

Visionary Peaks in the European Tradition

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My paper returns to the inexhaustible task which, under the overarching theme “The Force of Vision,” the 1991 ICLA Congress in Tokyo set for comparatists everywhere under the leadership of Haga Toru. I readily admit that the experience of something closely identified with the very essence of Japanese sensibility also motivated my choice of the word “peak”. Ever since the splendid day a decade ago, when I first flew in a Japan Airlines plane past the snowy summit of Mount Fuji, especially this mountain has suggested a spiritual affinity between Far Eastern and European aesthetics of sublime heights. Therefore I return as a pilgrim to learn more about the Japanese sense of visionary peaks from my colleagues who have grown up in the homo shadow of Fuji. I can only offer notes on the Western tradition in exchange for this very great privilege.

Two important changes directly relevant to my topic occurred during the transition which is summed up by the term Romanticism in European literary history. One change was the waning of the thematics and imagery of an earthly paradise in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and concomitantly the flourishing of an alternate master-paradigm, the journey through hell, for picturing both the dark interiority of the mind and the transformed quality of life in an industrial age that was increasingly dominated by big cities. The other notable change was the repotentialization of the symbolic values of the high country as a site of the sublime, a sublime encountered either as the wild fastness of the psyche or as the otherness of nature or spirit above the deceptive and decadent flat world of ordinary humanity. It is no wonder that some modern writers in European languages have felt the urge to climb, once again, to those heights which enable or are constituted by vision. Going up into the mountains is an attraction artists have experienced especially in recent centuries throughout the European repertory. But the beginnings of this impulse are deeply rooted.

Noah, the forefather in the book of Genesis who enables the survival of humankind and of primal knowledge, settles with his ark “upon the mountains of Ararat”; and the first sign of salvation from the deluge is when “the tops of the mountains [are] seen” (Genesis 8: 4, 5). Ararat is traditionally associated with the mountain of Paradise and the source of the four sacred rivers. Moses, the culture

hero in the book of Exodus who leads the Jews out of bondage in Egypt and shapes their religion, smites the rock on Horeb and brings forth needed water in order to prove to the Israelite elders the presence of their God (Exodus 17: 5-7). Horeb, Mount of the Sun, is twinned with Sinai, Mount of the Moon, where Moses receives the ten commandments directly from Jehovah amidst thunder and lightning (Exodus 20). In the dramatic ending to the book of Deuteronomy, the dying Moses may only gaze from Mount Pisgah upon the promised land, but may not enter it (Deuteronomy 34). It is this special destiny of the genius who reconstitutes the consciousness of his people which Stephen Dedalus yearns for in the Aeolus chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*. In the Old Testament, Mount Sion or Zion emerges as the idealized sacred height and spiritual center of the "promised land"—for example, in Psalms 2: 6 when God assures, "Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion"—and Christianity inherits the aspiration of restoring Zion.

We find an analogous idealization of a divine center in ancient Greek mythology in the gleaming white, celestial Olympus as the palace of the gods, whose chief is the sky god Zeus. The slopes of snowy Mount Ida are the location where a luminous masculine principle manifests itself in the story of Apollo's youthful apprenticeship tending the herds there. Ida is also the place where male and female glory at life's high point are connected, for it is on this mountain that the young Paris fatefully awards the golden apple to Aphrodite rather than to Hera or Athena. When the dark mysterious god Dionysus carries his secret teaching back to Greece from India, Mount Cithaeron, looming outside the endangered city of Thebes, becomes the citadel of his cult. There, as Euripides depicts in the *Bacchae*, women of Thebes in a frenzy tear to pieces Dionysus' cousin Pentheus, the city's rational king who cannot curb the new worship. Just as Apollo and Dionysus share a temple on the sacred island Delos, their distinct mountains are polar aspects of the Mountain which can never be fully grasped in its totality and which, in the case of Olympus, is revealed as the world axis.

In medieval Christian Europe, mountain fastnesses were often sought out quite pragmatically as refuges where a hermitage or a monastic house might be established. We are all grateful as modern tourists for the exquisite settings of famous shrines in high places, in old Europe as in Japan. In general, however, mountains were associated with a numinous wilderness, something uncanny that was connected with special aspects of the human soul. In analogy to the fundamental metaphor of stripping away worldly vestiges and experiencing oneness with the godhead as a penetrating into an ever remoter desert, medieval mystics thought of ascending out of the dark ground of being to a high place above the earthly where the soul touched its divine creator. Thus the thirteenth-century poetess Mechthild of Magdeburg writes of the soul in its nearness to or merging with God as a burning or

glowing mountain peak, with unmistakable eroticization of the perceived *unio mystica*. I excerpt here a few lines of the poem beginning “Wenn ich scheine, so musst du leuchten” [When I shine, it must be you who light”]:

O du brennender Berg, o du auserlesene Sonne!
O du voller Mond, o du grundloser Quell!
O du unerreichbare Höhe, o du Klarheit ohne Mass!
[O you burning mountain, you choicest sun!
O you full moon, you bottomless well!
O you unreachable height, you measureless clarity!]

