Soul!¹¹

While Keats never visited Mont Blanc, and the high price of a guide deterred him from tackling Ben Lomond, his tour took him through the Lake District, which, with its ‘magnitude of mountains’ was the place where, he declared, ‘I shall learn poetry’, and where he climbed Skiddaw, having earlier been frustrated by mist in an attempt to ascend Helvellyn (*Letters*, 103). Travelling North to Scotland, Keats climbed Ben Nevis despite suffering from a sore throat, noting in his letter to his brother Tom that the Ben was ‘the highest Mountain in Great Britain’, 4,300 feet above his starting point at sea level (*Letters*, 145). ‘Imagine the task of mounting 10 Saint Pauls without the convenience of Stair cases’ he observed, providing a strikingly Cockney perspective on the effort involved.

Both Walter Scott and Lord Byron suffered from physical disabilities that limited their mountaineering careers, but they nevertheless undertook significant climbs. Scott ascended Helvellyn with Wordsworth in 1805, as we have seen, and his writing, particularly his account of Fitz-James scrambling in the Trossachs in the opening to *The Lady of the*

Lake, had a strong effect on the development of Scottish mountaineering. Like Shelley, Byron overstated his achievements in early poems such as ‘When I rov’d a young Highlander’ in which he claims to have ‘clim’d thy steep summit, Oh Morven of snow’ but in this and other poems such as ‘Lachin Y Gair’ he was keen to present himself as an ‘active mountaineer’ in both senses of the word.¹² Byron frequently places his heroes on mountain summits—we think of Manfred on the Jungfrau or Napoleon in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage III* as the embodiments of the figure who ‘ascends to mountain-tops’ (*BCPW*, ii. 92)—and during his 1816 Alpine tour he did himself ascend what he believed to be the 7,000 feet Wengernalp, though John Clubbe has argued convincingly that the peak was in fact the Lauberhorn (8,111 feet).¹³ Both Byron’s and Scott’s writing powerfully influenced the imaginations of future climbers in the Alps as well as in Britain and helped shaped the genre of mountaineering literature. For example, while describing his successful attempt of 1827 on Western Europe’s highest mountain in his classic *Narrative of an Ascent to the Summit of Mont Blanc*, John Auldjo frequently quoted *Manfred* and included a lengthy extract from Scott’s *Anne of Geierstein* because it conveyed ‘with wonderful truth and feeling’ the experience of Alpine scrambling.¹⁴

Mountaineering, then, was an important activity for all the major male Romantic poets, except Blake, though his famous notebook jotting ‘Great things are done when men and mountains meet’¹⁵ might be taken as a motto for this essay. All these writers participated in the emergent activity, and the role of the ‘mountaineer’ was one to which they all aspired and frequently claimed. In the rest of this essay, I will place their experiences and writings within a broader account of the rise of mountaineering to explain why they should be so keen to engage in this new pursuit, and to be seen engaging in it, and to consider how they

helped define and question mountaineering as an emerging practice and discourse.

II: THE RISE OF MOUNTAINEERING

Many of the earliest mountain ascents in Britain were made for scientific purposes. For example, the first known ascent of Ben Nevis in 1771 and the first publicly recorded rock climb (William Bingley's scramble up Clogwyn Du'r Arddu in Snowdonia in 1798) were both undertaken to collect botanical specimens.¹⁶ However, it was the picturesque tour popular in the second half of the eighteenth century that provided the most important stimulus to mountaineering in Britain, and the intellectual, aesthetic and practical context out of which it developed. Though mountaineering is often set against picturesque travel, characterised as only interested in low-level views,¹⁷ the possibility of ascending to summits was inherent within the tour from its origins. In his *Guide to the Lakes* of 1778, a founding text of the tour, Thomas West advocated the Lake District over the Alps as a travel destination because, though 'the tops of the highest Alps are inaccessible, being covered with everlasting snow', the Lake District mountains 'are all accessible to the summit' and, moreover, they 'furnish prospects no less surprising [and] with more variety than the Alps themselves'.¹⁸ West's *Guide* offers no advice on how to ascend to these summits, but some of his well-known 'stations' or viewpoints were surprisingly elevated. For example, as his fourth station at Derwent Water, West chose Castle Crag, a very steep peak in the so-called 'Jaws of Borrowdale' which is just under 1000 feet high and requires quite a demanding climb to gain what West describes as 'a most astonishing view' (*Guide*, 97).

