

Mountain landscape and the aesthetics of the sublime in Romantic narration

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Any man who observes nature is always inclined to question its precise order. The analogies and regularities of natural phenomena have often suggested a predetermined design, a benign creator, a sublime artist: thus nature appears to be his masterpiece. The persuasive quality of the so-called physical-theological proof of the existence of God is well known, a theory that perceives the creator's perfection in the incredible and spectacular workings of the cosmos. The knowledge gained from the examination of the order and harmony of the universe suggests an aesthetic dimension which, born from the thrill of wonder and amazement, rises to beauty or to the sublime.

But even the most convinced supporters of natural theology, which was a particularly popular theory in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, used for justifying and singing the praises of the cosmos, cannot fail to see certain incongruities or irregularities, not obvious enough to cause doubt in the unity of nature, but certainly enough to render its reconstruction more complicated. As far as the origins of the universe are concerned, not everything appears to be ascribable to a perfect and conclusive order, to a harmonious and totally regulated cosmos, especially since, in this era, it is understood that nature possesses a history of its own, and it can be viewed as transformation. One of the most difficult issues which comes to the fore in the »earth sciences« is the »unevenness« of the earth's crust which is visibly recognisable in mountain landscapes.

Ever since ancient times theoretical speculation on nature has been unable to overlook the question of the imperfections of the earth's crust, of its imprecise geometrical conformation. While a sort of empathy for a nature which was represented by the *locus amoenus*, a relaxing and pleasant type of country landscape bearing the signs of man's »interventions of advancement«, was established very early on, for a long time the phenomena representing nature's wilder side carried no positive meaning and were described as *loci horridi*. For a long time nature was merely a place for refuge, for rural peace, not a place in which to search for deep-rooted emotions or an aestheticism of contrasts.

In modern times, as step by step technical instruments such as the telescope and the microscope opened up new horizons, philosophers and scientists gradually realised that what they had before them was a cosmos, the order of which appeared more and more complex, in which unclassifiable phenomena were more and more numerous and frequent. This scientific and philosophical attitude, particularly starting from the eighteenth century, brings a new sensitivity that ascribes aesthetic worth to the beauty of wild and irregular landscapes. It follows that anything which does not appear to comply with a certain universal law or rule, which appears to be irregular or even deformed, opens up a whole new dimension of beauty, which goes far beyond convention.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, Edmund Burke's theorisation of the sublime clarifies a new idea of beauty, which highlights the central position of terror as a basis for modern sensitivity to anything which flouts the rules of classical reason. The revival of Longinus's ancient theory concerning the sublime as opposed to the beautiful marks a turning point in

eighteenth-century aesthetics: the elements of vastness, of potency and of irregularity illustrated by Burke, which dominate the faculties of the human mind, reappear later in Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Critique of Judgement, 1790), a systematic proposal of a renewed aesthetics, open to the conflicting elements which are expressed in the idea of the sublime. They rise, in fact, from our consideration of a nature less automatically geared towards man's well-being, at times mysteriously destructive, yet for that very reason captivating, in a completely new way.

The direct knowledge of mountain landscapes, which educated travellers acquired through study-trips, becomes in this sense crucial. Already at the end of the seventeenth century it had appeared to some scientists, such as Thomas Burnet, as the result of the fall or the destruction of a previous world of perfection, a spoilt paradise, which cannot be considered a divine creation but more likely the result of a catastrophe similar to the Deluge. However, at the beginning of the following century its attraction begins to produce such ideas as the »terrible joy« of John Dennis and the »agreeable kind of horror« of Joseph Addison. This compels the scientist to reformulate his theory of an all-comprehensive cosmos in a more complex manner, taking into consideration the conflicting and dynamic phenomena which are expressed in the earth's morphology. Simultaneously it challenges the writer to use a new and daring type of language, a language which recognises and accepts the transgression and the discontinuity, and converts them into the positive value of fragment poetry, or exhibits them in a prose which is often written in letter style in order to give as much room as possible to a new individuality. The sensation of impending catastrophe provoked by mountain landscape and the sublime which it inspires represents a dynamic element, a place of transformation.

1. Rousseau

The famous story of the two lovers of different social class, whose love is opposed by social conventions, is set near Lake Geneva, in the middle of Nature, which however has little significance within the entirely »sentimental« plot of the novel. Nature in the novel expresses and reflects human emotions, its presence gives them a »setting«, providing them with a suitable background. *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (Julie or the New Heloise) wins considerable acclaim in Europe in 1761. Among the reading public, it starts a definite fashion for Switzerland as a »romantic« country.

Despite the setting, Rousseau is not particularly adept at describing and comprehending nature. However, it does appear, at least as a background, in two decisive moments, in the scene of the kiss and in that of the separation that paves the way for the scene of seduction. The first scene takes place in a wood, a typical *locus amoenus*, suitable for a meeting between lovers, while the separation takes place during an excursion made by Saint-Preux, to the Vallese Mountains in the great Rodano valley, which leads to the Gottard, surrounded by spectacular glaciers. The famous letter XXIII is similar to Petrarca's letter from Mont-Ventoux: the landscape is explicitly considered from the viewpoint of someone who is focused on his own emotions. But the landscape also distracts, drawing the character out from the closeness of his own interior world, placing him before something that by no means leaves one indifferent.

