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More than Mounts the Eye: Coleridge, Byron, De Quincey

Marc PORÉE*

RÉSUMÉ

Le premier pan de cet article est consacré à une lecture de "Hymn Before Sun-rise, in the vale of Chamouni" (1802), de S.T. Coleridge, poème composé non pas d'après nature, comme tant d'autres paysages de montagnes romantiques, mais sur le Scafell, montagne anglaise de la région des Lacs. Gêné par la disproportion trop voyante qui existait entre ses sentiments exaltés et "nos humbles montagnes", Coleridge reniait ces dernières et leur préférait la récréation imaginaire du Mont Blanc sublime. Thomas De Quincey fait le cheminement inverse dans *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* (1838-1840), lorsqu'il affirme que ces "humbles montagnes", peuplées de montagnards humbles mais d'une grande force morale, bien qu'ayant la préférence de Wordsworth, méritent toute l'attention critique possible.

Les deux parties devraient converger autour de la question suivante : pourquoi les romantiques de la première génération ont-ils dû de façon répétée repousser les accusations de modération et d'esprit de clocher, quand il n'était que trop évident de voir que le rang éminent de leurs productions dépassait de loin la prétendue "humilité" de leur cadre indigène ?

Keywords: Coleridge, Byron, De Quincey, Mont-Blanc, Romanticism

Ranging from the building down of the "humble" mountains of the Lake District to its eventual building up at the hands of romantic writers, my paper will address the issue of the relativity of our ideas of what constitutes humility (or greatness) in mountains, and, more essentially, to the artistic and ideological significance of "introducing Alpine scenery" within the scope of a poem, a play and an essay whose explicit purpose it is to configure a "landscape"—a mountscape, for that matter—, in full awareness of some of the pitfalls attending the rhetorical or discursive construction of loftiness and grandeur. Originating in the dismissal, by Coleridge, of home-grown Sca Fell, and the subsequent promotion of "Mont Blanc", my paper will end with an aesthetic and political reassessment of the Lakes by Thomas De Quincey, using Byron's twofold evocation of the Alps (both in his *Alpine Journal* and in *Manfred*, composed in the early months of his Continental exile) as yet another manifestation of his aristocratic detestation of English parochialism. It should be noted that the mountains evoked here can be said to function more or less in the guise of a *trompe l'oeil*, since, very much like the French proverbial train, each of them hides another one behind it, making of their inclusion in this paper a triple case of more than meets/mounts the eye.¹

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¹ Works of reference:

Coleridge's *Poetry and Prose*, selected and edited by Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimond Modiano (New York, London : Norton & Company, 2004).

Lord Byron, *Selected Poems*, edited with a preface by Susan J. Wolfson and Peter J. Manning (London : Penguin Classics, 1996).

---, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, edited by Leslie A. Marchand, Volume 5 1816-1817 (London : John Murray, 1976).

In an article entitled "scapeland", Jean-François Lyotard argues that a landscape can only be known emotionally in function of another, previously experienced landscape. "One would be entitled to speak of a landscape every time the mind displaced or deported itself ("se déporterait", in the original) from a sensible matter to another while maintaining in the latter the sensorial organization² suited for the former, or at least the memory thereof".³ The Earth as seen from the Moon by an inhabitant of the Earth, is the example Lyotard gives to substantiate his point. To which he adds: "Dépayement would be a prerequisite of landscape". By drawing a line between landscape and location, or site, Lyotard endeavours to characterize the corporal experience that landscapes suppose: whereas location, since the days of Aristotle, has invariably been linked to the idea of destination, "the privilege of deserts, mountains and plains, ruins, oceans, skies in landscapism" resides in that they appear to be "indestinés d'office" (un, or non-destined to be a place of destination), therefore "dépayants". Whereas I can live and move around in a location, I cannot walk in a landscape. Place or location is what anchors me within space together as it informs it, whereas landscape supposes that you exit the place or location, the better to contemplate it from a certain vantage point. Location is therefore natural to me—now, "pour être passible de paysage, il me faut rendre impassible au lieu", (in order to allow landscape to pass into me, I ought to make myself impervious, or impassive, to place). Location would be the place which holds me together ("ce dans quoi je tiens"), as opposed to landscape which would suppose "la fuite d'un point de tenue" (the slipping of whatever foothold I may have gained). I can never enter a landscape but I merely contemplate from afar all the places on which I might be standing provided I was to make a move.