West's *Guide* was only one early literary encouragement to climb mountains, and the search for the sublime or picturesque experience produced a large number of summit

narratives as well as a developing infrastructure of guides, routes and accommodation that supported the increasing demand to ascend. In the Lake District, Skiddaw near Keswick in the northern part of the region became the most frequently ascended mountain due to its accessibility, its relative separation from other peaks and the fact that it was possible to get to the top on horseback. Ascents of 'lofty Skiddaw' were described in a number of the most popular travel accounts, including those made by William Hutchinson in 1774, Adam Walker in 1791, Joseph Budworth in 1792 and Ann Radcliffe in 1794.¹⁹ As early as 1798 this nascent summit fever had become a target for satire. In the comic parody of picturesque tourism *The Lakers*, bad weather frustrates the heroine Veronica's plans to climb Skiddaw but she comments: 'I must go up whether it is fine or not. My tour would be absolutely incomplete without an account of a ride up Skiddaw'.²⁰ Semi-organised mountain trips of the sort a real-life Veronica would have taken were often rather sociable events. Led by a local guide, usually a farmer, shepherd, innkeeper or one of their family, many people climbed as part of a group, like Keats who went up Skiddaw, 'with two others, very good sort of fellows' (*Letters*, 108). These trips often began very early in the morning—Keats was up at four and five to ascend Skiddaw and Ben Nevis respectively—and seem to have involved drinking fairly copious amounts of brandy, rum and whisky, supplied by the guide (an issue frequently discussed in the accounts). While the exploration of Lake District summits beyond the most popular ones of Skiddaw, Helvellyn and Coniston Old Man remained rare in the eighteenth century and the desire to scale alternative peaks could disconcert even the local guides,²¹ the canon of climbable mountains expanded rapidly in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. In his *A Companion to the Lakes*, first published in 1829, Edward Baines offered 'a particular account of the ascents of

Skiddaw, Helvellyn, Scawfell Pikes, Great Gavel, Bowfell, Langdale Pikes, High Bell, High Street, and several other mountains'.²²

There was a comparable expansion in the number of visitors who sought to reach the summits of the Scottish Highlands and Snowdonia in Wales, though the greater scale and difficulty of the Highland mountains meant that activity focused initially on Ben Lomond, the most southerly of the Scottish peaks over 3,000 feet, where guides were 'at hand to conduct you, by the best and readiest track, to the summit'.²³ Though Ben Nevis was recognised as the highest mountain in Britain, as late as 1824 one guidebook could still describe it as 'not often visited' due to the 'considerable ... distance to the top' and the 'laborious' ascent.²⁴ Even the adventurous Samuel Taylor Coleridge was rather overawed by the wildness of the Highlands, though as we have seen John Keats did ascend the Ben in 1818.

In Wales, Joseph Cradock satisfied his 'desire of visiting the Welsh Alps, the summit of Snowdon' in 1770,²⁵ a feat repeated in 1773 by Thomas Pennant, who also ascended Cadair Idris. Pennant failed to gain a view from the latter peak, and his hope that 'another traveller' would be able to 'make a more satisfactory relation of this mountain, than I have been able to do' indicates how pioneering this venture was.²⁶ Following Pennant's ascents, Cadair Idris and Snowdon became established as the two most popular Welsh summits. By the time of William Bingley's *A Tour Round North Wales, performed during the Summer of 1798*, seven main routes had been established up Snowdon, 'the most celebrated mountain in Great Britain', all of which Bingley explored and described in detail.²⁷ Bingley climbed several other Welsh mountains including Tryfan, though his account of the dangers of this peak served to discourage others from attempting it. By 1803, William Hutton, who commented that it is 'unfashionable not to visit the Lakes of Llanberis, but chiefly Snowdon', was assessing

the economic benefit of the developments in mountaineering to Wales, reporting that 'there is already ... more than thirty thousand [pounds] a year spent by the English mountain-hunters'.²⁸ Towards the end of the Romantic period, Snowdon (like Scafell and Ben Nevis) started to become a target for those motivated by a desire to climb the highest peak in the country (early examples of what Jonathan Simon has categorised as 'summiteers' as opposed to 'mountaineers').²⁹ M.R. of Liverpool wrote to *The Kaleidoscope* in 1828 that 'From the time I landed in North Wales I had looked upon the ascent of Snowdon as a kind of achievement I should like to perform. It would be, I thought, a feat without which all my other excursions would be incomplete'.³⁰ However, for the vast majority of early mountaineers the stated reason for reaching a summit was the view it facilitated, and many writers saw their expeditions as failures if bad weather prevented them from obtaining a view even if they had reached the summit.³¹

III: THE VIEW FROM THE TOP _____
Mountaineers are fond of asking themselves the question: 'why climb?'. The primary reason offered by most early mountaineers for ascending was the view or prospect they hoped to gain, which they often presented as the reward for the effort involved in ascending. In her account of climbing Scafell Pike that was included in her brother's *Guide to the Lakes*, Dorothy Wordsworth comments that 'Scawfell and Helvellyn [are] the two Mountains of this region which will best repay the fatigue of ascending them'.³² This economy of physical expenditure and visual reward is well captured by Keats's account of his Skiddaw ascent: 'we had fagged & tugged nearly to the top, when at halfpast six there came a mist upon us & shut out the view; we did not however lose anything by it, we were high enough without mist, to see

the coast of Scotland; the Irish sea; the hills beyond Lancaster; & nearly all the large ones of Cumberland & Westmoreland, particularly Helvellyn & Scawfell' (*Letters*, 108). Keats here expresses no interest in summiting Skiddaw or disappointment at having failed to do so; the achievement of the view provides the culmination of his efforts. Much summit literature, like Keats's letter, is concerned with identifying the various sights and places that can be seen. Mountain climbing creates a compelling visual fusion of the familiar and the strange, enabling the viewer to see new places, or to identify known places but to see them in new ways. (The pleasure in identification and naming of landscape we see in much of this early mountaineering literature continues today and is perhaps best illustrated by the enduring popularity of Alfred Wainwright's seven-volume *Pictorial Guide to the Lakeland Fells*.)³³

