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Mountain Gloom and Yankee Poetry: Thoreau, Emerson, Frost

I have in mind emotions aroused by the passing sights, sounds or smells of mountain environments, or by thoughts about those environments, rather than long-enduring traditional attitudes that have crystallized in the consciousness of artists or of poets.

J.K. Wright, "Mountain Glory and Mountain Gloom in New England"

"Something strange" indeed has come into the minds of these modern people, something that has broken down idols of pattern, regularity, symmetry, restraint, proportion, and replaced them by ideals of diversity, variety, irregularity, most of all by ideals of indefiniteness and vastness, . . .

Marjorie Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*

Might we look upon this entire "range of mountings" as a kind of ideal paradigm? Might we conclude that a writer's work would have the maximum vibrancy if all of these ascensions were somehow contained by the same symbol, in exhilarating harmony?

Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*

There it was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

Wallace Stevens

Summer and winter our eyes had rested on the dim outline of the mountains in our horizon, to which distance and indistinctness lent a grandeur not their own, so that they served equally to interpret all the allusions of poets and travellers . . .

Thoreau, "A Walk to Wachusett"

Many Yankee poets have rested their eyes on the dim outline of the mountains or had their emotions aroused by the sights, sounds or smells of mountain environments or, like Thoreau in Concord and on Katahdin, done both. A smaller number have transmuted their sense of

the mountain, actual, literary, mythical, allegorical, or scientific, into a special, significant poetic statement. I should like to consider and compare three such statements, by Thoreau, Emerson, and Frost: "With Frontier Strength", "Monadnoc", and "The Mountain",¹ not only in themselves but within several possible contexts suggested by the quotations at the head of this essay. These contexts are: first, the traditional attitudes excluded by Wright from his essay but chronicled and analyzed at length by Marjorie Nicholson as the literary reflection of an important shift in the history of ideas;² second, Kenneth Burke's tabulation of various "rhetorical" or symbolic forces that mountains, or "mountings", can have for that rhetorical animal, man;³ third, other literary responses by Thoreau, Emerson, and Frost to the mountains of New England; fourth, the literary relationships we know to exist among these three poets; and finally, a context I hesitate to introduce too fully both for its possible irrelevancy and from the limitations of my own experience, the actual, physical reality of the mountains that give a literal subject to the three poems.

For Wright, Ruskin's famous distinction in *Modern Painters* between two artistic attitudes toward mountains is exemplified by the glory of such "lures" as seeing Monadnock from other, lesser New Hampshire hills, later climbing it, and viewing the New England landscape north and south from its summit and by the gloom of "antilures": forest fires that blacken the land on the mountain's side, loggers that ravage it, and tourists that overcrowd it. All these real glories and glooms — save, perhaps, the last — were ready at hand to the poetic imaginations of Thoreau, Emerson, and Frost.

As one example of "Rhetorical Radiance of the 'Divine' ", the final section of *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke offers "a possible thesaurus of meanings in the symbol of mounting, either the act, or its corresponding image (for a mountain would be a kind of static mounting, the act congealed into a set design)" (p.301). With a brief but suggestive discussion for each, Burke separates the following eight strands of meaning: kinaesthetic appeal, Faustian fascinations, sexual mounting, parental contact, social climbing, ethical betterment, fecal affirmation and transcendence, and finally, hierarchic dialectical generalization.⁴ All these are "resources of the Upward Way", "particular hierarchic embodiments" of "the pure form of the principle of hierarchy" (311). For Burke, as the extra quotation marks surrounding " 'Divine' "

imply, such "rhetorical radiances" are to be accounted for "as much as possible in purely naturalistic terms" by "neurological, linguistic, and 'socioanagogic' explanations" (331). Not all these "mountings", as Burke admits, necessarily involve mountains, even analogically. Nevertheless, as readers and interpreters of Thoreau, Emerson, and Frost, we may wish to make what use we can of Burke's nimble, if controversial, analogies.