Likewise, in Coleridge's "Hymn Before Sun-rise, in the vale of Chamouny" (1802), the landscape around Mont Blanc was known to the poet by way of reference to another, less lofty, mountain, which he had experienced emotionally:

Has thou a charm to stay the Morning-Star
 In his steep course? So long he seems to pause
 On thy bald awful head, O Sovran Blanc!
 The Arve and Arveiron at thy base
 Rave ceaselessly; but thou, most awful Form!
 Risest from forth thy silent Sea of Pines,
 How silently! Around thee and above
 Deep is the air and dark, substantial, black,
 An ebon mass: methinks thou piercest it,
 As with a wedge! But when I look again,
 It is thine own calm home, thy crystal shrine,
 Thy habitation from eternity!
 O dread and silent Mount! I gaz'd upon thee,
 Till thou, still present to the bodily sense,
 Did'st vanish from thy thought: entranc'd in prayer
 I worshipp'd the Invisible alone.

Yet, like some sweet beguiling melody,

Thomas de Quincey, *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, edited with an introduction by David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970).

² It is worth noting that landscape specialists, such as Alain Roger or Augustin Berque, would no doubt claim that the "sensorial organization" Lyotard has in mind results from such a structuration of the vision of nature as informed by cultural models.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, "Scapeland", *L'inhumain* (Paris: Galilée, 1988). Quoted by Céline Flécheux, "La Vague est-elle un paysage?", *Le Paysage et la question du sublime*, Chrystèle Burgard, Baldine Saint-Girons (Musée de Valence: Arac/Réunion des Musées nationaux, 1997) 140-142.

So sweet, we know not we are listening to it,
 Thou, the meanwhile, wast blending with my Thought,
 Yea, with my Life and Life's own secret Joy:
 Till the dilating Soul, enrapt, transfus'd,
 Into the mighty Vision passing—there
 As in her natural form, swell'd vast to Heaven! (ll. 1-23, 195-196).

Behind the alleged object of the poet's reverence,⁴ stands another peak, Sca Fell in the Lake District on which Coleridge had stood in rapture and ecstasy. The former culminates at 4807 metres, the latter, albeit the highest summit in England, falls just short of the one thousand meter limit. Altitude takes pride of place and conclusions are easily drawn. Embarrassed by the all too conspicuous disproportion between his exalted feelings of devotion and "our humble mountains" where they originated, Coleridge disowned the latter in favour of an imaginary recreation of the proudly sublime Mont Blanc.⁵ And yet it was on Sca Fell, and not in the vale of Chamonix, that those lofty thoughts were prompted to Coleridge. There that sublimity, in the sense given to the word by Longinus ("haut-dire"), originated and was given free vent. There and then that the first lines of the poem flowed from wherever poetic lines flow, the poem finally emerging a few months after the actual sojourn in the Lakes. Is one to understand that the English mountain, to which a French one was preferred, was suppressed in view of its humbleness—which reads almost like an act of geological, or should one say, geopolitical, discrimination? Indeed, it appears that Sca Fell was deemed inferior or unworthy by mountainous standards, and was disqualified on the grounds of its shameful lack of eminence. It was literally removed, and symbolically erased from the picture—conjured away, it might be argued, in view of the reference, in the opening line of the poem, to "charm", to magic, to tricks and sleight-of-hands performed by powerful conjurors. Sca Fell fell through, or out of the poem. So humble a mountain was not up to the task of eliciting sublime emotions in the breast of a poet. No poet in his right mind, and that is the other side of the argument, could openly confess to having been aroused to that sublime extremity by a most average and, what's more, indigenous height: aye, there lay the rub of the gross imbalance that Coleridge, forever fearing to be ridiculed, could not afford to take on. It is to be feared that he bowed before the unwritten demands made by the doxa of his time and age, that insisted on locating the sublime somewhere in continental Europe—an inferiority complex largely interiorized by the Lakist Poets, who have always had to fight off accusations of moderation, temperateness and parochialism, and lay themselves open to the scathing critique of Byron, who felt so incensed by the "narrowness" of their world view that it made him wish they'd change their "lakes for ocean"⁶—their hills for mountains, it might pointedly be added.

Compounding the matter still further, is a nagging problem of mis-appropriation. Shortly after composing the first enthusiastic draft, Coleridge came across a poem of 1791 in the German language, "Chamounix beym Sonnenaufgange", by a Swiss poet called Frederique Brun. The twenty-line poem was written in stanzas, which means that Coleridge expanded

⁴ The final line of the poem, "Earth, with her thousand voices, praises God" is the gospel, the piece of good news, that it is out to broadcast. It also marks the climax of an end-oriented text, which sees teleology fall in line with theology. In the words of T. Weiskel, "all versions of the sublime require a credible god-term", *The Romantic Sublime*, John Hopkins UP, 1976, 243.

⁵ "I involuntarily poured forth a Hymn in the manner of the Psalms, tho' afterwards I thought the ideas &c. disproportionate to our humble mountains—& accidentally lighting on a short Note in some Swiss poems, concerning the vale of Chamouny, & its Mountain, I transferred myself thither, in the Spirit, adapted my former feelings to these grander external objects." Letter to William Sotheby, September 10, 1802.