Sometimes huge cliffs hung like ruins above my head. Sometimes high and thundering waterfalls drenched me in their thick fog. Sometimes a perpetual mountain stream opened by my side an abyss the depth of which eyes dared not fathom. On occasion I got lost in the darkness of a dense wood. On others, on emerging from a chasm a pleasant meadow suddenly delighted my sight. A surprising mixture of wild and cultivated nature revealed throughout the hand of men, where one would have thought they had never penetrated [...] It was not only man's labor that made this strange countryside so oddly contrasted; nature also seemed to take pleasure in striking an opposition to herself, so different did one find her in the same place at various angles (Rousseau, trans. Stewart 1997, 63).¹

The mountain appears as a place of opposing elements: a combination of garden and ancestral wood, a *locus amoenus* poised precariously upon a landslide. This is what Rousseau's hypersensitivity immediately captures: the emergence of contrasts, the confusion of the elements. Nature herself is not simple and refuses to follow one single line of expression. It is a different shifting nature, a »new world«, governed by different rules, inhabited by extravagant flora and fauna in a strange climate. It is not the same world which we are already familiar with on the plains, it is a world of highly concentrated variety, of an almost exotic, uncommon beauty, unknown and surprising.

Rousseau loves to walk in the midst of nature, in the woods and over meadows; he dislikes bare rocks. He observes from below a world, the origins and structure of which do not particularly interest him, though he does recognise its potency. What he does grasp is the powerful influence upon the soul.

Nature, though silent and motionless, is never inexpressive: it can affect human passions and has a surprisingly calming effect upon them. Even if one reaches a high perspective from which it is possible to observe the formation of hurricanes down below, the sensation is nonetheless one of serenity. Paradoxically, Rousseau describes a world that, due to its absence of simplicity, corresponds perfectly to a complex and destructive sensitivity, such as that which the writer projects through Saint-Preux. Nothing can represent the novel's lavish descriptions of lacerating conflicts, like this landscape can. In fact there is a sort of symmetry to the irregularity, the »mixture« of elements of the inorganic blend with the confused sentimental situation of the protagonist.

Ascension is nonetheless considered, in a Petrarchan way, as a spiritual ascent, as a purification. A metaphorical elevation occurs in relation to all that which appears tied to the earth, opposing a spiritual force of gravity which binds us invincibly to passions and desires.

Meditations there take on an indescribably grand and sublime character, in proportion with the objects that strike us, an indescribably tranquil delight that has nothing acrid or sensual

1. »Tantôt d'immenses roches pendoient en ruines au dessus de ma tête. Tantôt de hautes et bruyantes cascades m'inondoient de leur épais brouillard. Tantôt un torrent éternel ouvroit à mes côtés un abîme dont les jeux n'osoient sonder la profondeur. Quelquefois je me perdois dans l'obscurité d'un bois touffu. Quelquefois, en sortant d'un gouffre une agréable prairie rejoüissoit tout à coup mes regards. Un mélange étonnant de la nature sauvage et de la nature cultivée, monroit par-tout la main des hommes, où l'on eut cru qu'ils n'avoient jamais pénétré [...]. Ce n'étoit pas seulement le travail des hommes qui rendoit ces pays étranges si bizarrement contrastés; la nature sembloit encore prendre plaisir à s'y mettre en opposition avec elle-même, tant on la trouvoit différente en un même lieu sous divers aspects« (Rousseau 1964a, 77).

about it. It seems that by rising above the habitation of men one leaves all base and earthly sentiments behind, and in proportion as one approaches ethereal spaces the soul contracts something of their inalterable purity. There, one is grave without melancholy, peaceful without indolence, content to be and to think: all excessively vivid desires are blunted; they lose that sharp point that makes them painful, they leave deep in the heart nothing but a light and sweet emotion, and thus it is that a favorable climate causes passions to contribute here to man's felicity which elsewhere make for his torment. I doubt that any violent agitation, any case of vapors could stand up to a comparably prolonged sojourn, and I wonder that baths of the salutary and beneficial air of the mountains have not become one of the principal remedies of medicine and morality (ibid., 64).²

All is carried up high, abandoning that which is heavy, that which is most tied to the earth's surface. We are not dealing here merely with the Longinian theme of the great and the elevated — the sublime — but also with the much more modern subject of the sublimation, of the dislocation of entirely earthly impulses and instincts into thoughts of a higher order, into wider dimensions, of a less personal nature.

As Weiskel argued (1986, 30), sublime and sublimation are closely related: sublimation implies the passage from the »natural« impulse of love to a substitutive and erotic-objective which dampens the energy in the passage from an earthly »low« to a spiritual »high«. In the same way the disproportion between the potency of an object and the mind necessitates metaphorical language, because of the insufficiency of ordinary language. In both cases the necessity of going beyond nature becomes the primary requirement. And this requires a new capacity for seeing and above all a new capacity for feeling. Indeed, the mountain landscape »has something indescribably magical and supernatural about it that ravishes the spirit and the senses« (Rousseau, trans. Stewart 1997, 65),³ in which it is difficult to get one's bearings: a whole new world has been discovered.