Nicolson surveys mankind's ambiguous response to the mountain, from *Genesis* to the Cumberland hills and the Alps of the English Romantic poets: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley. First, she explores the tradition of Classical and Christian responses, literary and Biblical, with their tendency toward abstract, moralized depiction supported by mythology or theology. The orthodox Christian continued to question how, why, or even whether God created mountains, seen as interruptions of earth's symmetry, blemishes against earth's beauty, emblems either of man's original fall from grace or earth's continuing decay toward apocalypse and judgment. Yet for other poets and theologians, even from the beginning, mountains were granted to have a beauty befitting God's creation. Nicolson then shows how, during the renaissance, new astronomy and new geology expanded men's conception of Deity and prepared them for a fresh subjective response to those aspects of nature commonly associated, by the opening of the eighteenth century, with the aesthetic and psychological recognition, experience, and celebration of the Sublime and its "ideals of diversity, variety, irregularity, of indefiniteness and vastness, . . ." (16). Out of this complex tradition came the full Romantic response to the mountain as symbol and as experience. And out of both this tradition and their own individual reactions, came the mountain poetry of Thoreau, Emerson, and Frost.

II

Thoreau published "With Frontier Strength" twice, both times within the context of an imaginative prose work. Part of its original poetic identity, of course, was its role within "A Walk to Wachusett"⁵ and, with some few lines added, in *A Week*.⁶ In the former the poem is the imagined prologue to an actual excursion to and up the mountain

and is presented to us clearly as an alternative to, an anticipation of, and even, by the end of the essay, an allegory of the actual experience. Thus it never becomes the direct, personal, intimate knowing of Wachusett that the essay does. In *A Week* the poem, slightly expanded by this time, is introduced by the same prose lines as in the essay and followed at first by the same lines. But almost at once it becomes the poetic surrogate for those “adventures” and “many similar excursions” which “it would be too long to tell of” (173). One of these Thoreau, with characteristic Yankee perversity, tells of in “Tuesday”, offering as justification the early morning fog that keeps him from seeing anything to write about. He can thus offer his mountain poem, in *A Week*, as poetic epitome of and poetic contrast to the reality of his own climb up the side of Saddleback Mountain and, by implication, of other climbs including, by this time, Mount Katahdin in Maine, the reality of which, as is well known, apparently proved much more daunting, even devastating, to him than any other mountain experience.⁷ It had little relation, even allegorically, to the kinds of response eloquently conveyed in this long poem.

A third identity — probably the earliest — is provided by the entry in the journal for 4 September 1841, four months after the original version of the lines on Wachusett was written in the journal for 2 May 1841: “I think I could write a poem to be called ‘Concord’. For argument I should have the River, the Woods, the Ponds, the Hills, the Fields, the Swamps and Meadows, the Streets and Buildings, and the Villagers. Then Morning, Noon, and Evening, Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter, Night, Indian Summer, and the Mountains in the Horizon.”⁸ Thoreau’s mountain poem, unlike those of Emerson and Frost, may never have been thought of by its author apart from one of these three, very Thoreauvian contexts.

But what of the poem in itself and by itself, as it now stands in the *Collected Poems*? We may surely allow these Thoreauvian contexts to enclose and enrich our response along with the other contexts suggested earlier. First, and most obviously, Thoreau does not centre his poem on one mountain which bears the whole force of his literal and symbolic response, as do Emerson and Frost. Instead, he allows three to arouse in him three different, if overlapping, responses.⁹ The obvious result is to lessen radically any Burkean sense of “mounting”, to diffuse any impulse toward specific allegorical plot in the mode of Dante or

Bunyan, and to keep an imaginative distance from any single hill or peak. He bridges this distance not by recollected experiences but, as we shall see, by certain highly effective visual and empathic analogies — a combination characteristic of Thoreau's verse, which rarely achieves the immediacy of his prose. How much this indirectness cripples his poetry may be a matter of differing taste or historical fashion. In "With Frontier Strength" such analogies have their own power to move us, especially within the perspective established by the poem: Thoreau viewing from Concord "the Mountains in the Horizon". By the time of the final version in *A Week* he had come to know these mountains more closely, had even climbed many of them. But he chooses not to draw on such experience.

The poem opens abruptly with an image which, if allowed to develop or resonate to any extent, could evoke several Burkean "mountings", given the complexity of American attitudes toward the frontier and the obvious power that the image of the frontier had for Thoreau himself.¹⁰ But in spite of its initial prominence, the image is not encouraged to intensify that much within the poem — as it does later in the essay, "A Walk to Wachusett". Thus, its surviving authority, even including its reappearance in the final section of the poem, does not allow for much symbolic force beyond its general signification of pioneer value. For a few lines this frontier strength is held firmly in place topographically and analogically — yet confusingly so far as any frontier implications are concerned — by an Emersonian circle. But with the oxymoronic

Firm argument that never stirs,
Outcircling the philosophers,—

Thoreau begins to move mountains, and his poem.