⁶ Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, edited by G. Steffan, E. Steffan, W. Pratt (London : Penguin Classics, 1986) "Dedication", stanza 5, 42.

upon it considerably, besides choosing a different form altogether, closer to Milton, Thompson and the Psalms. To say this only partly answers the question as to whether this potentially shallow dimension of derivativeness diminishes its achievement as a poem. It might be argued that Coleridge was merely borrowing circumstantial evidence, a mountain of ready-made facts, a geographical framework, a channel or conduit through which to pour his home-grown feelings, so as to erect a "shrine" in which his initial inspiration would not only be wholly (holily? holistically?) preserved, but also dramatically heightened, the implication being that to avail oneself of a greater, vaster mouthpiece, further broadens the polyphonic impact of those "thousand voices" of Earth that rise in praise of God.

A far less generous construction was put forward by De Quincey. He was the first to insinuate that Coleridge was a *Voleur de mots*,⁷ having used Brun's poem with an eye to deceiving.⁸ "Hymn Before Sun-rise, in the vale of Chamouny" is the first of a long list of blatant instances of plagiarisms which he painstakingly took stock of, under the fallaciously humble pretext of clearing the reputation and praising the memory of Coleridge, the freshly deceased poet. In all fairness to Coleridge, the only proper way to tackle his poem is to state the obvious: since Coleridge, unlike Shelley,⁹ never went to Chamonix, the hymn is first and foremost a powerful vindication of imagination, the romantic faculty *par excellence*, to which its sings a paean. If Romanticism can be defined as "recovery of projection" in the words of Harold Bloom, some of that recovery must needs concern the force of projection itself. By way of a poetic transfer (Alpine Transfer), Coleridge takes a great leap forward and makes the world of visionary imagination come true, as it were. And even if he deplors a few lapses suffered en route, in the wake of the *dépaysement*,¹⁰ he stands by his original habit and state of mind. Half-creating, half-perceiving with this mind's eye an entity he never saw, again giving the lie to the painstakingly vivid evocation of the vale of Chamouny that preceded the first publication of the poem,¹¹ Coleridge is not above producing the very image of abstraction, only intermittently present, one that doubles itself in time and space (a mountain of ebony, prior to a mountain of crystal), one that dematerializes into nothingness shortly after being conjured forth: its perceptual regime (its "sensorial organization", in the words of Lyotard) is a curious mix of presence to the bodily senses and absence to the mind: "Till" (...) "entranc'd in prayer/ I worshipp'd the Invisible alone".¹² Barely meeting its own eye, the I of the speaker-gazer is

⁷ Michel Schneider, *Voleur de mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

⁸ Angela Esterhammer has established that Coleridge's poem differs from Byron's in a particularly significant way: where in Byron's poem the "landscape responds to the human subject of its own accord", it remains in Coleridge's text, a "mere echo of what the poet's 'busier mind' and 'active will' bestows," *The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001) 172.

⁹ Shelley visited Chamonix, and his poem, "Mont Blanc, Lines Written in the vale of Chamouni" (July-August 1816) constitutes a vibrant response to Coleridge. Confer, too, his letters to Thomas Love Peacock: "One would think that Mont Blanc was a living being, and that the frozen blood forever circulated slowly through his stony veins", quoted by Duncan Wu, editor of *Romanticism, an Anthology* (Blackwell, 1994) 816.

¹⁰ "I had written a much finer line when Sca' Fell was in my Thought—viz—O blacker than the Darkness all the Night", letter to Sir George Beaumont that included a copy of the poem, with specific reference to line 30: "O struggling with the Darkness all the night" (196).

¹¹ Let me just quote the final sentence of the long head note of 1802, appended to the poem in the original version published in *The Morning Post*: "If any readers of *The Morning Post* have visited this vale in their journeys among the Alps, I am confident that they will not find the sentiments and feelings expressed, or attempted to be expressed, in the following poem, extravagant". The very timing and pace of the peroration, with its deliberate retarding of the word "extravagant" amounts to as insincere a confession as can be. Quoted by Duncan Wu, *Romanticism, an Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 558.

¹² There is a passage from De Quincey's *Confessions*, in which, beholding from afar the town of Liverpool, and seeing it vanish into thin air, he willingly lays himself open to accusations of "Behmenism, quietism,

virtually expelled from his own poem by the piercing stare¹³ ("thou piercest it", l. 9) of the mountain's "wedge"—quite the instrument of a humble woodfeller, incidentally.

