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# Mountains Inside Out: The Sublime Mines of Novalis

## From Sunlit Peaks to the Dark Entrails of the Mountains

The eighteenth century marks a turning point in the Western understanding of the mountains. The Englishman Thomas Burnet had already described, in his *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681), the awe he felt when faced with high peaks. While crossing the Alps he realized that “there is something august and stately in the Air of these things [the mountains], that inspires the Mind with great Thoughts and Passions.” “[W]e do naturally, upon such Occasions, think of God and his Greatness,” writes Burnet, for “whatsoever hath but the Shadow and Appearance of INFINITE, as all Things have that are too big for our Comprehension, they fill and overbear the Mind with their Excess, and cast it into a pleasing kind of Stupor and Admiration” (191–92). Still, Burnet’s feelings of wonder were mixed with horror when he contemplated the violent Alpine scenery of ragged slopes and unimaginable elevations. His shock was conditioned by age-old prejudices against peaks, believed to be the result of human sin inscribed onto the once-flat surface of the earth.<sup>1</sup> Long thought to be the dwelling place of monsters, witches, and evil spirits, mountains were commonly regarded as dangerous, inhospitable areas best to be avoided.

But the cultural connotations of elevations cannot be reduced to their construal as hostile environments. Mountains were also, traditionally, the seat of divinity, from Mount Olympus in Ancient Greek mythology to Mount Ararat and Mount Sinai in the Judeo-Christian

context. This longstanding association of high peaks with religion and, more broadly, with spirituality, resurfaced toward the end of early modernity and led to a renewed appreciation of mountains during Romanticism. As Marjorie Hope Nicholson points out in *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, this period witnessed a reversal in cultural attitudes toward elevations. In England alone, John Dennis, Lord Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, and Horace Walpole, all writing within just a few decades after Burnet, commented on their astonishment when they beheld the great pinnacles of the Alps. They reported experiencing not only awe, like Burnet, but also a strange mix of pain and aesthetic pleasure triggered by the sight of Alpine landscape.

The contribution of the mountains to the theory of aesthetics coalesced in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Burke distinguishes the sublime from the beautiful in that the former elicits both pleasure and pain and is therefore "productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (110). He develops a complex biological explanation as to "why visual objects of great dimensions are sublime" (217). For Burke, the imprint of a large body, such as a mountain, on the human retina would necessarily strain the eyes and inflict pain. He argues that humans associate delight with certain forms of pain, including the one produced by seeing elevations. In an effort to counter the pernicious effects of indolence and inaction, divine Providence made human beings appreciate the exertion brought about by labor. Work, which involves a contraction of the muscles, is sometimes painful, but, thanks to the wisdom of Providence, humans take delight in it. According to Burke, the straining of the eyes when one sees a mountain is akin to the straining of the muscles when we work, and it causes both pain and delight, leading us to experience the sublime.

Burke's outdated notions of human physiology notwithstanding, the link between the sublime and the mountains was to become a mainstay of nature writing from Romanticism onward. For instance, the Scottish Highlands and the Lake District—the most famous British Romantic landscapes—became renowned for their similarity with the Alps, the archetype of the Romantic sublimity (Garrard 71). From Henry Thoreau's climb to the summit of Mount Katahdin, through Aldo Leopold's injunction for humans to "think like a mountain" (132), to Arne Ness's praise of high peaks in deep ecology, mountains were to remain key to ecological thought and sites where humans admired the natural sublime.

But there is an underside to this luminous history of the sublime associated with mountain peaks. For, if light was needed to view majestic elevations, darkness could also elicit the feeling of sublimity. For

Burke, “[w]hatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror be endued with greatness of dimensions or not” (130). We can experience the sublime not only when we see large bodies, such as mountains, but also when we contemplate anything that causes terror and pain, mixed with aesthetic admiration. Darkness, which prevents us from seeing, is “terrible in its own nature” (226), and therefore can trigger the experience of the sublime as effectively as the highest mountain range.