2. Goethe

Did it really have to be like this? — that the source of Man's contentment becomes the source of his misery? [...] At other times, when I gazed from the crags across the river to those hilltops yonder, taking in the entire fertile valley and seeing all about me burgeoning and putting forth

2. »Les méditations y prennent je ne sais quel caractère grand et sublime, proportionné aux objets qui nous frappent, je ne sais quelle volupté tranquille qui n'a rien d'acre et de sensuel. Il semble qu'en s'élevant au dessus du séjour des hommes on y laisse tous les sentimens bas et terrestres, et qu'à mesure qu'on approche des régions éthérées l'âme contracte quelque chose de leur inaltérable pureté. On y est grave sans mélancolie, paisible sans indolence, content d'être et de penser: tous les désirs trop vifs s'émoussent; ils perdent cette pointe aiguë qui le rend douloureux, ils ne laissent au fond du Cœur qu'une émotion légère et douce, et c'est ainsi qu'un heureux climat fait servir à la félicité de l'homme les passions qui font ailleurs son tourment. Je doute qu'aucune agitation violente, aucune maladie de vapeurs put tenir contre un pareil séjour prolongé, et je suis surpris que des bains de l'air salubre et bienfaisant des montagnes ne soient pas un des grands remèdes de la médecine et de la morale« (Rousseau 1964a, 78).
3. »Le spectacle a je ne sais quoi de magique, de surnaturel qui ravit l'esprit et les sens« (Rousseau 1964a, 79).

new life; when I saw the mountains, clad from foot to peak with thick and mighty trees, and the winding valleys shaded by the most delightful woods, and the river flowing gently amongst the whispering reeds and mirroring the lovely clouds which a soft evening breeze wafted across the heavens at such times, [...] how ardently my heart embraced it all: I felt as if I had been made a god in that overwhelming abundance, and the glorious forms of infinite Creation moved in my soul, giving it life [...]. It is as if a curtain had been drawn from before my soul, and this scene of infinite life had been transformed before my eyes into the abyss of the grave, for ever open wide. [...] what wastes my heart away is the corrosive power that lies concealed in the natural universe — in Nature, which has brought forth nothing that does not destroy both its neighbour and itself (Goethe 1989, 65 f.).⁴

In the typical appearance of a view from above, spaciouly widespread and rich in detail, the function of mountain landscape immediately appears to be ambivalent. From beginning to end, Goethe's literary and scientific career is accompanied by a passion for rocks and stones, which he collects in large quantities throughout all of his travels, and which inspire interesting scientific essays and famous poems. It is not only the world of living nature which captures his interest, but also the »inorganic« world, with its subterranean secrets, which he had occasion to examine during his appointment at the Ilmenau mines, and the »irregularities« of the earth's surface which, from 1775 onwards, he covered during his Alpine excursions. He used this direct knowledge of mountain landscapes for the settings and background of many of his novels, often characterised by a typical ambivalence. In *Werther* (1774) and in the three versions of *Wilhelm Meister*, the mountain landscape is both a place of great serenity, of unshakeable strength, of solid meridianity, and a disquieting, dangerous and demonic place.

At the beginning of *Werther*, the protagonist wanders in the forest of Wahlheim reading Homer, and the image is of a *locus amoenus*: green hills, gently running rivers, all seen from the top of a mountain which looks out over a vast, calm, serene and patriarchal landscape. Nature in its variety appears as an abundance of shapes arranged harmoniously to correspond with the gladness of a heart which lives »days as happy as any God sets aside for his saints« (Goethe, trans. Hulse 1989, 44).⁵ The natural setting reflects and projects the sentiments of the leading character, his initial naive and happy love for Lotte, which gradually deteriorates until the final tragedy, which conversely is accompanied by a dark and tormented horizon. In the letter of

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4. »Müßte denn das so sein, daß das, was des Menschen Glückseligkeit macht, wieder die Quelle seines Elendes würde? [...] Wenn ich sonst von Felsen über den Fluss bis zu jenen Hügeln das fruchtbare Tal überschaute und alles um mich her keimen und quellen sah; wenn ich jene Berge, vom Fuße bis auf zum Gipfel, mit hohen, dichten Bäumen bekleidet, jene Täler in ihren mannigfaltigen Krümmungen von den lieblichsten Wäldern beschattet sah, und der sanfte Fluß zwischen den lispelnden Rohren dahingleitete und die lieben Wolken abspiegelte, die der sanfte Abendwind am Himmel herüberwiegte [...] wie faßte ich das alles in mein warmes Herz, fühlte mich in der überfließenden Fülle wie vergöttert, und die herrlichen Gestalten der unendlichen Welt bewegten sich allbelebend in meiner Seele. [...] Es hat sich vor meiner Seele wie ein Vorhang weggezogen, und der Schauplatz des unendlichen Lebens verwandelt sich vor mir in den Abgrund des ewig offenen Grabes. [...] mir untergräbt das Herz die verzehrende Kraft, die in dem All der Natur verborgen liegt; die nichts gebildet hat, das nicht seinen Nachbar, nicht sich selbst zerstörte« (Goethe 1981, VI.1: 51).
5. »Ich lebe so glückliche Tage, wie sie Gott seinen Heiligen aufspart« (ibid., VI.1: 28).

12th October »Ossian has ousted Homer from my heart« (ibid., 95)⁶ and the setting changes: no longer do calm streams flow down from the mountains but stormy winds and the wails of the »spirits of the caverns«, destructive and perturbing elements, arise: natural ingredients, unchanged in their physical consistency, now veer towards the horrific, in accordance with the leading character's changed existential being.