"Like some vast fleet": this Homeric-Melvillean analogy — with its appeal to the traditional sublimity of mountain and ocean chronicled by Marjorie Nicolson, as well as to a second American "frontier", a second stage for Faustian "mounting" — reaches through the next thirty lines of the poem. It allows Thoreau his first moral transcendental allegory,

Still holding on upon your high emprise,
Until ye find a shore amid the skies;
Not skulking close to land,
With cargo contraband,

and the fanciful, literal-metaphoric visual image of

Convoying clouds
Which cluster in your shrouds,

and above all the empathic, almost Keatsian

I seem to feel ye in my firm seat here,
Immeasurable depth of hold,
And breadth of beam, and length of running gear.

Burke might gloss such a “kinaesthetic” image of effort and exhilaration in the following terms, originally applied to Coleridge: “such ideal identification with the mountainous mass gives us in one ‘moment’ both an imaginary idea of huge effort and the effortlessness of sheer indolence” (302), a Thoreauvian stance.¹¹ Or, if we prefer, Thoreau’s powerful image could evoke a complex physio-psychological state: the climber’s sudden, triumphant halt at the top, his system’s continued cardio-vascular effort, and his imagination’s sense of the moving-rotating earth beneath his feet, all three heightened to their fullest by the metaphorically “mounted” mountain.

The poetic effect is underlined by unobtrusive invocations of what Nicolson calls the rhetorical Sublime: “grand”, “tumultuous”, “distant”, “vast”, “untold”, and “immeasurable”. As in the remainder of the poem, the rhymed, irregular lines bear the modulations of thought, emotion, and imagery effectively. Thus the dozen lines of the next section are more symmetric in rhyme and length to suit the “western leisure” and “unappropriated strength” of the mountains/ships viewed another way. Only at the end does Thoreau, in a single powerful line, unite mountain and ocean with the further sublimity of the “new astronomy”, still new for the literary imagination by Thoreau’s time and even by ours, so as to make the mountains the emblems of the “western” future of “a world/Which through the seas of space is hurled.”

As the mountains are lit by the sinking sun in the west, Thoreau strings together a series of images whose physical identity carries, in each case, some literary echo or quality, from the pastoral hay stacks of “God’s croft”, followed by the heroic “enemy’s camp-fires” and “funeral pyre”, to the Spenserian or Shakespearean opulence of the final lines in which “even Heaven seems extravagant”. These sunset images seem to mount a curiously unThoreauvian ladder of increasing civilization and artificiality. Thoreau may, of course, intend this inverse

“mounting” to parallel the gradual loss of the sun’s elemental light and strength emblematically, just as it does literally, and to bring his vision of “Monadnock and the Peterborough Hills” to its appropriate dying close at day’s end, within which even the richness of the last lines may take on a funeral cast.

Thoreau’s outer and inner eye then turns to Watatic, nearer, lower, and less clearly defined against the sky than Monadnock and its neighbors. His language turns domestic and colloquial for a brief moment of grotesque contrast, followed by an equally momentary recall of the “vast fleet” of the opening section, now shrunk to a passing simile. This is followed by a self-conscious allegorization:

I fancy even
Through your defiles windeth the way to heaven;
And yonder still, in spite of history’s page,
Linger the golden and the silver age;

which seems, in its unabashed conventionality, merely transitional from the expansive vision of the mountains in the northwest to Thoreau’s special kinship with Wachusett, just as were the casual images of the lines directly before. Thoreau uses Watatic, and the fanciful suggestions it arouses, as a respite between two more imaginative responses to the possibilities of his poetic subject.

Wachusett, that Thoreau knew best and thought of most, gives his poem its climax and its conclusion:

But special I remember thee,
Wachusett, who like me,
Standest alone without society.

What more successful form of “socioanogogic” transcendence than to make oneself the very mountain, to contain synecdochally all the strivings and uncertainties of social hierarchy, of social climbing, within one’s own asserted, antisocial mountain identity. Especially when the very vehicle of this social transcendence, Wachusett, could be viewed daily from within that Concord society to whose hierarchical judgments Thoreau remained always vulnerable in reality, no matter how far he managed to transcend them by the strategies of the literary imagination which could place him, in both senses, “without” society.