Burke’s reflections on sublime darkness pave the way to a reevaluation of obscurity and of the night in Romanticism. Throughout the history of Western thought, darkness was linked to ignorance, while light was associated with knowledge. Plato, for instance, often uses the sun as a metaphor for reason that will allow humans to leave the world of appearances behind and reach the eidetic sphere. The Platonic association of light and knowledge remained a pillar of European thought up to the Enlightenment, a cultural and philosophical movement that postulated as its goal the eradication of superstition, prejudice, and blind faith. The latter should be replaced by the universal laws of rationality, that is to say, by the light of reason, an idea that stands at the origin of the word “Enlightenment.”

Already within the Enlightenment movement, a philosopher like Immanuel Kant pointed out the limits of human reason in his distinction between phenomena that can be experienced and the realm of noumena, which lies beyond human knowledge. But it was only with Romanticism that the Enlightenment project of individual emancipation through the light of reason and its political consequences was questioned. Moving away from the luminosity that had hitherto dominated the discourse of Western philosophy, the writers of the Romantic period praised the darkness of the night, and contributed to dethroning the primacy of sight, replacing it with the senses of hearing and of touch. Thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder and poets like Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) tapped into the hidden power of darkness in their turn toward hitherto neglected forms of experience, namely death, the dream world, the irrational, and the unspeakable.<sup>2</sup>

In his *Hymns to the Night*, Novalis underscores the relevance of darkness for Romantic thought: “[m]ore heavenly than those flashing stars the endless eyes seem, which Night opens up in us,” since these blind eyes “having no need for Light,” “see through the depths of a loving soul” (12–13). The German writer pits the superficiality of light, which only touches upon the exterior of beings, against the depth of darkness. The light of reason is here unable to reach the core of human existence that can only be approached in darkness with “blind eyes.” According to Novalis, the eyes that see in the night are able to move

beyond appearances and decipher the profound secrets of the soul.<sup>3</sup> This notion that the soul lies beyond the reach of luminous rationality will gain scientific currency in the beginning of the twentieth century with psychoanalysis, which privileged the unconscious, hidden beneath the surface of what we know, remember, and can fit in narrative structures, as the key to understanding human behavior.

Novalis developed the opposition between light and darkness, height and depth, in his unfinished Bildungsroman, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, published posthumously in 1802 in an edition of the writer's works compiled by his friends Friedrich Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck. Heinrich von Ofterdingen was a legendary, Medieval German poet, chosen by Novalis as the protagonist of his narrative to represent the spirit of art and poetry. The novel depicts Heinrich's trip from his father's house and hometown of Eisenach in Central Germany, to his mother's birthplace in Augsburg, located close to the country's southern border, sometime during the thirteenth century. Augsburg is presented in the book as the combination of the diligent German work ethic with the more carefree and artistic attitude prevalent in the South, where the so-called "Latins" live (27). In his training to become a poet, Heinrich was meant to embody both German industriousness and Latin creativity, thus synthesizing the best of both worlds.

It is significant that in this "road-novel" there is little mention of impressive mountains and high peaks, so common in the work of other Romantic writers. Rather, it is the inside of the mountains that draws Heinrich's attention, triggers in him the aesthetic feeling of the sublime, and awakens his poetic calling. During his journey of initiation, Heinrich meets several men who function as role models in his learning process. He comes across a miner and, together, they find a hermit who had been living for years deep inside mountain caves, having only his books for company. As the protagonist explains later in the narrative, the miner stands for wisdom received from nature, while the hermit represents teachings drawn from human history. Both, however, acquired their knowledge, which they pass on to Heinrich, inside the mountains. In the darkness of mountain caves and passages, the miner and the hermit are not blinded by the glow of superficialities and can, therefore, grasp the essential truths of the natural world and of human life.