Bearing in mind Lyotard's earlier distinction, "Hymn before Sunrise" is a fine instance of the displacement, the re-orientation of a poet's sensorial organization, one that does justice to it, not simply by elevating it, but by reallocating it to the task of constructing a landscape, which means lifting it beyond and above the contingency of the here and now. Sea Fell vanishes into the blankness of vaguely anthropomorphic "sovrán *Blanc*", the man-mountain, or it the other way round, what with its "bald awful head", its "feet" and "breast", that seem to hark back to the Dinocratic tradition of the mountain colossus (and forward to Mount Rushmore, if I may)?¹⁴ *Blanc*, after the colour of no colour, or is it the colour of all colours, the colour of atheism, or the colour of God in the devotional eyes of Coleridge? Anonymous *Blanc*, stripped of its Mount, invisible, otherwise unnameable (call Him *Blanc*), whose being is at one with its dwelling, its own calm home, "thy habitation from eternity!"—a privilege granted to no other being, since there is no other being in the landscape of the poem, besides garlands of flowers.¹⁵ *Blanc*, an easily broken code name for God, the only true Sovrán, whose presence-absence massively suffuses a poem clearly modelled on the mightily resounding cadences of the Psalms.¹⁶

Wordsworth took issue with some sections of the poem on the ground that their rhetoric was inflated and blown out of proportion. In a letter to an unknown correspondent that may date from November 1819, Coleridge wrote: "Mr. Wordsworth, I remember, censured the passage as strained and unnatural, and condemned the Hymn *in toto* *** as a specimen of the Mock Sublime" (196). Wordsworth was referring to line 23 in particular: "there/As in her natural form, swell'd vast to Heaven", and it is indeed vital for the sake of of the topic of mountains that the charge be examined in depth. I tend to view the run-on line as a sweeping sign of the ease with which Coleridge conducts his celebration of that which, in the mountain itself, acts as a force of dilatation. I'm availing myself here of Jean-Louis Chrétien's recent essay on *Spacious Joy*, which has at least two sections on Anglo-Saxon writers (Thomas Traherne, Walt Whitman), on top of such obvious candidates as Psalm CXVIII, Hugo and Claudel.¹⁷ Quoting Whitman's "I chant the chant of dilatation and pride", Chrétien begins by

&c." *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Grevel Lindop (Oxford : Oxford UP, 1985, 1996) 48. It could very well serve as a commentary upon Coleridge's poem, and the thoughts expressed in the November 1819 letter: "From my very childhood I have been accustomed to abstract and as it were to unrealize whatever of more than common interest my eyes dwelt on; and than by a sort of transfusion and transmission of my consciousness to identify myself with the Object" (196).

¹³ Speaking about the perceptive revolution brought about by the early photographs of mountains, by Aimé Civiale or Charles Soulier, Alain Roger writes: "jamais le verbe *percevoir* n'a pris un sens aussi actif, aussi aigu: *percer pour voir*", Alain Roger, *Court Traité du Paysage* (Paris : Gallimard, 1997) 98.

¹⁴ Confer Simon Schama's chapter on "Dinocrates and the Shaman", in *Landscape and Memory* (London : Harper Collins, 1995) 401-410. Dinocrates was a Greek architect with hubristic claims who wanted to carve Mount Athos "into the figure of statue of a man", the implication being, not every man, but the king himself, Alexander the Great. Hence Coleridge's overt reference to the Sovereign, which works on many different levels of understanding, not forgetting Hobbes's vision of the Leviathan.

¹⁵ The only presence, besides that of the gazer, is that of a flower, the greater gentian, to which an entire headnote is devoted, also purloined from Brun's notes to her poem. Coleridge's design may have been to use the flower as a humble counterpoint to the grandeur of Mont Blanc: He writes that it "grows in immense numbers, with its flowers of loveliest blue, within a few paces of the Glaciers"—for a second, Wordsworth's daffodils come to mind. But this humbleness is only a token one, for, in actual fact, "*Gentiana major*" is construed by Coleridge as "an effecting emblem of the boldness of human hope, venturing near, and, as it were, leaning over the brink of the grave" (197).

¹⁶ "Who *would* be, who *could* be an Atheist in this vale of wonders!" (197).

¹⁷ Jean-Louis Chrétien, *La Joie spacieuse : Essai sur la dilatation* (Paris : Les Editions de Minuit, 2007).