In considering this early mountaineering writing, we need to appreciate just how novel and extraordinary a view from 3,000 feet would have been for these Romantic-period climbers, unfamiliar with air-travel, aerial photography or even the high-rise buildings that have made the sensations of altitude more familiar in the centuries since.³⁴ When Keats writes to his brother Tom about his experience on Ben Nevis that 'I do not know whether I can give you an Idea of the prospect from a large Mountain top' (*Letters*, 147), he reminds us that this was an entirely new visual experience and one that was difficult to capture in language. For Keats, as for others, summit views were unprecedented and unrivalled. He described the chasms on Ben Nevis as 'the most tremendous places I have ever seen' (*Letters*, 146) while Coleridge wrote that 'of all earthly things which I have beheld, the view of Sca'fell and from Sca'fell (both views from its own summit) is the most heart-exciting' (*Collected Letters*, ii. 846). Moreover, the new sensations and experiences produced by mountaineering came not only

from grand and sublime objects but also from small and exquisitely beautiful ones. For example, at the culmination of a wonderful description of Scafell Pike's summit, Dorothy Wordsworth identifies a visual sensation available to only the very few who reach that remote spot, writing that '[f]lowers, the most brilliant feathers, and even gems, scarcely surpass in colouring some of those masses of stone, which no human eye beholds, except the shepherd or traveller be led thither by curiosity: and how seldom must this happen!' (*Guide*, 110).

Mountaineering enabled these early climbers to see new things, prospects on an unprecedented scale and colours of unsurpassable beauty. Ascent also produced new ways of seeing, frequently as a result of the combination of elevation, geography and weather conditions, perhaps allied to a predisposition on the climber's part for a transformation of vision. When Keats climbed Ben Nevis he was again unlucky with the mist, which, as he described, formed 'as it appeared large dome curtains which kept sailing about, opening and shutting at intervals here and there and everywhere' (*Letters*, 146). But the poet was not disappointed by these atmospheric conditions, finding in them an alternative way of seeing. He continues: 'so that although we did not see one vast wide extent of prospect all round we saw something perhaps finer—these cloud-veils opening with a dissolving motion and showing us the mountainous region beneath as through a loop hole—these Mouldy [*probably for cloudy*] loop holes ever varying and discovering fresh prospect east, west north and South' (*Letters*, 146–7). There is something characteristically Keatsian about the way the poet enjoys having his vision shaped by atmospheric conditions. Whereas Wordsworth in one mountaineering poem describes the climbing process as 'Obtaining ampler boon, at every step/Of visual sovereignty' ('Musings Near Aquapendente', ll. 39–40), Keats feels no

need to assert the power of his own eye or self over nature or the landscape beneath. As he says later in the same letter, on a mountain 'the most new thing of all is the sudden leap of the eye from the extremity of what appears a plain into so vast a distance' (*Letters*, 147). Keats's eye is tricked by the strangeness of the place it finds itself but the poet relishes this new visual experience, itself only one of a number of new sensations realised through ascent.

Wordsworth himself, of course, was similarly deprived of the experience of seeing 'one vast wide extent of prospect all round' on his two most famous mountaineering experiences, the crossing of the Alps in Book 6 of *The Prelude* and the summiting of Snowdon with which he concludes his epic autobiography. In this masterwork, Wordsworth repeatedly climbs high, but by doing so he gains insight rather than far sight. He is rarely, if indeed ever, rewarded for his 'climbing toil' with a prospect of an actual landscape, instead what he sees is an internal 'prospect'—the 'prospect' of his own mind or soul (*The Prelude*, II. 371)—and what is revealed to him is not the sublimity or beauty of the landscape but the power of his imagination. The Snowdon and Alps incidents in *The Prelude* are very well known, and need no further comment here other than to emphasise that it is specifically through the process of mountain climbing that Wordsworth learns the poem's key lessons.

Wordsworth emphasises the importance of mountaineering to his ambitious poetic project by conceiving *The Prelude* as a mountain that the reader too must climb if they are to experience the same revelation. He frequently calls upon the metaphor of mountain climbing when describing his own poetic activity, for example invoking the figure of the chamois hunter when he describes how he has 'tracked the main essential power—/Imagination—up her way sublime' (XIII. 289–90). But perhaps Wordsworth's mountaineering conception of

his poetic task is best seen in Book 3 when he announces the exciting new theme for his epic, his own inner life. He begins the passage: 'And here, O friend, have I retraced my life/Up to an eminence' and ends: 'Enough, for now into a populous plain/We must descend' (III. 168–196). By adopting such a framework of ascent and descent for the key statement of his new found epic purpose, Wordsworth illustrates the extent to which the concept as well as the activity of mountaineering structures one of the key texts of Romanticism.