### Back to the Past, Back to Nature

The depiction of miners in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* reveals the novel's positive valuation of the depths of the mountain. According to the hermit, miners are "astrologers in reverse," since they do not "gaze

incessantly at the heavens and stray through those immeasurable spaces" but, instead, turn their attention to "the earth and explore its structure," "investigate the powers of rocks and mountains and the manifold effects of the strata of earth and rock" (86).<sup>4</sup> The hermit draws here a distinction between the knowledge of astrology, gained from looking upward toward the skies and from contemplating the light of the sun and the stars, and the insights acquired by moving downward and boring ever deeper into the rock of mountains. This comparison between astrology and mining in the novel is indebted to the development of the science of geology and the discovery of geological time, which was understood as a counterpart to the expansion of the heavens with Newtonian science (Rigby 139).<sup>5</sup> The temporal dimension of the two sciences is further explored when the hermit states that, for astrologers, "the sky is the book of the future," while miners delve into the earth in order to better appreciate the achievements of the past in "monuments of the primeval world" (86). Even though the hermit does not repudiate astrology, it becomes clear in the text that he finds mining to be a superior activity.

The hermit's take on mining in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* signals that light, height, and the earth's surface are replaced in the text by darkness, depth and the underground as paradigmatic ideals. Instead of looking up to mountain ranges in search of spiritual inspiration and aesthetic stimulation, a young man such as Heinrich should find it deep inside the mountain. This inversion of directionality toward the depths is accompanied by a move backward in the direction of the past. Rejecting the forward-looking mindset of the Enlightenment, the hermit suggests that, rather than guessing what the future might bring, Heinrich should focus on the lessons of earlier times in sync with the Romantic interest in history. Disenchanted with historical progress, which seemed to be tied to an increasing industrialization, and more broadly, to the "modern age" and its "monotonous and more humdrum picture of a commonplace day" (25), Romantic writers harked back to the past, and especially to the Middle Ages. Perceived to be the root of European nationalities and a Golden Age of art and poetry, this historical time is characterized in the novel as a "reflective and romantic period concealing a higher form under its simple garment" (25). The Romantic recovery of the Middle Ages, formerly known as the "Dark Ages," is part of the shift in values that we have been describing. Novalis's choice of a quasi-mythical medieval poet for the protagonist of his novel is to be understood in light of this fascination with a pre-modern, pre-scientific, almost magical mindset.

It may seem ironic to a contemporary reader that, at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, which drew heavily on mining to secure both

fuel and raw materials for the new manufacturing industries, Novalis, with his dreamy and backward-looking approach to art and society, would choose a miner as a model for his protagonist. What is more, the writer's views on mining were not derived from an idealized, imaginary conception of this activity, since he had first-hand knowledge of the business. He was appointed auditor of the salt mines of Weissenfels, where his father was director, in 1776 and entered the Freiberg Mining Academy a year later.<sup>6</sup> Still, Novalis fails to mention both the environmental impact of mining and the strenuous lives of miners, topics that were to figure prominently in Romantic and post-Romantic literature. Writing less than two decades after the publication of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, E.T.A. Hoffman paints a Dantesque picture of a mining landscape in "The Mines of Falun" (1819): "Not a tree, not a blade of grass to be seen [ . . . ]. In the abyss itself lie in wild confusion—pell-mell—stones, slag, and scoria, and an eternal, stupefying sulphurous vapour rises from the depths, as if the hell-broth, whose reek poisons and kills all the green gladness of nature, were being brewed down below" (293–94). Similarly, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Émile Zola drew attention to the plight of destitute and exploited mine workers in his masterpiece *Germinal* (1877).

Novalis's depiction of one of the most emblematic professions during the Industrial Revolution contrasts sharply with the image of environmental degradation highlighted by Hoffman and with Zola's denunciation of the appalling living conditions endured by miners. One reason for this discrepancy might have been the type of mining with which Novalis was acquainted. While mines in England were already firmly linked to industrialization and to the highly polluting extraction of coal, this connection was established only later in Germany. During Novalis's lifetime, mining was still primarily viewed as the skilled work of extracting salt, precious metals, and stones, an activity practiced by craftsmen, rather than an impoverished proletariat, and with little visible impact on the surrounding landscape (Rigby 140).

