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## **MOUNTAIN ANALOGUE: SEEKING MEANING AT THE SUMMIT** CH2

### **VISIONS AND DREAMS: EARLY ROMANTIC APPROACHES TO THE MOUNTAIN**

by Rachel Duchak

*With what eyes these poets see nature!*

—William Hazlitt

The pre-Romantic texts discussed in the previous chapter illustrate how general expressions of fearful mountain gloom could and did develop in the late eighteenth century into sincere assertions of alpine glory. These new ways of seeing mountain landscapes often drew upon the ancient history of the “divine alpine” as well as the new, burgeoning sciences pursued above tree line. This shift from the gloomy to the glorious became the literary rule rather than the exception, although mountains still retained their frightening aspect. Danger lurked in the mountains at the dawn of the Romantic age and throughout the Victorian nineteenth century. Indeed, danger thrives in the mountains today and presents to us the very same environmental threats faced by travelers from hundreds of years ago such as avalanche, rock fall, foul weather, and the occasional wild animal. By traveling by foot into the mountains, you can almost walk back into the nineteenth century.

Before the Romantic period, a writer might have approached the mountains in a purely intellectual manner by imagining this landscape from the comfort of an armchair, nestled in the interior space of a library or office. A pre-Romantic writer may also have accessed mountains and considered their powerful symbolism

though the two-dimensional portal of frame and canvas. Still other pre-Romantic writers physically approached the mountains by foot and experienced this landscape through their eyes, lungs, skin, muscles, and brain as they began to explore the material, intellectual, muscular, and touristic planes of and on the mountain. This chapter considers that point of intersection among a range of different approaches to the mountain by Britons and Europeans, and British Romantic poets in particular.

Several culturally influential eighteenth-century literary figures significantly altered the mountain paradigm and set the stage for what would develop across the nineteenth century: this chapter links back to chapter 1 and further develops the conversation about how British Romantic writers responded to and moved beyond their Enlightenment and pre-Romantic inspirations such as Burnet, Rousseau, and Saussure. Despite his frontloading of scripture and science in *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, Burnet's visceral response to the material and aesthetic reality of the Alps exerted a far greater influence on his readers throughout the century following the publication of this text. Indeed, his powerful emotional response to alpine landscapes is about the only reason Burnet's text remains relevant outside of the realm of religious historiography: his arguments about how the new science of geology could integrate seamlessly with ancient scripture were disproved long before Wordsworth and Coleridge pored over his alpine descriptions. And yet, his mountains landscapes emerged powerfully from this text and practically leaped off the page. Coleridge found himself particularly

impressed by Burnet and hatched plans to adapt Burnet's descriptive prose to powerful poetry, mentioning this literary concept at several points in his notebook and letters.

Unlike Burnet's approach to the Alps—which he developed during and after his occasional trips across the Alps while accompanying young clients on the Grand Tour—Rousseau's deeply personal and highly symbolic approach to mountain landscapes grew out of his long personal association with the Alps. By living among the mountains and coming to know them as a worshipful neighbor rather than an amazed tourist, Rousseau's texts such as *La Nouvelle Heloise* served to present the mountains as an idealized landscape capable of nourishing the most pure and perfect human souls and relationships. Finally, the edgy, muscular-scientific approach to mountain landscapes modeled by de Saussure, one of the first mountain explorers, encouraged fellow scientists to head into the hills to explore and experiment. The stage was set.

With the onset of the Romantic period, Nicolson explains, partly through the work of these pre-Romantic writers, the tide had fully turned from seeing in mountains only the terror or disgust inherent in the concept of "mountain gloom." While the gloomy, dangerous symbolism of mountain landscapes survived past the Enlightenment period (and, in fact, continues in some ways even today), the mountain analogue also incorporated the enthusiasm, awe, and transcendence suggested by "mountain glory." The gloom and glory of the mountain symbol

links to both the ancient and recent past, and yet it also points forward to, among other things, the British imperial future in the nineteenth century and beyond. The evolving analogues of the mountain across nineteenth-century British culture helped to create a climate that fed the imperial drive to stake claims on land and resources around the world. To a degree, one can see from the summit of the mountain imagined by Romantic writers a distant prospect of the vast British empire that comes closer and closer into view as the century proceeds. Of course, while it is possible to make this connection between mountains and the furtherance of the British imperial project, this is not the only cultural work that mountains perform. Conversely, one could argue that traveling in the mountains really has very little to do with the promotion of the British empire, particularly for those climbers not seeking a first ascent or not intending to name the mountain after themselves. However, this project will keep the imperial always in mind as it considers a range of texts and authors and focuses on the links between the mountain analogue and the British empire throughout the nineteenth century.

Unlike most of their Enlightenment predecessors, the Romantic writers discussed in this chapter and chapter 3 all experienced the mountains first-hand in a way that powerfully informed their work. Some were climbers and hikers who sought intense, active mountain experiences while others were extended visitors to alpine landscapes who drank in the mountain's material power from its base and felt possessed of its energy. Of course, not every Romantic writer pursued the same experience in the mountains: some scrambled up peaks hand over hand,

while others walked thousands of miles by road and path through this rugged terrain, while still others lived for a season in an alpine environment and looked out every day at the jagged peaks of the Alps. Regardless of how they approached the mountains, these writers participated physically and intellectually with this landscape by observing, walking, climbing, and sometimes risking all.

The Romantic writers discussed in this chapter and the next—William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Mary Shelley, and Percy Bysshe Shelley—each breathed deeply the fresh mountain air and sought to know these landscapes by living with and in the midst of their ruggedness. The writers at the center of this chapter, Wordsworth and Coleridge, shared an aesthetic appreciation of mountain landscapes but differed so strongly in their respective “mountain philosophy” that it should not surprise readers that they both approached mountains in clearly distinct ways that worked in direct contradiction to each other. This chapter considers two early texts featuring mountains: *Descriptive Sketches* and “Hymn before Sun-Rise, in the Vale of Chamouni.”<sup>1</sup> Each poet drew upon his real experience of the mountains while imagining this landscape but, while Wordsworth constantly looked back toward Britain, Coleridge directed his gaze outward to what was for him a known physical experience but an unknown imaginative vision. Regardless of approach, each poet interpreted his mountain world empirically and metaphysically.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Coleridge wrote several poetic hymns, this project will only consider his “Hymn before Sun-Rise,” hereafter referred to as the “Hymn.”