In Mignon's song from *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship Years, 1795/96), the Italian landscape appears to be emblematically pleasant, from its »blue skies« to its lemon trees and orange leaves, but at the same time it is overshadowed by mountains covered in clouds and mist, by caverns home to the traditional dragons and by clefts from which menacing torrents flow freely. Moreover, the delineation of Mignon's character has a lot in common with this background. The girl dressed in men's clothes, the incompletely formed androgynous being, this dark-skinned creature with irregular features, who expresses herself better with music than with words, feels both nostalgia for Italy, for Lake Como where she was born, and an instinctive desire to climb to the edge of the snow at the top of the mountains, with the lightness of a bird, the skill of an acrobat. The mystery of her fleeting and disquieting nature is explained later in the well known story of the unwitting incestuous relationship between Augustin and Sperata in book VIII, which decidedly makes Mignon the symbol of a nature made up of many faces, not all harmonious, but all necessary to the world of man as well as of other natural beings.

Furthermore, in the *Wanderjahre* (Wilhelm Meister's Journeymanhood, 1821, 2nd edition 1829), the third version of *Meister*, Mignon makes yet another appearance, in the portrait which an artist has painted of a girl-boy, against a background of sheer cliffs, waterfalls and mountain gorges (a situation gracefully depicted, yet nonetheless narrow and menacing, with no visible means of communicating with the rest of the world), as well as the inevitable caves inhabited by dragons but rich in sparkling crystals (Goethe 1981, 227 f.). Mignon is placed between the Mediterranean beauty of the lake and the disquieting mountain landscape, depicted intentionally in a mysterious version, rich in perfect geometrical mineral forms as well as, at the same time, traditional dark beings, evoked or imagined.

The entire story of *Wanderjahre* is colored by the importance of the mountain environment: right from the first scene in which Wilhelm, under the shade of a great rock, situated near a steep footpath, is joined by his son Felix, who, having found some stones and believing them to be gold, wishes to know their nature. In the scene which depicts the meeting with Jarno-Montan, Felix once more expresses his curiosity for the world of rocks and stones. Montan, who has in the meantime become a seeker of crystals and therefore perfectly adept in this Alpine setting, answers the boy's questions in one of the many scenes set high up in the mountains, and in which, in just a few lines, the landscape below is described according to Goethe's theories on geology. »Right now you're sitting on one of the oldest mountains in the world« says Montan to Felix, and, when asked if the world were created all in one go, he answers: »It's very unlikely: important things take time«.⁷

6. »Ossian hat in meinem Herzen den Homer verdrängt« (ibid., VI.1: 82).

7. »du gegenwärtig auf dem ältesten Gebirge [...] dieser Welt sitztest«; »Schwerlich, gut Ding will Weile haben« (ibid., VIII.3: 31, 32).

The idea is the same as that which Goethe had already expressed in 1784 in his essay on granite, which picked up on Adam Gottlob Werner's geological theories: granite, which is the main component of the western Alps as well as of the Harz, is the emblem of primary rocks, the first to be formed, slowly, by water crystallisation, while the other sedimentary or conglomerate rocks are much more recent. Although this classification was historically overthrown by research carried out by the British geologists Hutton and Lyell at the end of the century, it did however represent valid criteria of scientific analysis as well as of personal research for Goethe.

Sitting on a high bare peak, looking down upon a vast region, I'm able to say to myself: you are right on top of a foundation which goes to the very heart of the earth, no recent layers, no haphazard pile of ruins separates you from the firm surface of the original world itself, you are not walking now as in those beautiful fertile valleys where your feet tread upon tombs, these peaks have neither produced nor devoured a living thing, they are before all life and above all life.⁸

The inorganic here exercises a new attraction as an element totally without life, as possible evidence of what preceded life itself, of that which sits, silent and immovable, at the basis of our very being, before all movement, before all life or death. A sure foundation connected to the centre of the earth, a simple and abstract, primordial world, pure, barely formed rock, but directly linked to the origins, the silent and compact cosmos, untouched by birth and putrefaction, a sidereal, enigmatic world endures, in parts, still visible in its essentiality.

In this case the granite does not represent a place of disquieting spectres but is rather the image of a primordial world as yet untouched by throbbing life; the empiric and symbolic experience of a primal solidity of being, of a restrained, apparently denied, genesis. Granite is, according to Goethe, the most profound of rocks, if not the terrestrial nucleus, of which we are denied first hand experience; it is at least its innermost skin. And quiet and still, it crouches below the earth's surface, while its backbone rises high in the mountains; granite is simultaneously the highest and most profound, »das Höchste und das Tiefste« (ibid., 254).

Although not described in so many words, the stability and solidity symbolised by the granite is clearly recognisable in several scenes of the *Wanderjahre*: for example, it can be found in the warm and safe environment which is the setting for the story of Saint Joseph the second, the story of a mountain nativity. Here, in this context, comes the affirmation that life in a mountain environment has a more humane quality than life on the plains, because men, though they may appear less intimate, by necessity of the situation live more closely together.

Ambivalence then is the dominating feature of mountain landscapes in Goethe's literature: solidity, the moving closeness of the world's origins, as well as perturbing effects, still tied to mysterious spectres and to an inextinguishable element of menace, which however do not represent an impediment to knowledge or experience, but rather present an element of new attraction which expresses well the conflicting emotions of modern man.

8. »Auf einem hohen, nackten Gipfel sitzend und eine weite Gegend überschauend, kann ich mir sagen: Hier ruhst du unmittelbar auf einem Grunde, der bis zu den tiefsten Orten der Erde hinreicht, keine neuere Schicht, keine aufgehäuften zusammengeschwemmten Trümmer haben sich zwischen dich und den festen Boden der Welt gelegt, du gehst nicht wie in jenen fruchtbaren schönen Tälern, über ein anhaltendes Grab, diese Gipfel haben nichts Lebendiges erzeugt und nichts Lebendiges verschlungen, sie sind vor allem Leben und über alles Leben« (ibid., XIII.1: 255).