IV: WORDSWORTH AND SUBLIME ELEVATION _____

As the language of many of these examples has already suggested, mountain climbing gave access to sublime objects and experiences. A change in altitude could produce a change in the self, and physical elevation could lead to spiritual elevation, ideas Wordsworth neatly encapsulates in a draft for his poem 'View from the Top of Black Comb':

Let him—who, having wandered by the side
Of Lakes and Rivers entertains a wish
By lofty place to elevate his soul
—Ascend on some clear morning to the top
Of huge Black-comb. . . /³⁵

Here mountain climbing becomes an almost instantaneous means of elevating not only the body but also the soul, a development of the discourse of the sublime that was most influentially codified by Edmund Burke in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* of 1757. It was in terms of the sublime that Wordsworth's friend Thomas Wilkinson justified a lifetime of climbing, opening his memoir *Tours to the British Mountains* of 1825 by stating 'From early life I have been an admirer of the sublime in Nature. Mountains and their accompaniments are amongst the finest specimens of the sublime. Hence, when

circumstances allowed, I availed myself of the opportunity of exploring their recesses and ascending their summits'.³⁶ For the Quaker Wilkinson, the sublimity of mountains was specifically religious; he comments that 'Mountains may be said to be among the most conspicuous and imperishable monuments of the Creator's power that we behold' (*Tours*, vi). We can find variations on this idea that mountain climbing gives access to God or the divine throughout the period, perhaps most notably in the Wanderer of Wordsworth's *The Excursion* who feels his faith 'on the tops / Of the high mountains'.³⁷

In other mountaineering accounts of the period we encounter a more secular sublime, one concerned with the power of the self rather than the Creator. In his *Remarks on Local Scenery and Manners in Scotland during the Years 1799 and 1800*, for example, the future editor of *The Times* and Hazlitt's brother-in-law to be, John Stoddart, describes standing on Ben Lomond's summit and feeling 'a degree of surprise arising almost to terror' (a pleasurable experience of terror is, of course, central to Burke's definition of the sublime). Contrary to the group mentality of many of the organised summit excursions I've discussed above, Stoddart argues that 'In such a situation, the most sublime sensations cannot be felt, unless you are alone. A single insulated being, carrying his view over these vast, inanimate masses, seems to feel himself attached to them, as it were, by a new kind of bond; his spirit dilates with magnitude, and rejoices in the beauty of the terrestrial objects'.³⁸ Here, the sublime experience of mountain climbing leads to an expansion and empowering of the self, magnified and isolated from others. Stoddart goes on to give an archetypal statement of how climbing can produce a sense of transcendence and seem to open up new modes of being:

It was a bright, lovely day, and I stood contemplating with admiration a beautiful

vale, with its glittering lake, rich woods, and numerous buildings. Gradually, a thick mist rolled, like a curtain, before it, and took away every object from my view. I was left alone, on the mountain top, far above the clouds of the vale, the sun shining full upon my head; it seemed as if I had been suddenly transported into a new state of existence, cut off from every meaner association, and invisibly united with the surrounding purity and brightness. (*Remarks*, I. 237)

Stoddart's account of his summit experience during a cloud inversion might seem like a prototypical description of the Romantic Mountaineer, paralleling Wordsworth's description of himself on Snowdon, Byron's image of Manfred on the Jungfrau, or Caspar David Friedrich's *The Wanderer in the Mist*. Loss of bodily vision becomes revelation and corporeal ascending becomes disembodied ascension as Stoddart achieves transcendence, rising above the physical earth and every-day care into an otherworldly state of 'purity and brightness'. As a result, Stoddart's self-representation might seem an example of the power and gender politics inherent within Romanticism and mountaineering, both of which have been accused of a self-glorifying elevation of the male protagonist over Nature, the feminine, and the everyday.

In response to such arguments, I want to argue that many writers of this period were already aware of the symbolic politics of climbing high, and that they were themselves engaged in debating mountaineering's moral and ethical dimensions. There are many examples that could be looked at in relation to these issues, including Keats's resistance to the rhetoric of the sublime or Byron's use of the Chamois Hunter in *Manfred* to interrogate his own earlier representation of the Napoleonic individual 'who ascends to mountain-tops' in Childe Harold III (*CPW*, II. 117) (the dialogue between Manfred and the Chamois Hunter

stages a dramatic confrontation between the two different kinds of mountaineer I outlined in this essay's opening). But here I wish to focus on Wordsworth, the poet most frequently cited as the major exponent of the Romantic conquest of Nature but who I think actually provides the most sustained examination of the politics of mountaineering throughout his career.

At times in Wordsworth's poetry mountain climbing can certainly produce the self-elevation and empowering vision that we saw in Stoddart. As mentioned above, in the relatively late poem 'Musings near Aquapendente. April, 1837', Wordsworth describes climbing Helvellyn as a process of 'Obtaining ampler boon, at every step / Of visual sovereignty' (ll. 39–40). Here, ascending grants a form of dominion over all that the poet surveys, and elsewhere Wordsworth links the power of elevated vision with more explicitly political forms of power. A particularly important mountain for Wordsworth was Black Combe, at the very Southern end of the Lake District, which he climbed in 1811 and which he considered gave the fullest view of Britain, as he states in the opening of his 'View from the Top of Black Comb':

This Height a minist'ring Angel might select:
It is a spot from which the amplest range
Of unobstructed prospect may be seen
That British ground commands: (ll. 1–4
[*Shorter Poems*, 99])

Black Combe's summit was significant for Wordsworth because on a clear day it provided a view of all four countries of the United Kingdom, its prospect offering a visual equivalence to what the poet hopes will be a united nation at a time when Great Britain is at war with France. Wordsworth ends the poem by combining the mountain tropes of prospect and revelation to emphasise this geographical expression of Britain's national identity.