remarking that by some strange linguistic irony it frequently happens that the English language trims the word "dilatation" by one syllable. Coleridge's poem is a case in point. He then attempts to lay down the foundations of what he purports to call a "poetics of dilatation", based on orality, voice, movement, amplification, plenitude and joy. Joy, he claims, is something that makes of us quicker beings in a world that is vaster, higher. In his attempt to get to the bottom of the outer and inner broadening of heart and soul, of which Coleridge's poem is an obvious illustration, he remains aware of the proximity of the sublime to the ridiculous; one of the pitfalls of dilatation is the dissolution of form into amorphousness, another being the risk of uttering pious platitudes. There is no gainsaying that there is something stiltedly awkward about Coleridge's poem that compares badly with Shelley's, which must account for the fact that it is not frequently anthologized. And yet, in the phoney valley of the Arve, Coleridge raves "ceasesly", swells and ultimately thrives, as if intoxicated by the sheer strength of words. In that respect, much against the critical grain, Jean-Louis Chrétien contends that it is largely because words are stronger, mightier than ourselves, that poetry can arise.¹⁸ It is because to speak, or to write, is a struggle to rise to their height that the happy few may rise to the occasion as poets. A case in point is the end of Coleridge's poem: we witness an avalanche of high sounding words, piled upon the mountain: "Spirit", "Ambassador", "Hierach", in a desperate attempt to convey the conducive nature of the mountain by naming it thus. How much of a fond illusion is such a nomination? How truly beguiling was the melody overheard on lines 18-19? The words of a French poet come to mind: his name is Yves Bonnefoy, he is known to seek and confront a forever elusive and misleading Presence. He is the author of a 1975 collection entitled *Dans le leurre du seuil* (*In the Lure of the Threshold*). So is this a case of "Dans le leurre du sommet", after all? The proof of the sublime is in the writing, a mode and a performance bent on making the essence of what is contemplated and intimated manifest. Coleridge is clearly bent on the verbal forging (no forgery, here) of a symbol, i.e. a symbol of mediation. On the faith of his enthusiastic words, the mountain is established as a threshold of sorts, sitting between and enforcing the passage from, Sense and Soul, Image and Word, Nature and God.

Unlike Coleridge, Byron was *on the spot*, when he wrote on the Alps. In his insightful *Byron and Place*, Stephen Cheeke argues that the notion of being *there* represents the most powerful and complex aspect of Byron's work.¹⁹ Drawn to the aura or "halo" of the past, Byron always insisted on first-hand experience, on visiting famous historical places, fascinated as he was by the dream or fantasy of an immediate connection or communion with the *genius loci*. That he actually was there, as opposed to so many of his fellow-poets, was one of the reasons behind his immensely popular appeal at the time. Indeed, something in the way of an "effet de réel" was perceptible by his readers, whom historical circumstances had left literally dying for and starved of *dépayement*.²⁰ In September 1816, following upon a previous tour of Chamonix and Mont Blanc, in the company of Hobhouse and Scrope Davies, where he had collected stones and crystals for his sister, he embarked on a more ambitious excursion of the Bernese Oberland with Hobhouse, and from the 18th to the 28th of September kept an 'Alpine Journal' for Augusta, closely recording the details of their journey, and mostly conveying them in a deliberately anti-sublime vein. It is indeed the less mountainous aspects of the journal which are the most

¹⁸ Chrétien, work cited, 30-31.

¹⁹ Stephen Cheeke, *Byron and Place History. Translation, Nostalgia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

²⁰ Confer the anxiety experienced by Byron in the face of the "real" Mount Parnassus, in Greece, confronting him with the daunting obligation of steering clear from the clichés and stereotypes churned out by generation after generation of poets who never were there (*Childe Harold*, I, 60-65) (82-83). Cf. Marc Porée, "Romantic Scaping", *Scapes*, Paul Volsik & Abigail Lang ed. (Paris: *Cahiers Charles V*, 2006) 23-43.

memorable: the English lady fast asleep in her carriage 'in the most anti-narcotic spot in the world'; Byron's description of tumbling down slippery slopes, or attempting to help a bleating goat over a fence, or buying a dog en route. Such a mode of seeing is quite instinctive with Byron in whom precise evocation of place and circumstances offsets, in the words of Stephen Cheeke, the larger claims of the whole, and anecdote and detail replace any general attempt at the Alpine. The sublime aspect of the trip, what Byron referred to as "the romantic part" or "what touches upon the rocks &c.", are experiences of a kind that B always insisted *defeated* prose description, so that the Journal focuses on the human culture among the Alps, whether it be evidence of pastoralism among the Swiss,²¹ or the insufferable arrogance of English tourists:

I remember in the very eyes of Mont Blanc—hearing another woman—English also—exclaim to her party "Did you ever see anything more rural?"—as if it was Highgate or Hampstead—or Bromton—or Hayes—"Rural" quotha!—Rocks—pines—torrents—Glaciers—Clouds—and Summits of eternal snow far above them—and "Rural"! (97)