Novalis's miner is neither shocked with pollution, as is the case with Hoffman's protagonist, nor is he an activist, fighting for the rights of proletarians like Zola would imagine some decades later. Yet, the absence of explicit environmental and political commentary in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* does not prevent the miner from functioning as a symbol of resistance to the unbridled commodification of life in the narrative. Together with the poet Heinrich, the miner stands in stark contrast to industrial modernity. In fact, the entire novel is populated by characters of another age: princes and princesses, wise men, hermits, and poets. Whether Novalis was being subversive or merely

idealistic when painting his picture of the miner, the result is a powerful critique of his time.

In the novel, the miner is a venerable old man, both knowledgeable and wise. Commentators have seen in this figure a reference to Abraham Gottlob Werner, Novalis's charismatic professor of geology at the Freiberg Academy with whom both the fictional miner and his old master shared their first name.<sup>7</sup> A far cry from those who were forced into mining because other, lighter and more dignified forms of work were not available, this miner is in love with his profession, which he wanted to embrace ever since he was a child. He was attracted to the mines by a desire to uncover the "hidden treasure chambers of nature" (66). For, he tells Heinrich and his friends, "[i]t sure was not for nothing that these mountains were so lofty, of such great compass, and so firmly based" (64). The might of high mountains was nothing more than an invitation for humans to explore their underbelly, as if their imposing shape signaled the wonders buried in "those primeval corridors and vaults" (64).

Novalis's miner here reiterates earlier defenses of the profession. The most famous of these treatises is perhaps Georg Agricola's *De Re Metalica* (1556), in which the author argues against the idea that mining is a violation of the body of Mother Earth, a notion widely disseminated in Classical Antiquity and in the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup> Agricola dismisses the belief that nature wished to keep its treasures concealed underground and argues for an understanding of mining as a path toward a better knowledge of the natural world. According to this view, the miner could be regarded as nature's helper, assisting it in giving birth to the minerals it developed in its midst. Far from a transgressor, the miner was nature's collaborator in the process of producing metals and precious stones.<sup>9</sup>

The appeal of nature's mysteries, to be unveiled by human beings attuned to their surroundings, resonates with Romanticism's fascination with the natural sublime. In fact, the novel's narrator deplores nature's apparent separation from humanity:

In days of old, all nature must have been more alive and meaningful than today. Effects which today animals hardly appear to notice anymore and which are felt and enjoyed by man alone moved lifeless objects in those times; hence it was possible for artistic individuals alone to do things and produce effects which appear fabulous and quite incredible today. (32)

In the past, all nature, including inanimate objects, was ensouled and alive, and therefore, many events that now appear to be magical were

simply the result of the vitality of the natural environment which has, in the meanwhile, subsided. In fact, the idea that metals are living beings akin to plants was very widespread in pre-modern thought and is mentioned in several texts on mining during German Romanticism.<sup>10</sup> We can read nature's aloofness in the novel as a reaction to the human drive to exploit it. The fascination with the inside of the mountain is part of Novalis's effort to revitalize the natural environment and see beyond the mute surface of the rock into its animate core. The miner's belief that a mountain has more to it than what lies at the surface—that Nature has "secrets" to be unveiled—should be interpreted as an attempt to "re-enchant" the world, which was increasingly viewed as a collection of raw materials.

### Thinking Through the Mines

The miner's preference for the inside, as opposed to the outside of the mountain in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, encapsulates a blueprint for a new aesthetics, epistemology, and ethics. He shows Heinrich that aesthetic experiences are not without mediation. In other words, one has to go through a process of learning in order to see and feel artistically—"to receive heavenly gifts"—bearing in mind that that which is more conspicuous is often also hollow and trivial. In order to experience the mountain aesthetically, one has to turn to the least obvious place, namely to its alluring, hidden "bosom" (71). Such aestheticizing of the activity of mining belongs with the non-exploitative attitude to nature mentioned above and will be complemented by the rejection of an appropriative relation to the precious metals being mined.