Of Nature's works
In earth and air and earth-embracing Sea

A revelation infinite it seems,
Display august of man's inheritance,
Of Britain's calm felicity and power. (ll. 18–22)

Here a view becomes symbolic of national power, and there are other instances in the period when climbing a mountain becomes a performance of national identity, as when Wordsworth, Southey and their two families celebrated the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 with a party on top of Skiddaw.

At other times in Wordsworth's poetry, however, it is the mountain that retains power, even once it has been climbed. In 'To ———, On Her First Ascent to the Summit of Helvellyn' of 1816, Wordsworth celebrates the feelings of awe, delight and amazement that the unnamed climber experiences when gazing from 'the watch-towers of Helvellyn' (ll. 3–4 [*Shorter Poems*, 221–2]). While the poem beautifully captures the euphoria that reaching a summit can produce, it resists any sense that summiting may be a triumph or a conquest, instead emphasising a recognition of what in the final stanza the poet terms 'the power of hills':

For the power of hills is on thee,
As was witnessed through thine eye
Then, when old Helvellyn won thee
To confess their majesty! (ll. 33–6)

Here it is the hills that reign sovereign over the eye, which can only pay its tribute. Similarly, in a poem that has been the subject of much critical scrutiny, 'Written with a Slate pencil, on a Stone, on the Side of the Mountain of Black Comb', Wordsworth shows how an attempt to impose a cartographic understanding on the mountain meets with failure.³⁹

Wordsworth's most critical interrogation of mountaineering tropes comes in the opening to his poem of 1817, 'To the Same', one of the 'Odes to Lycoris'. In this work, Wordsworth strikingly captures how the changes in visual perspective achieved by ascending can alter the individual's relationship with the world he or

she has risen above. But here the poet is critical of the sense of elevation above, and distance from, everyday care that can come with altitude:

Enough of climbing toil! —Ambition treads
Here, as mid busier scenes, ground steep
and rough,
Or slippery even to peril! and each step,
As we for most uncertain recompense
Mount tow'rd the empire of the fickle clouds,
Each weary step, dwarfing the world below,
Induces, for its old familiar sights,
Unacceptable feelings of contempt,
With wonder mixed—that Man could e'er
be tied,
In anxious bondage, to such nice array
And formal fellowship of petty things!
—Oh! 'tis the *heart* that magnifies this life,
Making a truth and beauty of her own;
And moss-grown alleys, circumscribing
shades,
And gurgling rills, assist her in the work
More efficaciously than realms outspread,
As in a map, before the adventurer's gaze—
Ocean and Earth contending for regard.
(ll. 1- 18 [*Shorter Poems* 253–4])

Wordsworth offers a striking alternative to the 'egotistical sublime' with which Keats famously associated him (*Letters*, 157), rejecting the 'visual sovereignty' of mountain top prospects and arguing that climbing produces 'unacceptable feelings of contempt' (my emphasis) for the world that the climber has risen above. He implies that the gaining of an elevated position is an attempt to control and subordinate landscape akin to map reading. 'Adventurer' is a word Wordsworth frequently used for Napoleon, so there is a suggestion here that summiting and map making are attempts to conquer nature, part of, or akin to, an inherently imperial or colonial project.⁴⁰ In place of this rejected sublime often seen to characterise 'masculine Romanticism', Wordsworth embraces the heart, aligning it

with the feminine and the beautiful—'tis the *heart* that magnifies this life,/Making a truth and beauty of her own'. Whereas the changing perspectives produced by ascent result in a diminishing or shrinking of the perceived landscape and the sense of the everyday, the heart 'magnifies this life', making possible what the poet presents as a proper appreciation of truth and beauty. In these lines, one of mountaineering's earliest practitioners offers a powerful critique of the potential gender and power politics of this emerging activity.

V: COLERIDGE AND THE JOYS OF ASCENT _____

So far I have discussed Romantic mountaineering in what might be described as Romantic terms, focussing on issues of vision, insight, elevation, revelation and transcendence. In the final section of this essay, however, I want to stress the importance of climbing as an embodied activity and one whose excitements and satisfactions are linked to a sense of danger or fear that goes beyond Burke's notion that terror can be pleasurable only if experienced from a position of safety.