Moreover, this personal identification with the literal apartness of Wachusett — it rises conspicuously above the general western horizon — also allowed Thoreau to make the full poetic significance of the

mountains integral to his own "climb" toward full identity. The last twenty-five lines of the poem apply to Wachusett in a more condensed, more heightened form Thoreau's vision of the mountains as journeying to the west, reaching toward the skies, without shame or fear, without the "pilgrim's axe" of either Bunyan, making a clearing where Frost never would — "in the sky". The final two couplets give eloquent, epigrammatic expression to this identification and this recapitulation by two, heavily caesural, balanced lines and by two resonating puns, the Anglo-Saxon, recompounded "past-time" and the witty, Latinate "approve myself thy worthy brother!"

III

In his essay-review of the first publication of the *Collected Poems*, Henry Wells made the obvious contrast between Thoreau's mountain ode and Emerson's "Monadnoc" — even their spelling was different: "Emerson's poem is clearer in meaning and nearer to the usual practices of the times in metre, symbol, texture, and total effect. A Yankee practicality in this verse withholds it from the more catholic and liberated imagination conspicuous in all Thoreau's best lyrics. To his contemporaries Thoreau's poem must certainly have appeared rough and raw. To us it seems less regular in its beauty, subtler, more meditative and, in the very delicacy and elusiveness of its symbolism, so much the more poetic. Thoreau's picture of mountains as ships pioneering on strange seas possesses a poetic scope and a richness of imagination of which Emerson proved incapable."¹² As a brief descriptive comparison this seems fair enough. But as an implied aesthetic judgement, it may not recognize the differing literary intention of the two poems, their separate Yankee responses to New England "mountain glory". As Harold Bloom puts it, "Thoreau is a more Wordsworthian poet than Emerson, and so meets a nature ruggedly recalcitrant to visionary transformations," whereas "Emerson's Monadnoc is genial and gnomic."¹³ Elsewhere, Bloom finds "Monadnoc" to be "a powerful ramble of a poem, now absurdly undervalued",¹⁴ and for Hyatt H. Waggoner, it is "among the finest things Emerson ever wrote".¹⁵ Bloom's comparison of "Monadnoc" with poems by Stevens and Ammons, and Waggoner's comparison with Robinson's "Monadnock Through the Trees", suggest a further literary context for our three poems.

Emerson, unlike Thoreau, makes one mountain the subject of his poem, but of its actual physical or symbolic identity gives little sense in "Monadnoc", apart from such neo-classical periphrases as "airy citadel", "Cheshire's haughty hill", "fixed cone", "aerial isle unploughed". Rather, we know this mountain by its real or fancied emanations, what Emerson called elsewhere the "uses" of nature, what it does for man and what it "says" to him. With regard to its ostensible subject, the poem is centrifugal rather than centripetal, and for unsympathetic readers the effect may be more one of philosophical patter than genuine poetic eloquence.

But perhaps a fairer approach to the poem's real excuse for being would be by way of Bloom's well-chosen term "genial". For Emerson's first approach to this traditional occasion for both the natural and the rhetorical Sublime is curiously relaxed, even domesticating. The mountain is a model of Yankee, Puritan husbandry:

In his own loom's garment dressed,
By his proper bounty blessed,

of pastoral plenty:

Garden of berries, perch of birds,
Pasture of pool-haunting herds,

even of pioneer house-masonry:

Earth-baking heat, stone-cleaving cold.

Its traditional mythological identity, unlike that of Thoreau's Katahdin or Melville's Greylock, is of a prosperous yet philanthropic Concord squire:

The Titan heeds his sky-affairs,
Rich rents and wide alliance shares;

with an added talent for exterior decoration.

The general ease and lightness of all this is, of course, supported by Emerson's end-stopped, regular, verse rhythms, echoed in Frost's lighter verse. These opening sections of the poem might be intended to contrast unfavorably in form and substance with the later speeches of Monadnoc, but I find little evidence of any ironic discounting in the lines as they stand or of any clear structural sign, later, of either rhetorical or dramatic opposition. The burden of geniality, in short,

seems at first to weigh equally on poet and mountain.

Emerson then apostrophizes Monadnoc with a pre-Romantic and Romantic cliché:

‘Happy,’ I said, ‘whose home is here!
Fair fortunes to the mountaineer! . . .’

but goes on to give the issue somewhat more searching consideration. First, he contrasts the “squalid peasant” with the “patriots” he “thought to find” from traditional allegorical-environmental convictions of the sort recognized by Nicolson and absorbed by Kenneth Burke:

And by the moral of his place
Hint summits of heroic grace;
Man in these crags a fastness find
To fight pollution of the mind;

but then giving his (patronizing?) qualified approbation of the highland people,

Coarse and boisterous, yet mild,
Strong as giant, slow as child.