3. Ludwig Tieck

The complexity and myriad definitions of the world of rocks and mountains emerge quite clearly in some of Ludwig Tieck's more famous novellas, such as *Der blonde Eckbert* (Eckbert the Fair, 1797), or *Der Runenberg* (Rune Mountain, 1804). In both cases the mountain appears above all as a refuge from an unhappy present: we see this in the story Eckbert's wife Bertha tell, with sinister overtones, of her departure from a poor family to whose welfare she was incapable of contributing in any way. Her flight takes her to a mountain village, which, set among bare rocks, appears initially to be desolate, but which later, with its woods and valleys, turns out to be welcoming, protective, silent and enchanted, almost a passage from hell to paradise (Tieck 1985, 130). The old lady whom Bertha meets, all dressed in black, has all the characteristics of the menacing, demonic being, living alone in the woods, capable of communicating with animals, therefore nearer to nature and its secrets. However, her house in the woods is clean and tidy and Bertha is welcomed with warmth and kindness. So, above all, the search for an identity which has been denied is set in a place which is full of mystery but not oppressive; the old woman, its tutelary spirit, is arcane but ready to offer assistance to a solitary soul.

Bertha, a simple creature, is impervious to the strange surroundings and learns from the old lady things which her parents had refused to teach her, and more precisely the possibility of constructing one's personality through reading and writing. Later Bertha, portrayed in a condition of solitude, using the common expedient of a challenge, finally achieves serenity and stability, and understands that it is possible to be perfectly happy in a simple and solitary but not hostile world, a world in which the imagination can run away with itself and develop freely. The mountain landscape is shown as a possible Eden, perceived by a sensitive soul as a chosen place, where, in the search for identity, one may find temporary sustenance, as well as a place from which to strike out for freedom. In fact, in a subsequent moment of solitude, the girl begins to feel, along with the sensation of safety that the woods generate in her, a new and typically romantic restlessness: the ardent desire to see the world, to experience new emotions. Having decided to leave, Bertha assumes a part of the identity of the old lady, taking with her the enchanted bird and some of the old lady's precious stones which the bird produces. And at this point everything goes terribly wrong: disobedience towards a demonic being unleashes all the destructive potential of which the mountain landscape is the expression. The precious stones represent wealth, which however is incapable of alleviating the pain of her parents' death, and moreover becomes a source of anxiety, when, once married to Eckbert, she has a constant fear of being robbed.

Eckbert, when confiding in his friend Walther, describes Bertha as unique, and attributes her strange character to the solitary and enchanted place in which she previously lived, that sort of mysterious Eden which has made her special. Besides, Eckbert too is portrayed as a solitary cavalier, melancholy and sensitive, living on the slopes of the Harz, therefore the union is based on an affinity of souls to which the mountain environment, distant and mysterious, is well suited. The final plot, with the revelation of the unwitting incestuous relationship between Eckbert and Bertha, somewhat like the incest theme in Goethe, adds dark overtones to the narrative, and together with the discovery of the old lady's transfigurations, casts an arcane shadow over the whole story. This closes in an emblematically Romantic manner, in which the

landscape represents perfectly the emotional conditions of the characters. Sensitivity, mystery, exchange of identity, hermitage and exclusive friendships, mixed with suspicion which is linked to an attraction for precious stones, make up the typical aspects of an atmosphere in which the landscape is not merely an irrelevant backdrop, but the natural setting for all that which appears conflicting, lacerating and disturbing.

The *Runenberg* too, which, like *Der blonde Eckbert*, was included in the *Phantastus* collection, illustrates the story of a solitary soul who, feeling trapped by everyday life, chooses the mountain landscape as a pleasant and welcome refuge, but who discovers instead, among the cliffs and crevices (Tieck 1985, 185), a whole new country, a »new world«. The *Runenberg* also exploits a fascination for the life of the crystal seeker, and for the algid and abstract seduction of stones. More generally, the whole world of minerals assumes here a primeval attraction, the seduction of an eternal and incorruptible world, steeped in absolute light and perfection. Here we find the image of an unforgettable beauty in the brief glimpse of the woman amongst the ruins at the *Runenberg*, the sinuous and magnificent body of »beauty in the woods«, who magically appears amongst the rocks and crystals. The combined sorcery of the stones and the woman's beauty come together in a symbol of perfection, in relation to which all life-forms appear as wounds, as a sort of violation of a bright and uncorrupted body. When the protagonist tears at a root, he hears the lament of a living but unhappy underworld, in which the plants talk not of the abundance of growth and life, but of pain, of the world's suffering.