Which, of course, puts an extra premium on the passages, few and far between, that suddenly break away from the picturesque and the prosaic and touch a raw nerve, by bringing to the fore the underlying bedrock of "bitterness" and "desolation", thus striking home, in more ways than one: "Passed whole woods of withered pines—all withered—trunks stripped and barkless—branches lifeless—done by a single winter—their appearance reminded me of me and my family" (100). Indeed, when Byron came to write *Manfred* (published in 1817), "for the sake of introducing the Alpine scenery in description",²² he was clearly emerging from a period of psychological torment, in the wake of his infamous separation from his wife and of his dramatic exile. Which explains his declaration to Murray: "but it was the *Staubach* & the *Jungfrau*—and something else—much more than *Faustus* that made me write *Manfred*" (118). Again, cropping up from behind or under the snow-capped summit of the *Jungfrau*, is "something else", another shadowy or ghostly mountain of the past that cannot elude or escape his present sorrowful eye. The drama is situated "amongst the Higher Alps" and, among several other locations, features the "summit of the *Jungfrau*", from which Manfred wants to take his life, and a "lower valley" (allowing for provisional relief from the mounting pressure, when the Witch of Atlas is invoked and Manfred's love recalled, II, scene ii), but the actual scene-settings function as a mere backdrop, as no more than a token idea of romantic mountaininess. Precise and detailed descriptions are rare, and even then, a different landscape altogether superimposes itself upon the Alps: the thick mists that "boil up around the glaciers" are implicitly aligned with the sulphurous bubblings of a volcano ("Like foam from the roused ocean of deep Hell", I, ii, l. 87, 474). This unstageable drama, composed as a mental drama, points to the drama of mental insanity, of impending madness, even though it should be noted that the relation between mental suffering and the Alps is not a straightforward one, as the mountains offer neither an unequivocal analogon for mental superiority, nor a clear image of mental breakdown.

In the last analysis, Byron's Swiss Alps are as abstract as Coleridge's Blanc. Clearly, they are a literary mode rather than a place, and they disappear into what Stephen Cheeke proposes to call "Alpineism"²³ (on the model of Orientalism). That is, they are not primarily a setting, nor

²¹ "I realized all that I have ever heard or imagined of a pastoral existence—much more so than Greece or Asia Minor—for there we are a little too much of the sabre & musket order—but this was pure and unmixed—solitary—savage & patriarchal—the effect I cannot describe" (99).

²² In his own words, Byron wrote *Manfred* "as a sort of mad Drama, for the sake of introducing the Alpine scenery in description... Almost all the *dram. pers.* are spirits, ghosts, or magicians, and the scene is in the Alps and the other world, so you may suppose what a Bedlam tragedy it must be". Letter to Thomas Moore, March 25, 1817.

²³ Stephen Cheeke, *Byron and Place*, 86.

even a metaphor, but a mental disposition, part of a psychic framework, a spiritual and moral affinity: with aloofness, solitude, solitariness, a demanding athletics of breath and spirit: "My joy was in the Wilderness, to breathe/ The difficult air of the iced mountain's top, / Where the birds dare not build, nor insect's wing/ Flit o'er the herbless granite" (II, ii, 62-65, 481).²⁴ With soaring Pride, in short, the aristocratic pride of Manfred's "high lineage" (II, I, l. 7, 476) that sets him forever apart from human "clay" and the "brutes of burthen" (417)—that makes him unable to walk with the "souls of men" (II, ii, 51) and converse with the deserving "peasant of the Alps" (the Chamois hunter) who saved his life. Less conventionally, perhaps, their correspondence is also with a philosophical orientation, which includes the (Satanic) notion that the mind has its own place, is its own place.²⁵ In other words, the Alps of *Manfred* represent the overcoming of place, the concentratedness of the human mind and the damning victory of metaphysics over topography—no place of destination but "indestiné d'office", in the words of previously quoted Lyotard. Ironically, the one and only vivid evocation of a specific place in the drama is not Alpine, but Roman. In the final scene, Manfred appears alone inside his tower and remembers the Coliseum (III, iv, ll. 31-39): a fond memory returning oddly among the Jungfrau and virtually erasing the Alpine scenery. The passage is both out of place and fully *à propos*, in that what it stands for (a place that "became religion" and calls for worship in view of the connection it re-establishes with history and subjectivity) is a challenge not only to (rejected) Christianity but also to the Alps as a symbol of bottomless abstraction and towering solipsism. As for Manfred's death, it epitomizes the failure of a mountain-induced catharsis, which the end of Byron's *Alpine Journal* had already foreshadowed.²⁶

Mists, proud summits, virtuous peasants and heroic deaths (including by suicide) also abound in De Quincey's account, but redistributed along a very different set of priorities. When tackling the subject of mountains, his interest is seemingly *human* (not to say humane, as evidenced further down), openly topographic and pointedly anti-alpineistic: "The gorgeous scenery of Borrowdale, the austere sublimities of Wastdalehead, of Langdalehead, or Mardale; these are too oppressive, in their colossal proportions and their utter solitudes, for encouraging a perfectly human interest" (158). Turning away from sublime alienation, when most of his fellow-writers embrace it, De Quincey distances himself strongly from the artistic cult and the ideological reverence of mountains for their own sake. In the process, eminence changes places and sides, as it shifts from its loftiest representatives to its humblest embodiments. The initial purpose of his *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* was to present and portray greatness, *in situ*, as it were, *i.e.* against the mountainous backdrop of the Lake District. That greatness was of a literary nature, embodied in the figures of three poets, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey, surrounded by a circle of lesser stars, forming the Lake Society, whom De Quincey was blessed to approach during his stay in Grasmere. Each of those figures stands