According to the miner, one has to learn how to approach the natural world in order to experience it aesthetically:

[ ... ] the more the procreative powers of nature have waned the more its shaping, ennobling, and social powers have grown, its heart became more tender and receptive, its imagination more varied and vivid, its hand more deft and artistic. Nature is approaching human beings; and whereas she was formerly a wildly producing cliff, today she is a tranquil, growing plant, a silent human artist. (88)

As nature abandoned its former Genesis power, it acquired a sensibility that humans often do not register. Instead of a wild creator, a demiurge who has no concern for human feelings, nature is now like an artist. Novalis suggests that humanity's greed endangers the potential "spiritualization" of nature that would result from a convergence of human beings and the natural environment. For instance, in places

that have been inhabited by humans for a long time, nature and human activities blend together and form a seamless whole (61). Such coming together of humankind and nature should prompt individuals to recognize in natural elements equal partners in the creation of a community. However, unlike the miner, most people give in to their unbridled ambition to possess natural riches. They forget that, if we contemplate nature aesthetically, act upon it and modify it, it also contemplates and transforms us.

For Novalis, the process of learning how to relate to nature is analogous to the practice of excavation, sifting through rubble and digging ever deeper until one reaches a gold vein. The narrator's description of the miner's work is clearly a metaphor for that of the artist and the scholar:

Often a deceptive seam lures him [the miner] from the right direction, but he soon detects the false lead and cuts forcefully across until he has recovered the true ore-bearing vein. How familiar the miner becomes with all the whims of chance, but how sure too that zeal and persistence are the only infallible means to master those whims and to get out the treasures so stubbornly defended by them. (71)

Cutting through layers of rock to reach the precious metals and stones hidden inside them, the miner's is a meticulous and painstaking labor. It involves plowing through deception and disappointment until one reaches a truly solid and rich vein. This undertaking metaphorically foreshadows the method of phenomenological reduction described by Edmund Husserl about a century later, whereby a process of de-sedimentation is needed in order to clear thought from abstract concepts accumulated after centuries of philosophical activity, and thus return to the things themselves.

If we understand "the noble art of mining" as an "earnest symbol of man's life" (71) and interpret the miner's account of his trade as a lesson designed to shape the future behavior of young Heinrich, we realize that artistic endeavors and philosophizing are arduous tasks. In spite of its oft-exacerbated sentimentality and penchant toward fairytales, Novalis does not advocate for mere castles in the air; idealism and speculation, he asserts, have to be tempered with the hard rock of reality. The novel portrays Heinrich's education as a search for knowledge within nature which can be achieved not by succumbing to metaphysical conjectures, but through tenacious work akin to that of the miner.

It is perhaps due to *Heinrich von Ofterdingen's* anti-metaphysical stance that the mines in the novel contrast with the most iconic underground site of Western thought: the cave described by Plato in *The Republic* (514a–17c) as an allegory for the condition of most human beings. In this episode, Socrates conjures a scarcely lit underworld inhabited by prisoners who observe the shadows of objects projected upon the walls. While they are inside the cave, humans are unable to see the reality that surrounds them and can only perceive its pale copies and reflections. A climb up into the world outside the cave is required for darkness to dissipate and for the philosopher to reach the light of reason. At the top, he will find the ideas, described as “what is always the same in all aspects” (*Republic* 484b) and as “a being that *is* always and does not wander about, driven by generation and decay” (*Republic* 485b). For Plato, then, the cave is a place of ignorance where humans are shackled to their illusions, unable to free themselves from error and behold the light of truth. Plato conceives of the process of learning and philosophizing as a move upward in the direction of the eidetic sphere. He views existence in terms of a hierarchical chain of appearances that culminate, at the highest point, in the complete reality of ideas. One has to leave the cave and move toward the sky and the light in order to reach the metaphysical truths.