They are also, in the eye of the World-soul, and of Emerson, the raw material out of which will be prepared

For the next ages, men of mould
Well embodied, well ensouled, . . .

Frost had his own comment on all this, in “New Hampshire”:

The glorious bards of Massachusetts seem
To want to make New Hampshire people over.
They taunt the lofty land with little men.¹⁶

Yet in a letter to Regis Michaud, Frost also praised highly the next section of Emerson’s perhaps undervalued but certainly uneven poem: “Some twenty-two lines in ‘Monadnoc’ beginning ‘Now in sordid weeds they sleep’ (I don’t need to copy them out for such an Emersonian as you, Michaud) meant almost more to me than anything else on the art of writing when I was a youngster; and that not just on the art of writing colloquial verse but on the art of writing any kind of verse or prose.”¹⁷

Looking forward and back at this point in the poem, it is possible to qualify my earlier comment and to see in “Monadnoc” three distinct poems, differing in intention, in seriousness, in originality, in stylistic

force, and in total effect. The first "poem," a generalized and gentlemanly 18th-century topographical poem, succeeds within its modest and pleasant limitations as do many poems of the sort called by Nicolson "Denham's literary progeny" (p.326). The second "poem," clearly unsuccessful, begins with Emerson's or the speaker's apostrophe to the mountain and is a hectoring, didactic sermon in verse deserving Frost's disapproval and insufficiently redeemed by the comments on language, into which Frost seems to have read the eloquence and subtlety of some of Emerson's other, prose comments on the same topic — in "The Poet" or the essay on Montaigne. The third "poem" begins with the poet standing on the summit of Monadnoc, already translated to a priestly hierarchic elevation, where he is, at last, in close physical communion with the mountain's self — without, however, having mounted physically or analogically any visible Upward Way or sounded any symbol to maximum vibrancy. This third "poem", which sets Monadnoc's "speech" against Emerson's final, fullest poetic comment, is the true "Monadnoc", one of Emerson's finest poems.

Monadnoc "speaks" to the poet — I have no more adequate term for what Emerson delicately conveys:

Seemed to me, the towering hill
Was not altogether still,
But a quiet sense conveyed:

in a voice as elemental as that of the Earth in "Hamatreya" but more complex in idea and image. The regular tetrameter couplets of the earlier two "poems" contained in "Monadnoc" acquire a subtler, more interesting music. The questions, insinuations, and affirmations of Monadnoc to the listener reassure us in their tonal and mythical rightness that Emerson's risky personification has been carried off successfully, as in "Hamatreya", and at much more length; this part of "Monadnoc", at least, does have some claim to be the "tessera" of Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" that Bloom finds it to be, "any later poet's attempt to persuade himself (and us) that the precursor's Word would be worn out if not redeemed as a newly fulfilled and enlarged Word of the ephebe."¹⁸ Emerson's vision is now centrifugal in time as well as in space, spiralling back to questions of Monadnoc's origin in literal volcanism and transcendental design and forward to the coming of the "bard and sage" whose "large thoughts" will harvest the true fruit of the mountain in contrast to the "spruce clerk" driven back to the "dapper town" by Monadnoc's sublimity.

Having achieved his own poetic voice at last, by Monadnoc's ventriloquial intervention, Emerson articulates with Yankee brevity, "It is pure use", and Renaissance wit, eloquence, and precision,

Firm ensign of the fatal Being,
Amid these coward shapes of joy and grief,

Monadnoc's full, Emersonian role:

Thou grand affirmer of the present tense,
And type of permanence!

Although still not the complex literary symbol that the mountain was for Thoreau, Monadnoc has become, for Emerson, a transcendental emblem, exemplar, and guide, which

dost succor and remede
The shortness of our days,

and

imagest the stable good
For which we all our lifetime grope,
In shifting form the formless find,
And though the substance us elude,
We in thee the shadow find.

IV

Reuben Brower likens Frost's "The Mountain" to a Platonic dialogue.¹⁹ Frost suggested that the book in which it was to appear might be called "New England Eclogues",²⁰ and certainly the Virgilian eclogue would seem more appropriate source for the debate form and the easy pastoral tone of "The Mountain", Frost's half-skeptical, especially Yankee response to the tradition of mountain gloom and mountain glory. In a famous episode in the pre-history of man's changing attitude toward mountains, Marjorie Nicolson reminds us (pp.49-50), Petrarch, refusing to be dissuaded by an old herdsman who had tried the climb unsuccessfully long before but found it too much trouble, ascended Mount Ventoux in April, 1335, savored the view, and then turned away from the sight of natural sublimity to contemplate the sublimity of man. Frost seems, in "The Mountain", to be giving his own Yankee reenactment of that event. And his poem, as we shall see, recapitulates with Frostian indirection the major classical and Christian traditions considered in Nicolson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*.