²⁴ In a recent novel of which the central protagonist is a woman alpinist, Nives Meroi, the Italian writer Erri De Luca claims that life in the mountains, by way of its greater concentration, pressure and intensity of being, is germane to and analogous of sainthood: Erri de Luca, *Sur la trace de Nives*, translated from the Italian by Danièle Valin (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

²⁵ "The mind (...) Is its own origin of ill and end—/ And its own place and time" (III, iv, l. 129-132, 506). Which immediately brings to mind the great tirade delivered by Milton's Satan: "A mind not to be changed by place or time/ The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a heaven or a hell, a hell of heaven" (*Paradise Lost*, I, ll. 253-255).

²⁶ The *Alpine Journal* closes on a bleak note indeed, conveyed by the negative syntax: "But in all this—the recollections of bitterness—& more especially of recent & more home desolation—which must accompany me through life—have preyed upon me here—and neither the music of the Shepherd—the crashing of the Avalanche—nor the torrent—the mountain—the Glacier—the Forest—nor the Cloud—have for one moment—lightened the weight upon my heart—nor enabled me to lose my own wretched identity in the majesty & the power and the Glory—around—above—& beneath me." (104-105).

out against a mountainous backdrop, of which he seems to be a geological emanation—especially in the case of Wordsworth, born and raised in Cumberland.²⁷ Begun with the unexpressed though guarded hope that some of that greatness would rub off on him, the work eventually grew into something markedly different. To begin with, the former objects of De Quincey's devout admiration are ruthlessly cut down to size, with characteristic spite. Wordsworth, for one, appears as a towering pillar of pride, hopelessly undermined by his abysmal pettiness: at the end of the *Recollections*, de Quincey realizes the extent of his delusions of grandeur. By way of contrast, the Dalesmen are never exposed to his levelling gaze, as they stand in all the unassuming glory of their deceptive humility. A humbleness that points far beyond itself, as the memorialist devotes two lengthy chapters to their habitat and architecture, in particular, for the Lakes are, essentially, a place to dwell in—which changes altogether the perspective, say, from Coleridge's and Byron's election of summits as mere sites to strike a pose on, or as scapes fit for contemplation alone. The Lake District is not a "no man's land", and its "Gens de peu" are a hard-working people; their manners, simple and humbly deserving.²⁸ Within an environment of tarns, fells, "forces" (waterfalls), their rough *mores* are painstakingly recorded and their anonymity redeemed by De Quincey, taking after the model set by Wordsworth in his *Lyrical Ballads*. It will be my contention that De Quincey's contribution to the topic of mountains in literature is a kind of landmark in the ongoing transformation of *sermo sublimis* into *sermo humilis*, as reconstructed by Auerbach in his great essay of 1953, *Mimesis, the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*.²⁹

"Recollections of Grasmere" relates how the landlocked setting of Easedale was the seat of a "calamitous accident", an "affecting tragedy", the leading roles of which are taken up by the Greens, a family of local shepherds. The story is an edifying one, involving self-sacrifice and fortitude, and marked by the death of the parents who lost their bearings in the mist, trying to reach across the walls of rock separating them from the neighbouring valley. Back home, their eldest daughter, aged nine, rose to eminence in looking after her five siblings, for four days on end, in their snow-bound little cottage.³⁰ A rescue team of sixty men, "with the speed of Alpine hunters" (263), finally retrieve the missing bodies—leaving everyone to reconstruct the "sad hieroglyphics of their last agonies" (264). After relating the pathetic circumstances of their disparition, De Quincey wonders why so little is done towards preventing such all too predictable tragedies from happening so frequently, causing the loss of

²⁷ "Now, taking Hawkshead as a centre, with a radius of about eight miles, one might describe a little circular tract which embosoms a perfect net-work of little valleys—separate wards or cells, as it were, of one large valley, walled in by the great primary mountains of the region, Grasmere, Easedale, Little Langdale, Tilberthwaite, Yewdale, Elter Water, Loughrigg Tarn, Skelwith, and many other little quiet nooks, lie within a single division of this labyrinthine district. All these are within one summer afternoon's ramble. And amongst these, for the years of his boyhood, lay the daily excursion of Wordsworth." (158).

²⁸ Pierre Sansot, *Les Gens de peu* (Paris : Puf, Quadriga, 1991).