Unlike what Socrates describes in *The Republic*, the caves depicted by Novalis are places where one finds out the truth about nature and about oneself. Not only in the episode of the miner, but also on several other occasions in the book—in Heinrich’s first glimpse of the blue flower, in his father’s journey, in the story of the princess—the cave sets the stage for a transformative experience, a revelation that will determine subsequent events.

It is noteworthy that, in the novel, caves are often the setting for amorous encounters. In the story of the princess and the young scientist, they consummate their love in a cave, an episode that allows for the union of contraries—art and science, a noblewoman and a commoner—and thus for a synthesis of opposing worldviews at the end of the tale.<sup>11</sup> As for Heinrich and his father, the connection between caves and sexuality is more veiled, but nevertheless central for the economy of the text. It is in a cave that both men first contemplate the blue flower, later identified, in the case of Heinrich, with his beloved Mathilda. This flower, which became a symbol of Romanticism, stood not only for love but also for the ultimate truth that humans incessantly seek and which constantly eludes their grasp. The link between the flower and Heinrich’s sexuality is fairly obvious. His sexual inexperience is frequently thematized in the text and the voyage he undertakes, at the end of which he meets Mathilda, is portrayed as a move from

innocence to experience, which will allow him to develop his skill as a poet. Heinrich's father, unlike his son, abandoned the pursuit of the elusive blue flower and married Heinrich's mother. Again, the sexual connotation of the flower found in the cave is clear: a metaphorical symbol for women, the flower is replaced with a real woman, namely Heinrich's mother.

The link between underground spaces and sexuality cuts across various texts from the early nineteenth century: The male protagonist of "The Runenberg" (1804), a short story by Novalis's friend Ludwig Tieck, leaves his wife and his life as a farmer to go to the mountains in search of "wonderful incalculable treasures" hidden "in the depths of the Earth." He is enticed by the image of a woman he once saw who seems to represent, at once, the spirit of the mountains and the earth itself: "Could one but clasp this Earth like a beloved bride to one's bosom, so that in pain and love she would willingly grant one her costliest riches," says the protagonist. He continues: "The Woodwoman has called me; I go to seek for her. Near by is an old ruined shaft, which some miner has hollowed out many centuries ago; perhaps I shall find her there!" In Hoffman's "The Mines of Falun," the sexual symbolism of the mine is even clearer. The protagonist abandons his bride on his wedding day to go into a mine where he had once seen a woman of alluring beauty. He dies underground, thus consummating his union with the "mighty queen" he had once beheld (302). In both Tieck's and Hoffman's short stories, the protagonists are led astray and underground by seductive women, thus rejecting the prospect of a comfortable life in fits of madness. Novalis's text conjures a more radical departure from Enlightenment values, since going inside the dark mountain is not a sign of delusion, but rather a logical step on the path toward an artistic, poetic, and philosophical life.

Caves and mines are not only spaces that propitiate sexual experiences; they also stand for the female body itself. The entrance of men—Heinrich, his father, the miner, and the merchants—inside the various caves described in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is often depicted in a language evocative of sexual penetration. The cave is here analogous to a uterus, a notion evoking the mythical beliefs described above that regarded caves and mines to be the matrix of the earth. In her book *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray recovers this old worldview in her analysis of Plato. For Irigaray, the Platonic cave is a figurative womb that men need to leave in order to free themselves from the constraints of nature and enter the reified realm of ideas. In exiting from the cave, men give birth to their own rational selves, ideally, in a process from which women are excluded. If we extend Irigaray's interpretation of the cave to the Novalis's text, it emerges as a paradigmatic

anti-Platonic rewriting of the famous allegory. Unlike Plato's would-be philosopher, the novel's protagonist needs to delve into the cave in his pursuit of wisdom. Instead of distancing himself from nature and moving into the sphere of metaphysical ideas, Heinrich must go deeper underground, a process symbolized by the activity of mining.