The typical Romantic consonance with a disquieting, irregular and mysterious world, perfectly illustrated by Tieck, becomes moreover the symbol of original perfection, in relation to which any generation appears as a decline or laceration. The contrast between the world of stones and the living world is in fact presented as the contrast between the eternal and the perishable, between that which lasts forever such as an image of ideal beauty and that which is generated, and through putrefaction changes. The wild sterility of the mountains does not lessen in value when compared to the richness of the plains: on the contrary, its disorderliness is now reversed. And it becomes the lasting and perfect order of the geometry of minerals. The brightness of the stones becomes the symbol of the brightness of the soul, its attraction is irresistible and the protagonist of *Runenberg*, even after having discovered the peace and sweetness of family life, the experience of becoming a father, is unable to resist it. His choice of a normal life, though well deliberated, is not enough to keep him away from the wild call of the mountains or the abstract appeal of the minerals. According to Tieck, only in minerals can real beauty be found, a beauty that cannot be touched, cannot be destroyed by the bland replica of simple human beauty. And the final outcome of ruin, of family abandonment and the subsequent return to the village with the illusion of wealth, does not dissolve the arcane appeal of a gelid rather than human beauty, in relation to which the protagonist's emotions are intimate, clear and taut.

The reason for Tieck's attraction to the world of stones is linked closely to his interest in *Naturphilosophie*, to his friendship with Henryk Steffens, a pupil of Schelling, and to his interest in the hidden, mysterious world of caves and minerals, which is also characteristic of Novalis. The mountain interior, the grottos; all that which represents a mysterious and unreachable abyss, is in fact the object of a great deal of interest, given that it may be considered an archive, a repository rich in documentation on the earth's origins and consequently on everything else.

If it may be said that the living world is at the heart of *Naturphilosophie*, then the fascination of minerals represents the attraction of all that which is perceived as primeval, original, to which even the essence of human life can be traced. Tieck's style produces darker overtones than that of Goethe and the literary transfiguration which he formulates from cold metal and gelid minerals deals with the subject of origin and essence, set beyond time, in an abstract and ideal dimension. This dimension however can turn out to be concrete if interpreted as a source of wealth, converted in the form of currency.

If the earth is the beginning of everything, then paradoxically all else must be considered in terms of decadence, corruption, putrefaction, therefore as pain and unhappiness. Here, in a manner far more abstract than that employed by Goethe, the stability of minerals represents the culmination of a perfection and of an aesthetic, which however recognises also the irregularity and sinister aspects of the mountain environment. This realm has become an apt symbol of the complexities of the Romantic spirit.

4. Ugo Foscolo

Shine, come forth and shine, Nature. Comfort human beings for their worries. You'll never shine again for me. I've known all of your charms; I've worshipped you. Your beauty has brought joy into my life. But that was while I saw you as beautiful and kind — when you spoke to me with a divine sweetness to tell to keep on living. But in my hopelessness I have pictured you with hands dripping wet from blood; the fragrance of your flowers was like poison to me; your fruit tasted bitter. You seemed to be a cannibal devouring his own children. The one difference is that you use your beauty and charm to lure men to suffer pain (Foscolo, trans. Radcliff-Umstead 1970, 146).⁹

The teachings of Rousseau and Goethe are brought to Italy by Ugo Foscolo. His *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis, 1802) deals with sentimental as well as political events, and for the setting of the story he chooses the much contested Italian borders situated between the regions of Veneto and Liguria, characterised by the Pre-Alpine and Alpine landscape. The importance of landscape is an entirely new concept for Italian literature at that time, an innovation which provides a backdrop capable of tinting the story with light and shadow, of giving imaginary depth to a narrative, which, being in letter style, is entirely »subjective«, so that consequently the emotions of the characters find resonance in intensely suggestive glimpses of the landscape.

At Arquà, suggestions of Petrarca inspire the representation which comes from above of a perfect *locus amoenus*, symbol of a nature which is all harmony and equanimity, the perfect icon of the protagonist's sentimental enthusiasm. From the plants and the animals to all four elements, earth, wind, fire and water, all coming together in a »universal exultation«, Foscolo achieves an idyllic picture of a nature created for man's maximum pleasure and well-being; it is

9. »Splendi, su splendi, o Natura, e riconforta le cure de' mortali. Tu non risplenderai più per me. Ho già sentito tutta la tua bellezza, e t'ho adorata, e mi sono alimentato della tua gioia; e finché io ti vedeva bella e benefica, tu mi dicevi con una voce divina: Vivi. — Ma nella mia disperazione ti ho poi veduta con le mani grondanti di sangue; la fragranza dei fiori mi fu pregna di veleno; amari i tuoi frutti; e mi apparivi divoratrice dei tuoi figlioli, adescandoli con la tua bellezza e co' tuoi doni al dolore« (Foscolo 1983, 142 f.).

expressed in the coolness of the brooks, the leafy shadows, the scented exhalations of the earth. The affirmation that landscape is a feeling is striking in this literary work, written at a time when political events and cultural tendencies suggested maximum political tension and poetic incisiveness. The landscape here has nothing ornamental about it, we are far from Baroque or Arcadian atmospheres: it is the direct and intense expression of a new sensitivity which is bursting forth in Italian culture, and at the same time does not forget the classics as well as references to Alfieri and Parini.

Indeed, immediately after the scene at Arquà, the discovery of the beloved Teresa's unhappiness brings about raging winds and pouring rain and the idyllic picture instantly assumes gloomy and melancholy overtones which tend towards the horrific in the letter dated 19th January from the Euganean hills. Here nature appears »incomprehensible« and certainly not created for men's pleasure. The view from the mountains »whose tops were covered over by a black cloud of icy fog that was falling and adding to the mournful atmosphere of the cold and darkened air« (Foscolo, trans. Radcliff-Umstead 1970, 53),¹⁰ is depressing, and the sweetness of April is offset by the mortal ice of winter.