²⁹ Bearing in mind the classic triad of high, middle and low styles in Antiquity, Auerbach points to its breakdown due to the impact of Christianity which gave rise to a mixed style, whereby emerged the possibility of writing in the vernacular where the low could be treated with high seriousness. Auerbach charts the development of *sermo humilis*, from the New Testament to the French realist writers, via Dante's *Divine Comedy*. At the end of the day, the lower classes and their social concerns are depicted as and in historical reality, treated not as comedy but with depth and the problematic seriousness of tragedy.

³⁰ De Quincey writes of her that she "towered up, overnight, into the perfect energies of womanhood" (259). The choice of the verb "to tower up" is quite in keeping with and germane to my own project in this paper, which is to point to De Quincey's building up of "our humble mountains". Likewise, he will later evoke the "remarkable" suicide of a Chatterton-like figure, that of a local young boy labouring under the bondage of dependency, who walks quietly up to the cloudy wildernesses within Blencathara, where, for the last time, he reads from his favourite authors, Aeschylus, Apollonius and Caesar, before dying placidly.

so many shepherds that entire hamlets have been wiped out from the face of the district. Drawing on a comparable scheme imagined in the Highlands, he promptly improvises a most impractical piece of practical thinking, that extends over quite a few pages, wherein he goes down to the minutest technicalities of the planned operation, calling for crosses to be erected, as in Catholic countries, at regular intervals across every slope, surmounted by bells, and equipped with a small box suspended at eight feet above the ground, for stray travellers to seek refuge in. He even urges the Dalesmen to decorate and embellish those crosses:

But whatever were the materials, the name of these rural guides and asylums—"storm-crosses"—would continually remind both the natives and the strangers of their purposes and functions—functions that, in the process of time, would make them as interesting to the imagination and to the memory, as they would, in fact be useful and hope-sustaining to the shepherd surprised by snow, and the traveller surprised by night. (280)

Beyond the somewhat extravagant details of the scheme itself, something quite essential is at stake here, in the form of a quite unprecedented blending of aesthetic, pragmatic and ethical categories, as prompted by the awareness of the mountain as a constant shadow hanging over the heads of the residents. The sentence that rounds off the chapter gathers momentum as it proceeds towards its balanced climax, granting dignity to the humble names inscribed on the artefacts (snow-crosses) erected by the anonymous local people. Against a natural backdrop of mineral hostility—the mist-ridden fells, the accident-prone configuration of the relief—, the adorning of those little cells at the hands of rough artists, together with the duty of solidarity in times of need, mark the refurbishing of an old aesthetic category—that of the "interesting"—, into a new form of political empowerment, on behalf of lives lost and of lives regained: the glory of the low, the nameless, the humble.³¹ At work here, in what can no longer be called a *digression*, is something that looks forward to a decisive, and quite spectacular demotion of the sublime—of aristocratic "Alpineism"—in favour of what Jacques Rancière terms "le partage du sensible", at least in my understanding of it, when the latter both detects and calls for a new distribution of tasks and roles, a new understanding of what is felt to be *common*, i.e. held in common, to coincide with a new distribution of politics along aesthetic lines (and vice versa).³² Striking indeed is the emergence in De Quincey's peroration of such notions as "imagination" and "memory", words that in a Romantic context strike a deep chord, and which find themselves side by side with the more mundane utility of neo-Alpine crosses. They share the same place, the same dignity; their worth is equal (democratic?), and they serve the same function in the service of this forthcoming, albeit utopian, community of natives and strangers, encompassed as they are within the calm and slow amplitude of a grand sentence: "l'union de la longue phrase et d'un peu de l'être de ce qu'elle n'est pas."³³ Not so "Rural", after all!

³¹ "C'est parce que l'anonyme est devenu un sujet d'art que son enregistrement peut devenir un art. (...) Mais aussi la révolution esthétique, c'est d'abord la gloire du quelconque", Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible* (Paris : La fabrique, 2000) 48, 50.

³² "Les artisans, dit Platon, ne peuvent pas s'occuper des choses communes parce qu'ils n'ont pas le temps de se consacrer à autre chose que leur travail. Ils ne peuvent pas être ailleurs parce que le travail n'attend pas. Le partage du sensible fait voir qui peut avoir part au commun en fonction de ce qu'il fait, du temps et de l'espace dans lesquels cette activité s'exerce. Avoir telle ou telle 'occupation' définit ainsi des compétences ou des incompétences au commun. Cela définit le fait d'être ou non visible dans un espace commun, doué d'une parole commune, etc. Il y a donc, à la base de la politique, une 'esthétique' qui n'a rien à voir avec cette 'esthétisation' de la politique propre à l' 'âge des masses' dont parle Benjamin", Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible* (Paris : La fabrique, 2000) 13.

³³ Yves Bonnefoy, "Paul Celan," *Le Nuage rouge*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1977, 304. Quoted by Jacques Rancière in his Preface to *Courts voyages au pays du peuple* (Paris : Seuil, 1990) 12.