In spite of the differences between Plato and Novalis, the two authors share an understanding of the search for wisdom as a quest for the good. For Novalis, mining is equated to the incessant pursuit of a better, more ethical life. As we read in the novel, miners are wanderers (*Wanderer*): "One mountain sends him [the miner] to another. He never gets through exploring and has to spend a lifetime learning about the wondrous architecture that has so strangely founded and paneled our earth" (86). Miners move from one mountain to the other, driven by their desire to better grasp the secrets hidden under the surface of the earth. In this, they resemble poets who constantly pursue a more eloquent turn of phrase, and Heinrich himself, looking for the perfection of the blue flower.

The miner's ceaseless search for perfection makes him not only a skillful practitioner of his trade but also a more accomplished human being. Mining, he tells Heinrich, "must bear God's blessing, for there is no [other] art which might make its participants happier and nobler, which would do more to arouse men's faith in a heavenly wisdom and providence, and which would keep the innocence and childlikeness of the heart in greater purity" (69). A miner's occupation "teaches him tireless patience and does not permit him to distract his attention with useless thoughts" (70–71). In the solitude of mountain caves the miner gets in touch with divinity, since he takes the wonders he finds in subterranean passages as proof of the existence of god "[w]hose hand and providence are daily visible to him in unmistakable gifts" (71).

Separated from other people and from the "restless tumult of the day" inside the mountain, miners are not corrupted by the vices of society. In their seclusion, they feel the "interdependence and blood kinship of all mankind" and learn to appreciate the advantages of family life and human companionship (70). Furthermore, "inspired only with desire for knowledge and love of concord," miners are not interested in wealth. Like modern-day alchemists, they strive to draw gold out of rock and baser metals not in order to get rich, but in their quest for wisdom:

The miner is born poor and he dies poor. He is content to know where the metal powers are found [ . . . ] but their dazzling glamor has no power over his pure heart. [ . . . ] he takes more delight in their

peculiar structures and their strange origin and habitat than in their possession which promises so much. They have no charm for him any more once they are turned into commercial articles, and he had rather look for them within the strongholds of the earth [ . . . ] than to follow their call into the world and to strive after them up on the surface by means of deluding, deceitful arts. (69–70)

Novalis's miner wears his poverty like a badge of honor. He deals daily with precious metals and stones, but is not corrupted by greed or avarice. Indeed, he rejects the possession of the treasures he draws from the mountains and their commercial value. He leaves for others the enjoyment of riches, knowing full well that these corrupt the heart.

The miner in the novel resembles, to a certain extent, the proletarians of the Industrial Revolution, unable to take advantage of the profits of their labor, which were appropriated by the owners of the means of production. Yet, in the narrative, the miner's rejection of what he produced is a personal choice. Or, rather, he discards the material profits of his labor in favor of the immaterial benefits he derives from it, be it knowledge or the good. Other miners, living on the brink of poverty and facing constant exploitation, did not have the luxury to enjoy either the material or the immaterial products of their work. The alienation of the industrial proletariat contrasts sharply with the relation to labor we find in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. As is the case with other Romantic writers, Novalis harks back to a pre-industrial worldview in order to distance himself from the abuses of the nascent industrial society. He implicitly weaves a critique of the rapacity prevalent in capitalism, which reduces human beings, non-humans, and things to commodities to be exchanged and readily converted into money.