But first we might look at a passage of some length in "New Hampshire", written almost certainly after Frost had written "The Mountain". Toward the end of "New Hampshire" Frost offers, as a further rebuttal of Emerson, this modest proposal:

If I must choose which I would elevate —
 The people or the already lofty mountains,
 I'd elevate the already lofty mountains.
 The only fault I find with old New Hampshire
 Is that her mountains aren't quite high enough.²¹

Frost goes on to consider which of several reasons explains why

I was not always so; I've come to be so.

Does he feel some Thoreauvian empathy with the mountain's own strength and stature? Or, in the manner of the English Romantic poets,

Can it be foreign travel in the Alps?

(which Frost himself, incidentally, never seems to have undertaken). Or is the reason an Emersonian transcendental vision of

The solid moulding of vast peaks of cloud
 Behind the pitiful reality

which inspires Frost to emulation; or an equally Emersonian, even neo-classical, theory of natural symmetry:

Or some such sense as says how high shall jet
 The fountain in proportion to the basin?

"No," says Frost, "none of these" but the "sad accident" of seeing an early map in which the mountains were given twice their real height. Nicolson finds such errors characteristic of our mountain knowledge until very recently; they "offered imagination a terrestrial vastness we can hardly comprehend" and "led men to transfer the immensity of interstellar space to the vastest terrestrial objects seen or imagined by man" (150). The passage from "New Hampshire", then, is wry testament to the continuing strength of mountain traditions and the creative power of the human imagination — as in "The Mountain".

Frost opens this poem with a direct response to the mountain that has the same "implicit dualism" Nicolson found recurring in attitudes toward mountains from the earliest time. On the one hand,

The mountain held the town as in a shadow.

And,

I missed stars in the west,
Where its black body cut into the sky.

Yet on the other hand,

I felt it like a wall
Behind which I was sheltered from a wind.

There are fields between the town and the mountain presumably watered by the mountain's streams; yet there are signs of the destruction done by the spring waters that flood off the mountain and down the river:

Good grass land gullied out, and in the grass
Ridges of sand, and driftwood stripped of bark.

The mountain can be both ominous and reassuring, pastoral and hostile.

On the back side of the mountain, a portentous location, Frost then meets one of Emerson's "squalid peasants", who proves to be a quasi-mythological, elemental figure,

a man who moved so slow
With white-faced oxen in a heavy cart,
It seemed no harm to stop him altogether.

Or just a sluggish rural "character". Either way, by the end of the poem the other speaker, with his oxen, has also proven himself a Wordsworthian sage, with a Yankee wit, and even, perhaps, a local deity who may well have lived "since Hor/Was no bigger than a —"

Hor is the name of a real New England mountain, in fact, more than one, although not, apparently, in Lunenburg.²² But in *Numbers* 20: 22-28 we are told how Moses and Aaron, on God's commandment, went to the top of Mount Hor, a traditionally sacred site, where Aaron died without entering the promised land as part of God's punishment of the Israelites for having doubted Him at Meribah, at which place Moses had struck the rock with his staff and made the waters gush forth. Brower, while pointing all this out, tip-toes rather carefully around it: "There is a mystery, and the added ironic amusement of knowing about a mystery and not bothering to investigate"²³ — both in the poem, presumably, and in responding to it. But what is Frost really up to? The name "Hor" is, after all, thrust in front of us four times within

fifteen lines. Is the relation between this New England "mountain" and the Near Eastern one Frost had earlier associated with the ancient city of Petra in his essay in the Lawrence High School *Bulletin* for December, 1891,²⁴ is this relation *only* a playful and ironic one? Or is Frost, as usual, having it both ways? To complicate matters further,

But there's the spring,
Right on the summit, almost like a fountain.

On the classical Mount Helicon, sacred to the Muses — as Frost well knew — was the spring Hippocrene, brought into being by a blow from the hoof of Pegasus. Warm or cold, one way or another, then, these remain powerful waters, on a very mysterious mountain.