Of course, Foscolo is not Goethe, despite a certain »Wertherism« in *Ortis*. To be precise, the character of Jacopo, like Goethe (or like Rousseau in the Fifth Promenade), always carries with him his *Linneo*, subsequently losing it, just as he forgets where he has placed the plants which he had gathered with the intention of classifying them. Also present are the unmistakable views from up high. After the splendid contemplation of Teresa's languid, sleeping form, accompanied by the realisation that the protagonist can never love her, the extensive view of the mountain »fills the soul« provoking veneration and at the same time fear. The gentleness of the rolling hills covered in crops is tainted by the nearby ravines, over which the evening shadows grow dark, and which resemble the »mouths of chasms«. The lush vegetation of the far off plain seems to have been cultivated with great fatigue rather than to have grown spontaneously; a passage in the style of the Roman philosopher Lucretius deals with the theory according to which matter constantly reverts back into itself, and the human condition is characterised by incessant, incomprehensible transformations (Foscolo 1983, 73 f., trans. Radcliff-Umstead 1970, 78). To be sure, at the top of the mountain the lover and impassioned patriot certainly feels free, and under the influence of nature, terrible and all powerful, he forgets his ailments and is liberated from the confines of a closed room, which has begun to feel (in the Goethean manner) similar to a sepulchre.

The »terrible majesty of nature« inspires intense Romantic ideas, but after having kissed Teresa, the hero's tormented heart sends him running over mountains and precipices from which the views spread out over the countryside below. This view offers, in place of the fruitful crops, an ever changing vision of nature, the logic of which is hard to grasp. The variety of the landscape corresponds to the turbulence of his feelings: the chasms and cliffs provide a backdrop perfectly suitable for the laceration of the soul. A Rousseau-inspired wood with streams

10. »Il vertice dei quali era immerso in una negra nube di gelida nebbia che piombava ad accrescere il lutto dell'aere freddo ed ottenebrato« (Foscolo 1983, 38).

and sounds of rustling leaves seems to offer protection and a sense of peace which for a moment calms the exacerbated soul, but may also be a premonition of death.

The awareness of the degree of subjectivity is explicit in these descriptions: »we fabricate reality to suit our needs« (Foscolo, trans. Radcliff-Umstead 1970, 85).¹¹ The landscape accompanies scenes of enthusiasm and soul searching, it condenses images in which nature, rather than being strange or indifferent, is directly experienced both as man's projection and as a suitable setting for his actions and sentiments. *Locus amoenus* and *locus horridus* alternate and combine, giving cosmic significance to the emblematic events of the story of the tormented intellectual at the end of the century. The entire universe groans together with Jacopo when he realises he is incapable of changing either his own personal situation or the political situation in Italy: at this point the cliffs and precipices prevail, concealing more and more the gentle, fertile hills which he loves so much, and the whole atmosphere darkens. Decadence and death, as well as senseless and sterile transformation now prevail as the ciphers used to project the presence of nature. The search for solitude high in the mountain peaks is no longer experienced as a desire to meditate on the complex workings of the world, but rather as a desperate lament in the face of a nature which is the mirror of the soul, a nature which the sun no longer makes vital and pulsating, but leaves merely bitter and harsh. Though incomprehensible and impelled in the style of Lucretius in an eternal cycle, the world of nature is never extraneous or far away, but always an indispensable environment in which to create the typically modern Romantic atmosphere.

After Jacopo's frenetic travelling around Bologna, Florence and Milan in the second part of the book, the landscape of the Maritime Alps near Genoa rises as the last symbol of the soul's desperate torment, devoid of hope and by now resigned to death as the only possible choice. The Alps, perceived in all of their discordant beauty, faithfully represent both the emotional turmoil, the intolerable contrast between inclination and convention, and the historical difficulties of the construction of a spiritual, cultural, and political identity in Italy. The landscape of the maritime Alps is characterised by a solitude which embodies an absence of life rather than a beneficial peace: »Nature sits here solitary and threatening while it chases away all living things« (ibid., 134).¹²

This harsh background which bites violently into the sweetness of the Mediterranean, is also the place where the search for concord between the »brothers of Italy« illustrates all of its difficulties. Neither a protective barrier, nor a useful source of life, the Alps appear as a place of laceration, of clashing dispute and terror. Their spatiality is however significant, the ambivalent and symbolic secondary role which they previously played now becomes the principal setting for the actions and emotions of the protagonist, who, just before committing suicide, goes back to visit »his« mountains, »his« solitude, those open spaces, home to a Romantic spirit from which they have drawn significance. And at the end of the novel, significantly, it is here, on the fir mountain, that Jacopo is buried.

Thus, in various ways, the mountain environment has become, in this age, the ideal place in which to express interior conflict: it has a symbolic role, unimaginable in classical aesthetics. Nature is torn to pieces to represent a broken heart, and irregularity perfectly expresses

11. »Ci fabbrichiamo la realtà a nostro modo« (ibid., 74).

12. »La natura siede qui solitaria e minacciosa, e caccia da questo suo regno tutti i viventi« (ibid., 130).

conflict and laceration. In this sense, the great relevance of nature, observed during this period in literature, as well as in science and philosophy, implicates the non-exclusion of elements of disorder and deformity. This complicates as well as enriches the situation, and is therefore perfectly suited, in literary transfiguration, to the representation of the most complicated of Romantic spirits.

5. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

It is well known that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) was conceived during her Swiss vacation in 1817 with Percy B. Shelley and George Byron. The Swiss landscape characterises the whole novel and is the background to the key scenes of the plot. The landscape plays an essential role in the story of Victor Frankenstein, a young science enthusiast, whose areas of research »were directed to the physical secrets of the world« (Shelley 2000, 75), studying first the hermetic sciences and then chemistry and anatomy at the University of Ingolstadt. His birthplace, Geneva, transforms the mountain landscape into the point of departure, the origin, the distinctive criterion for the character, his perspective on the world. Therefore the Alpine landscape appears as a native landscape, and in that way it inspires in the protagonist feelings based on recognition and a sense of belonging. It represents explicitly a *locus amoenus*, shown as a »genial and sunny climate« (ibid., 176) and it is opposed to the various northern landscapes in which he follows or is followed by the monster, from the Orkneys to the North Pole — a landscape that he seems to recognise in the places he loves most on his journeys, such as the banks of the Rhine or the Scottish landscape.

Every time Victor comes back to Switzerland from his travels, the Alpine valleys bring about a self-reconciliation, a newly recovered harmony with the world. On the way to Geneva after the first murder, the landscape of Lausanne placates his soul, and during his excursion to the Chamonix valley the solemnity of Mont Blanc neither depresses nor rejects him: nature appears to be »maternal« and consequently makes him feel »waited on« and tranquillised. The burden on his soul is relieved and the majesty and eternity of the Chamonix valley seem to recover his lost harmony. According to the protagonist (ibid., 91), the awful element itself and the sublime do not connect to an idea of destruction and decline, but to one of duration as well as eternity. We are dealing with a landscape of the soul, a landscape in which self has first taken form, a serene and restful landscape, in which he literally returns home.

These sublime and magnificent scenes afforded me the greatest consolation that I was capable of receiving. They elevated me from all littleness of feeling; and, although they did not remove my grief, they subdued and tranquillised it. In some degree, also, they diverted my mind from the thoughts over which it had brooded for the last month. I retired to rest at night; my slumbers, as it were, waited on and ministered to by the assemblance of grand shapes which I had contemplated during the day. They congregated round me; the unstained snowy mountain-top, the glittering pinnacle, the pine woods, and ragged bare ravine; the eagle, soaring amidst the clouds — they all gathered round me, and bade me be at peace (ibid., 91).

Besides this however, it appears clear that the Alps seem to represent »another earth«; they appear as »the habitations of another race of beings« (ibid., 89), almost a separate world, different

and enchanting, as well as stunning and astonishing. The highlands of the mountain appear as something special and elevated, maternal yet miraculous; a supernatural nature which appears benign as well as superior to mortal powers. Each time that Mont Blanc makes its appearance, there are thunderbolts and storms drifting around it, even though the rest of the sky is unclouded. Behind the delightfulness of the scene lurks a disturbing and alienating medium, and in the heart of this peace, the dark and destructive side of nature makes its appearance.

During the ascent to Montavert, the destructive force of the mountain appears close up: in the signs left by the landslides, in the gushing water of the waterfalls; the landscape appears to be deserted and the benign presence which seemed to have waited upon earlier now appears to have vanished. From the top of the mountain he is afforded a view which encompasses the entire majesty of the glacier, but the extraordinary landscape now provokes in him feelings of melancholy and pain. This is the moment in which, while contemplating Mont Blanc, he turns to the wandering spirits, entrusting to them both his happiness and his pain, and his creature appears bringing havoc and a dissipation of energy.

And what is immediately clear is that the creature appears to be perfectly at ease among the crevasses, living fearlessly among the caverns and the icebergs. Those same skies which now seem desolate appear to be the perfect refuge for the monstrous, inhuman creature, instinctively recognised as such even by the child, who will consequently be killed precisely for this reason. Having been banished from the world of men, it finds shelter in these desolate places, among the Alpine and Polar icebergs, which at this point are places on the same level. »The caves of ice which I only do not fear« (ibid., 94): here the element of terror which the extreme aspects of the landscape inspire is all-consuming. These places are unsuitable to the presence of man, and what had seemed like »another earth«, here unfolds not as a place inhabited by superior beings but as a medium for that which is devious, inhuman, monstrous, a suitable background for man's darker side, for Dr. Frankenstein's deformed double.

Moreover, every time the mountain makes its appearance, it appears initially as a place of recognition and of peacefulness, but then almost immediately it veers towards the horrific, both in the scene when he returns to Geneva and for the first time sees the monster up on the Alps, outside of the city, and at the end of the novel when, during his outing on the lake with his wife, Victor admires the surrounding mountains, from Mont Blanc, to Salève and Giura. The role of the landscape then, is always ambivalent: both calming and at the same time disturbing. The elevation and awareness which it brings are not the only relevant aspect. The mountain landscape lends itself perfectly well to the creation of an atmosphere suitable to a play on the parts of the two aspects of man, on the one hand Promethean and creative, and on the other essentially lawless and inhuman. The landscape clearly symbolises Frankenstein's ambivalence, his thirst for knowledge and his hubris, which diffuses the impetus in the deformed and the monstrous.

The choice of the mountain background therefore has an essential meaning in the economy of the novel: in this way it becomes clear that the *locus horridus* is merely the reverse side of the *locus amoenus*, and that there is no counter-position or contrast. Precisely that which appears familiar and restful, essentially human, at the same time, to a Romantic being, appears to be destructive and monstrous. Neither humanity nor nobility of the spirit exist, which are not at the same time unaware of their own personal abyss.

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