The proto-ecological posture of the miner in the novel should be understood in the context of this resistance to the values of industrial capitalism. Echoing political theorists from Plato to Rousseau, he decries private property and human attempts to fetter Nature as the source of social ills:

Nature desires not to be the exclusive possession of a single individual. As property, nature changes into an evil poison which drives away tranquility and makes those who possess wealth lust ruinously after power over all things, entailing a train of endless cares and wild passions. Thus nature secretly undermines the ground of the possessor, causing it soon to cave in and bury him, so that she may pass from

hand to hand and thus gradually satisfy her proclivity to belong to everyone. (70)

No single individual or group can appropriate nature, which belongs to all and, therefore, to no one in particular. In an age when the thirst for money and the private possession of things are the norm, Novalis's poets and his old-fashioned miner are symbols of Romantic literature's resistance to the prevailing zeitgeist. This is the reason why they do not experience the sublime when contemplating the surface of great peaks, which could be easily turned into a commodity and appropriated, say, for mass tourism. They encounter sublimity within the entrails of the mountain that hides its treasures in darkness, deep underground, far from the human drive to possess them and turn them into goods fit for consumption.

## N O T E S

1. Up until the seventeenth century, many Christian theologians believed that mountains were not part of God's original creation but originated in or were exacerbated as a result of human sin. Mountains were perceived to be a tangible sign of God's condemnation of humanity's Fall, which explained their negative connotations (Rigby 134–5).

2. See Chapter 1 of my *Seeing Politics Otherwise* for a more detailed analysis of the metaphors of light and darkness in Western thought.

3. In a letter to Friedrich Schlegel (1800), Novalis mentions the "petrifying and petrified reason" ("der Petrificirende und Petrificierte Verstand") that is unable to do justice to reality (cited in Mahoney 122).

4. The understanding of miners as "astrologers in reverse" is reminiscent of Friedrich Schlegel's statement that "The historian is a prophet facing backwards" (cited in Mahoney 122).

5. E.T.A. Hoffman also refers to the link between astrology and mining in his short story "The Mines of Falun": "Well, there's something infinitely higher in question here, perhaps: the mole tunnels the ground from blind instinct; but it may be, in the deepest depths, by the pale glimmer of the mine candle, men's eyes get to see clearer, and at length, growing stronger and stronger, acquire the power of reading in the stones, the gems, and the minerals, the mirroring of secrets which are hidden above the clouds" (289–90).

6. The Freiberg Mining Academy, founded in 1765, was the world's first mining higher education institution and resulted from the efforts of Saxony authorities to develop mining in the region.

7. As the old miner tells Heinrich: "[ ... ] I owe everything to my old master [ ... ]. He was born in Lusatia and was called Werner. [ ... ]

He gave me his name and made me his son" (68). Abraham Gottlob Werner was a professor at Freiberg from 1775 to 1817.

8. For an in-depth analysis of Ancient Greek, Roman, and Medieval condemnations of mining, as well as of Agricola's counter-arguments, see Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 29–38.

9. For a description of views across various cultures on mining and metallurgy as a kind of obstetrics, whereby humans aid nature in giving birth to metals and precious stones, see Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, 7–52.

10. Mircea Eliade states that metals were believed to grow like plants inside the mountain, which is why some mines were allowed to rest after a period of exploitation, so as to give the earth time to generate more metals and stones (45). The protagonist of Ludwig Tieck's "The Runenberg" prefers stones to the putrifying vegetal life and believes that the latter is the remnant of stones: "In plants and herbs, in trees and flowers, it is the painful writhing of one universal wound that moves and works; they are the corpse of foregone glorious worlds of rock, they offer to our eye a horrid universe of putrefaction." In Hoffman's "The Mines of Falun," the protagonist dreams of metals as plants: "[ ... ] wonderful plants and flowers, of glittering metal, came shooting up out of the crystal mass he was standing on, and entwined their leaves and blossoms in the loveliest manner" (291). Later in the text, he again remembers the images in his dream: "He was looking upon those Elysian Fields of glorious metallic trees and plants on which, by way of fruits, buds, and blossoms, hung jewels streaming with fire" (302).

11. The very activity of mining could be conceived of as bringing together art and science, a mythical outlook and scientific knowledge. As Warren Dym points out, one of the goals of the Freiberg Mining Academy was to complement scattered mining knowledge and mining lore acquired by those who had long been practicing this activity with the latest scientific discoveries in geology and mineralogy (Dym 837ff).

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