Thoreau's poem was a series of differing responses to different mountains at different points on the horizon's curve, radiated out from the common imaginative centre of his own imaginative responses to find new imagined centres in the actual mountains, symbolically considered. Emerson's poem tries to express in words a series of emanations, "messages", transmitted from Monadnoc to the receiving poet and from him to us. Frost, in his turn, interweaves and counterpoints two sets of attitudes in a potentially inter-destructive dialectic, all within the implied dramatic context of whether Frost or the other speaker should or would climb the mountain, now or ever.

The man who has lived his life beside the mountain feels toward it some of the ancient hostility toward mountains as blemishes upon God's earth:

'We were but sixty voters last election.
We can't in nature grow to many more:
That thing takes all the room!' He moved his goad.
The mountain stood there to be pointed at.

He knows the reality of Ladd's place, from which the mountain has been climbed, but there seems no way of climbing it from this side, which is his side, and he is more interested in what he has heard about the magical spring "Right on the top, tip-top," although, "It may not be right on the very top;" after all. We can see the role of Petrarch's discouraged herdsman split between this speaker and "a fellow climbing it" whom he asked "To look and tell me later how it was." However, after turning the conversation to a legendary lake in Ireland.

He never got up high enough to see.
That's why I don't advise your trying this side.

Why doesn't he climb the mountain himself? As always in Frost, the poem's words imply more questions than they ever actually answer to our full satisfaction. Familiarity has obviously bred a sort of contempt:

It doesn't seem much to climb a mountain
You've worked around the foot of all your life.

And yet there seems to be a more basic indisposition:

'Twouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it.

If there is no "real" reason to climb the mountain, then why climb it? The mountaineer's "because it is there" obviously has no force, and the speaker might seem to have a divine immunity to the very human appeal of Burkean hierarchy, to have transcended the very need for transcendence, to have become inhuman, a god. Putting it another way, though,

But all the fun's in how you say a thing.

This harmless-sounding, thoroughly subversive line puts not only the magic of the spring but all that he has said into Burke's world of rhetoric. Perhaps the countryman's verbal ascent to the spring, "that ought to be worth seeing", and his gradual descent from this rhetorical elevation is his true "mounting", after which he disappears from the poem with all the suddenness of a divine visitation, or a Yankee at last in a hurry.

What attitudes does Frost, as a fictional, dramatized character within the poem, display to us? We have already observed his initial awareness of the mountain's dual nature and his conscious approach closer to the mountain, to know it better.

The mountain stood there to be pointed at. This line not only concludes the countryman's hostile comment, as we have already seen, but introduces Frost's direct visual apprehension of the physical reality of the mountain. His apprehension of this reality in turn arouses his desire for further knowledge:

Is that the way to reach the top from here? —
Not for this morning, but some other time:

The desire, if real and not merely conversational, is not too pressing. Frost, like most of us and unlike Thoreau, may have thought about climbing mountains more than he actually climbed them. Frost, as character, in any case, is no zealot:

I shouldn't climb it if I didn't want to –
Not for the sake of climbing.

Thus, neither Frost nor the countryman has climbed the mountain or seems likely to very soon. But there is an important difference between their ways of imagining what the climb would be like. Frost does supply one kinaesthetic image of actual climbing, interwoven with traces of the rhetorical sublime,

Great granite terraces in sun and shadow,
Shelves one could rest a knee on getting up –
With depths behind him sheer a hundred feet;

whereas the countryman sees it more as another farm errand:

What would I do? Go in my overalls,
With a big stick, the same as when the cows
Haven't come down to the bars at milking time?
Or with a shotgun for a stray black bear?

But the next two lines of Frost's imagined ascent suggest other, more significant differences:

Or turn and sit on the look out and down
With little ferns in crevices at his elbow.

Frost's "leafy screens" and "little ferns" contrast with the countryman's "bushes" and "bear", as pastoral images. The farmer's self-image in relation to the mountain is wholly adult. But compare the two lines above with the last two from another Frost poem, "The Birthplace",

The mountain pushed us off her knees.
And now her lap is full of trees.²⁵

Subconsciously at least, Frost seems to express in the two lines from "The Mountain" what he later made explicit, what Burke calls "the theme of the maternal mountain: the mountain as the parental source" (p.303). Finally, whereas Frost in his imagination looks centrifugally outward:

There ought to be a view around the world
From such a mountain –

the countryman's vision, both real and fancied, is centripetally directed toward the mountain from its foot or sides.

Which view, that of the countryman or that of Frost the dramatized character, gives us a better sense of the mountain? I don't think we have to choose, although the countryman's vision seems to have a directness and integrity lacking in the vision of Frost the character. Frost the poet, of course, has given us both visions, and our reaction to the sustained ambiguities and unresolved dialectic in "The Mountain" will be of a piece with our reaction to these same characteristics in so many other of Frost's poems, from the lyrical "The Road Not Taken" to the dramatic "Home Burial".