Nearly all mountaineering writing of the period stresses what Wordsworth terms 'climbing toil', the physical effort required to reach the top (the main exception here is Byron, whose heroes' summit positions are symbolic rather than the result of physical labour). Keats, for example, gives an amusing evocation of the exertions required to summit Ben Nevis, writing to Tom that:

I have said nothing yet of out [*for our*]
getting on among the loose stones large and
small sometimes on two sometimes on three,
sometimes four legs—sometimes two and
stick, sometimes three and stick, then four
again, then two < , > then a jump, so that we
kept on ringing changes on foot, hand, Stick,

jump bogg| < e > , s[t]umble, foot, hand,
foot, (very gingerly) stick again, and then
again a game at all fours. (*Letters*, 147)

The staccato rhythms of Keats's prose enacts the awkwardness of his movement on the mountain; for him, climbing was not a physically enjoyable experience, as is obvious from the conclusion of his account: 'I felt it horribly—'T was the most vile descent—shook me all to pieces' (*Letters*, 148). For other climbers—perhaps fitter, more experienced, and in better health than Keats, who was suffering from a sore throat at the time of his climb—the physical demands of mountaineering were integral to the fulfilment it offered. Wordsworth has a wonderfully rich vocabulary for his movement in the mountains, an environment in which he hurries, plods, toils, climbs, clambers and scrambles, bounds like the roe, pants with an eager pace, hangs 'by knots of grass/and half-inch fissures in the slippery rock', or 'greedy in the chase', roams 'from hill to hill, from rock to rock, / Still craving combinations of new forms' (*The Prelude*, l. 342–3; XI.190–1). Yet for no-one was this pleasure in the kinds of movement demanded by a mountain environment as important as it was for Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose notebooks and letters exude a captivating pleasure in ascending and descending, seen in his account of his crossing of the Helvellyn ridge from Keswick to Grasmere in August 1800: 'the evening now lating, I had resolved to pass [the top]; but Nature twitched me at my heart strings—I ascended it— thanks to her'.⁴¹ Coleridge registers his frequent changes of altitude with a joyful relish, noting of his tour up Saddleback earlier the same month that [I] 'mount & mount & mount, the vale now fronting me as I stand . . . —ascend again & again leave the precipices & tents behind me, descend Northward, and ascend, & thence see the Tarn' (*Notebooks*, i. 784). While Keats suffers repeatedly from that demoralising curse

of novice climbers, the false summit—the mistaken belief that the next peak is the mountain top, only to discover another one beyond it, and another beyond that, seemingly *ad infinitum*—Coleridge seeks out extra summits to climb; on his high-level walk from Keswick to Grasmere, for example, he retraces his tracks by three furlongs because he is 'determined to wind up to the very top' (*Notebooks*, i. 798). Moreover, writing as he climbs, Coleridge's notebook form enables him to capture the immediacy of his elation on reaching the summit: 'I went, my face still toward Wasdale, Ennerdale, Buttermere, &c till I reached the very top, then, & not till then turned my face, and beheld (O Joy for me!) Patterdale and Ulswater' (*Notebooks*, i. 798). 'Joy' is, of course, a key word in Coleridge's thinking and writing and it is an emotion that he felt and articulated most strongly in the mountains.

Like Keats, Coleridge registers the bodily effects of climbing, but he does so with a satisfied curiosity: 'descended / as I bounded down, noticing the moving stones under the soft moss, hurting my feet' (*Notebooks*, i. 798). As this comment might suggest, Coleridge's engagement with mountain climbing was one that embraced its potential hazards. A feeling of exhilaration is common in Romantic-period accounts of climbing; Keats, for example, describes how on Skiddaw 'All [of his party] felt on arising into the cold air, that same elevation, which a cold bath gives one—I felt as If I were going to a Tournament' (*Letters*, 108), while a sense of the peril of mountain environments is central to a real understanding of Wordsworth's education 'by beauty and by fear' in *The Prelude* (l. 306). But Coleridge comes increasingly to search out risk for its own sake on the mountains and, in the process, to understand his reasons for doing so.

Coleridge thrilled in the sublimity of mountain landscapes, particularly relishing the sensation of looking down from a height into

voids and chasms. On the top of Scafell, for example, he exclaims:

But O! what a look down just under my Feet! The frightfullest Cove that might ever be seen / huge perpendicular Precipices, and one Sheep upon it's only Ledge, that surely must be crag! . . . Just by it & joining together, rise two huge Pillars of bare lead-colored stone . . . their height & depth is terrible. (*Collected Letters*, ii. 840)

For Coleridge, the sublime wasn't experienced from a place of safety, as recommended by Burke. He knew that the Lake District cliffs and precipices that he loved exploring were dangerous. In his notebook account of his 1799 tour he recalls how 'A little beyond Scale Force a man, named Jerome Bowman, slipped, broke his leg, & crawled on his hands & knees up & down Hill 3 miles to that Cottage in Sycamores . . . he died soon after, his Wounds festering' (*Notebooks*, i. 540). Coleridge himself had near death experiences on several occasions, describing how he 'almost broke my neck' when descending Carrock Fell in October 1800 (*Notebooks*, i. 828). By August 1802 the poet was courting the risk inherent in such descents, as his famous account of his scramble off the summit of Scafell via Broad Stand illustrates. Choosing a descent route at random (a practise he described as 'one sort of Gambling' to which he had become 'much addicted' [*Collected Letters*, ii. 841]), Coleridge found himself dropping from ledge to ledge until he reached a point where he estimated the drop was 'twice my own height, & the Ledge at the bottom was [so] exceedingly narrow, that if I dropt down upon it I must of necessity have fallen backward & of course killed myself' (*Notebooks*, ii. 842). At this point, his limbs all in a tremble, Coleridge lay on his back 'in a state of almost prophetic Trance & Delight', before eventually identifying a route down.