V

There they are, three poems that take the place of a mountain, three different Yankee responses to the gloom or glory of the mountains of New England. These three poems also take their place within the context of such other Yankee responses to the mountains of New England as: Bryant, "Monument Mountain"; Channing, "The Mountains"; Whittier, "Monadnock from Wachusett"; Dickinson, "Bloom upon the Mountain" (No.667); Robinson, "Monadnock through the Trees"; Stevens, "Chocorua to its Neighbor"; Richard Eberhart, "The Skier and the Mountain"; Robert Francis, "Monadnock"; and Galway Kinnell, "Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock." All these poems, in turn, could be considered within the contexts established at the opening of this essay, as yet other examples of mountain gloom and Yankee poetry.

Footnotes

1. Henry Thoreau, *Collected Poems*, ed. Carl Bode (Baltimore, 1964), pp.47-50; R.W. Emerson, *Works* (Boston, 1904), IX, 60-75; Robert Frost, *Complete Poems* (New York, 1949), pp.56-60.
2. J.K. Wright, "Mountain Glory and Mountain Gloom in New England," *Man and His Habitat*, ed. R.H. Buchanan, et al. (New York, 1971), pp.202-217; Marjorie Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of The Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, 1959).
3. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York, 1950), pp.301-313.
4. William H. Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* (Minneapolis, 1963), lists them as follows: "(1) Imagery of height and depth; (2) Alpinism, mountain-climbing in answer to a call; (3) sexual mounting, sexual ambiguities of all kinds; (4) social climbing, improvement of status; (5) ethical mounting; (6) the pyramidal dung heap, transcending of filth, ascent by purification; (7) the dialectic of the Upward Way." (p.142)

5. *Works* (Boston, 1906) V, 133-152.
6. *Works* (Boston, 1906) I, 170-173.
7. Sherman Paul, *The Shores of America* (Urbana, 1958), pp.358-362; John G. Blair and Augustus Trowbridge, "Thoreau on Katahdin," *American Quarterly*, 12 (1960), 508-517; Leo Stoller, *After Walden* (Stanford, 1957), pp.45-47.
8. *Journal* (Boston, 1906), I, 282.
9. In the intermediate version in "A Walk to Wachusett" the second of the three, Watatic, is not introduced; we have only "Monadnock, and the Peterboro' Hills" and in the very final section, Wachusett, which seems rather tacked on.
10. See: Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, 1950); Edwin Fussell, *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (Princeton, 1965); Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, 1967).
11. With un-Burkean cowardice, I relegate to a footnote the suggestion that this passage may also, by a process of undeliberate double-entendre, be an example of subconscious and subliterate fecal transcendence, to be compared with the quite conscious and literary "somewhat excrementitious" images of fecal affirmation in the "Spring" section of Thoreau's *Walden*.
12. "An Evaluation of Thoreau's Poetry," *Thoreau: A Century of Criticism*, ed. Walter Harding (Dallas, 1954), pp.158-159.
13. "A.R. Ammons: 'When You Consider the Radiance,'" *The Ringers in the Tower* (Chicago, 1971), pp.261-262.
14. "Bacchus and Merlin: The Dialectic of Romantic Poetry in America," *The Ringers in the Tower*, p.293.
15. *American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present* (Boston, 1968), p.108.
16. *Complete Poems*, p.207. Frost is, of course, echoing the language of the "Ode" to Channing, but it is clear from his half-recantation of this criticism in very old age that he also has in mind the lengthy passage in "Monadnoc." See *Selected Prose*, ed. Cox and Latham (New York, 1966), p.113.
17. *Selected Letters*, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York, 1964), p.228.
18. *The Ringers in the Tower*, pp.294-295.
19. *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York, 1963), p.166.
20. *Selected Letters*, p.89.
21. *Complete Poems*, pp.208-209.
22. For one real Mount Hor, now associated with Robert Frost, see Edward Hoagland's "Of Cows and Cambodia" in *Walking the Dead Diamond River* (New York, 1973).
23. *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, pp.90-91.
24. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence* (New York, 1960), p.23. For Sergeant, " 'The Mountain' (inexplicably called Hor) ... is a blend of many mountains." A good commentary on the traditional significances of mountains in the Bible is Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972).
25. *Complete Poems*, p.339.