By the end of August 1802, Coleridge was reflecting on his perilous mountaineering adventures and starting to articulate their role for him. Writing to Sara Hutchinson, he describes an ascent of the waterfall Moss Force near Buttermere:

[I] climbed up by the waterfall as near as I could, to the very top of the Fell—but it was so craggy—the Craggs covered with spongy soaky Moss, and when bare so jagged as to wound one's hands fearfully—and the Gusts came so very sudden & strong, that the going up was slow, & difficult & earnest—and the coming down, not only all that, but likewise extremely dangerous. However, I have always found this *stretched & anxious* state of mind favourable to depth of pleasurable Impression, in the resting Places & *lownding* Coves. (*Collected Letters*, ii. 853)

The physical danger of mountain climbing intensified Coleridge's relationship with the world around him once he had returned to a place of safety. It is this sense of increasing what he terms 'the Intensity of the feeling of Life' that lies at the centre of Coleridge's greatest statement of his mountaineering identity and activity, written in January 1803:

In simple earnest, I never find myself alone within the embracement of rocks & hills, a traveller up an alpine road, but my spirit courses, drives, and eddies, like a Leaf in Autumn: a wild activity, of thoughts, imaginations, feelings, and impulses of motion, rises up from within me—a sort of *bottom-wind*, that blows to no point of the compass, & comes from I know not whence, but agitates the whole of me; my whole Being is filled with waves, as it were, that roll & stumble, one this way, & one that way, like things that have no common master. I think, that my soul must have pre-existed in the body of a Chamois-chaser; the simple

image of the old object has been obliterated—but the feelings, & impulsive habits, & incipient actions, are in me, & the old scenery awakens them. The farther I ascend from animated Nature, from men, and cattle, & the common birds of the woods, & fields, the greater becomes in me the Intensity of the feeling of Life . . . (*Collected Letters*, ii. 916)

The pleasures of mountaineering, as Coleridge here identifies, come from its combination of the intellectual, imaginative, emotional and physical. In seeing himself as a chamois hunter reincarnated, Coleridge illustrates how the role of mountaineer that he was himself inventing offered him a coherent and satisfying identity. Yet if this letter finds the mountaineering role a fulfilling one, it was not a role which could be sustained, given Coleridge's economic and domestic responsibilities. Moreover, we can also detect less positive elements to the role's attractions at other points in Coleridge's writing, as when he muses in his notebooks in August 1802 as follows:

A gentle Madman that would wander still
over the Mountains by the lonely Tairns
< Lakes > —the like never seen since the
crazy Shepherd, who having lost almost all
his sheep in a long hard snow was repulsed
or thought himself treated coldly by his
Sweet-heart—& so went a wanderer seeking
his Sheep for ever/ in storm & snow
especially. (*Notebooks*, i. 1214)

Whether Coleridge is writing some form of autobiography or the plan for another poem is unclear, but this entry presents an alternative version of the mountaineer to the purposeful figure of the chamois hunter. Here the mountaineer is an outcast, an Ancient Mariner-like figure who has lost both his economic role and his relationship to other humans. Rather than an activity through which one realises life in all its intensity,

mountaineering becomes a form of escapism for one who has lost not only a meaningful place in the world but also his mind. Like Wordsworth's climbing poetry, Coleridge's notebook entry illustrates that even as mountaineering was being invented it was seen as a deeply ambivalent pursuit, embracing life while simultaneously fleeing from it; an ambivalence that has persisted in the way the activity has continued to be perceived over the past two centuries.

In Coleridge we have, if not the first, then certainly one of the most important British pioneers of both mountaineering and mountaineering literature, a form of writing that has now become a genre in itself. Unlike Wordsworth, who was able to incorporate mountaineering within his own vocational identity, Coleridge found it impossible to reconcile his activities as a mountaineer with his professional life. Similarly, he was unable to use the materials in his prose mountaineering writing as the basis for a major poem, as he had planned. But in his wonderful notebooks and letters, we now recognise the outstanding writings of the first age of mountaineering, the greatest articulation of an activity which was integral not only to the history but also to the literature of the Romantic period.

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NOTES _____

1. *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (6 vols, Oxford, 1956–71), ii. 848.
2. 'Mountaineer, v.', *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Third edition, April 2010; online version November 2010. < <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/239553> > ; accessed 14 February 2011.
3. 'Mountaineer, n and adj', *OED Online*, < <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/122896> > ; accessed 14 February 2011. The *OED's* examples for the latter definition, dating from 1860 and after, are much later than those I discuss here.

4. Joseph Budworth, *A Fortnight's Ramble to the Lakes* (London, 1792), 159.
5. Joseph Budworth, *A Fortnight's Ramble to the Lakes*, 3rd edn (London, 1810), 266.
6. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York and London, 1979), 202. Unless otherwise stated, all further references are to the 1805 *Prelude* and are cited by book and line number within parenthesis in the text.
7. 'Musings Near Aquapendente. April 1837', *Sonnets Series and Itinerary Poems, 1820–1845*, ed. Geoffrey Jackson (Ithaca and London, 2004), 742.
8. The major study of the change in the aesthetic response to mountains is Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, New York, 1959). For an excellent wide-ranging analysis of the culture of mountains and mountaineering, see Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (London, 2004).
9. Molly Lefebure, 'The First of the Fellwalkers', *Cumberland Heritage* (London, 1970), 131–47. See also William Ruddick, "'As much diversity as the heart that trembles": Coleridge's notes on the Lakeland fells', in *Coleridge's Imagination: Essays in Memory of Pete Laver*, ed. Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn and Nicholas Roe (Cambridge, 1985), 88–101.
10. Percy Shelley, *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, corr. G. M. Matthews (Oxford, 1970), 34.
11. John Keats, *Letters of John Keats, A New Selection*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford, 1970), 83.
12. Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (7 vols, Oxford, 1980–1993), i. 47.
13. See John Clubbe, 'Byron in the Alps: The Journal of John Cam Hobhouse 17–29 September 1816', in John Clubbe and Ernest Giddey, *Byron et la Suisse: Deux Études* (Genève, 1982), 24–6.
14. John Auldjo, *Narrative of an Ascent to the Summit of Mont Blanc* (London, 1830), 12–18, 40, 109.
15. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman and Harold Bloom (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, 2008), 511.
16. Simon Thompson, *Unjustifiable Risk? The Story of British Climbing* (Milnthorpe, 2010), 18. For William Bingley's extended account of his climb, see his *North Wales; including its Scenery, Antiquities, Customs* (2 vols, London, 1804), i. 248–50. For an early non-botanic, scientific ascent, see Nevil Maskelyne, 'An Account of Observations made on the Mountain Schehallien for finding its attraction . . . Read at the Royal Society, July 6, 1775' (London, 1776).
17. See Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque* (Stanford, California, 1989), 61. Andrews shows surprisingly little interest in the developing enthusiasm for ascending.
18. Thomas West, *A Guide to the Lakes* (London, 1778), 6.
19. For earlier ascents see Grevel Lindop, *A Literary Guide to the Lake District* (Wilmslow, 2005), 145–146.
20. James Plumptre, *The Lakers: A Comic Opera* (London, 1798), 27.
21. See Budworth, 1810, 269.
22. Edward Baines, *A Companion to the Lakes*, 3rd edn (London, 1834), v.
23. James Denholm, *A Tour to the Principal Scotch and English Lakes* (Glasgow, 1804), 39.
24. John MacCulloch, *The Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland* (London, 1824), 323.
25. Joseph Cradock, *Letters from Snowdon* (London, 1770), 55.
26. Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Wales, 1773* (London, 1798), 89.
27. William Bingley, *A Tour Round North Wales, performed during the Summer of 1798* (2 vols, London, 1800), i. 216–249; i. 245.
28. William Hutton, *Remarks upon North Wales* (Birmingham, 1803), 54.
29. Jonathan Simon, 'Taking Risks: Extreme Sports and the Embrace of Risk in Advanced Liberal Societies', in Tom Baker and Jonathan Simon (eds.), *Embracing Risk: The Changing Culture of Insurance and Responsibility* (Chicago, 2002), pp. 177–208.
30. M.R., 'Four Days' Ramble in the Neighbourhood of Bangor, North Wales', *The Kaleidoscope*, ix (30 September 1828), 102.
31. See, for example, Paul Hawkins Fisher, *A Three Weeks Tour into Wales, 1817* (Stroud, 1818), 36.
32. William Wordsworth, *Guide to the Lakes*, ed. by Ernest de Sélincourt with a preface by Stephen Gill (London, 2004), 111.
33. For a more detailed account of this issue, see my 'Reframing Nature: The visual experience of early

- mountaineering' in Ian Heywood & Barry Sandywell, *Handbook of Visual Culture* (Oxford, 2012), 220–34.
34. On this general point, see Macfarlane, 143–4.
35. William Wordsworth, *Shorter Poems, 1807–1820*, ed. Carl H. Ketcham (Ithaca and London, 1989), 347.
36. Thomas Wilkinson, *Tours to the British Mountains* (London, 1824), v.
37. William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca and London, 2007), Book I, lines 215–248.
38. John Stoddart, *Remarks on Local Scenery and Manners in Scotland during the Years 1799 and 1800* (2 vols, London, 1801), i. 236.
39. See Michael Wiley, *Romantic Geography: Wordsworth and Anglo-European Spaces* (London, Macmillan, 1998), 1–17, 143–176; John Wyatt, 'Wordsworth's Black Combe Poems: The Pastoral and the Geographer's Eye', *Signatures*, 3 (2001), 1–20; Ron Broglio, 'Mapping British Earth and Sky', *Wordsworth Circle*, 33.2 (2002), 70–77; Rachel Hewitt, *Map of a Nation: A Biography of the Ordnance Survey* (London, 2010), 201–2.
40. See, for example, 'Look now on that Adventurer', *Shorter Poems*, 55.
41. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (3 double vols, London, 1957–73), i. entry 798. References to the notebooks are cited by volume and entry number.