What is fascinating about the medieval mountain of the soul in such a poem is that it incorporates awareness of the soul’s darkness as well as its luminosity. One specific interpretation of the mountain as a hell of captivity in the ground is the late medieval story of the poet Tannhäuser’s seven years servitude to the flesh in the Venus-Berg. Later the pyramid, the favorite Renaissance image for the pinnacle of the soul or mind, may correspond formally to the medieval mountain, but humanism shifts the emphasis toward the acuteness, brilliance, and monumentality of the human spirit; unmistakable in this substitution is a new triumphalist view of human capability emerging at the end of the fifteenth century.

The legend of the Holy Grail, one of the most gripping medieval subject-matters, which Wagner popularized in such operas as *Parsifal*, has interested modernist poets and myth analysts alike. It exceeds the scope of my remarks to join in the perennial debate about the final intentions of the most famous medieval versions of the Grail story, or whether it attempts to fuse a Christian religious vision with the refined chivalric ethos of the high Middle Ages, or whether its symbolism reveals other archetypal discoveries. Pertinent here is the identity of the remote place where the mysterious Grail castle is located. The name of this recondite area into which the quester knight must penetrate is Montsalvage, which Wolfram of Eschenbach took over from Chrétien de Troyes into German directly as Munsalvaesche in the early twelfth century. Ambiguously the adjectival part of the name points both at the concept savage or wild, and at the concept salvage or saving, salvation. The darkness of the mountain, in psychological terms its *negritudo*, associates it thematically with the simpler structure of the grounded mountain of the soul in mystical poetry, but perhaps also with the existential implications of our incarnation. Reaching Montsalvage is clearly a complex journey into a special interior of Europe, not accessible to ordinary seekers. In Wolfram’s *Parzival*, the way of approach is described as virtually roadless, through a great forest, in Book IX: “Ez was uf einem grosen walt.” Parzival’s misaken judgments in his encounters with various figures reflects at this stage, as does his uncertain erring progress in the woods, the ambivalent condition of bewilderment. A token thereof is his unawareness of the fact it is Good Friday

when he meets the unarmed, bareheaded grey knight who has learned the appropriate garb and attitude for the holy season “uf disen wilden walt” [in this wild forest]. Yet the glory which the quester is elected to witness in the Grail rites, once he is initiated, will attain a splendor quite comparable to the heightening transformation of the soul in mystical thought. Wolfram has in mind the uplifting lustre of the Arthurian tradition.

The forbidding fastness which surrounds the quester Parzival before his encounter with further initiatory tests shares the intimidating quality associated with the “dark woods” of life. It is to this perplexing state of feeling lost in the tangle and thicket of existence as the “selva oscura” that the opening tercet of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* refers. The grand architectonics of the *Divina Commedia* make explicit that the descent into Hell in part one and the preparatory ascent toward Heaven in part two mysteriously mirror each other by inversion. The poet’s mind is released to soar into the divine realm of part three only after reaching the peak of Purgatory, which completes the counterbalancing of mutually shadowing paradigms. The Dantesque *Inferno* involves us in witnessing ever deeper levels of spiritual failure and perversity, plumbing the depths. The *Purgatorio* involves us in ever higher levels of cleansing, of recognition of divine grace, and of affirmation. As in one of the traditions regarding the location of the original earthly paradise, the original Edenic home of our first parents is rediscovered on the mountain, whereby it acquires an even clearer status as a cosmic mountain. Climbing the Mountain of Purgatory is necessary, because Dante’s epic poem concerns how the soul finds its way back toward its origins.

One of the classic pre-Renaissance texts which dwell on the ascent of the mountain as a master-image for the whole process of existence as our opportunity and challenge to rise spiritually is Petrarch’s famous essay on climbing Mont Ventoux in the company of a younger brother. For those who love France, a visit to the Vaucluse area and a trip over the massive heights of Ventoux, still awesome even today in an automobile, are virtually inevitable. Untold thousands of literary pilgrims before us have made this journey specifically in Petrarch’s footsteps during the past half a millenium. Petrarch is considered the foundational figure establishing a modern consciousness of the poetic vocation in Europe. The proximity of Vaucluse, or Valchiusa in Italian, is more than a geographical coincidence, for in his private confessional lyrics in Italian, the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch habitually sets the scene of his restless search for self-understanding amidst the large images of the wild beauty in the Provençal high country around Vaucluse. Climbing into the uplands, into desert places far from the vulgar abodes of men in the plains, the poet examines his own peculiar destiny. In the process, the inspiring love of Laura and the necessity of his being a poet are discovered to be related. Thus Petrarch draws together the

theme of following the educational pathway under the tutelage of love, and that of the arduous toiling of the poet whose sensibility is as much a martyrdom as a gift. In his essay on climbing Mount Ventoux, Petrarch focusses on the inner rhythms and discipline of the human being who is called to ascend. by contrasting the youthful vigor of his brother, who like mountain goat leaps ahead over difficult obstacles but is still blissfully unconscious of life's goal, with his own more laborious, steady pace determined by awareness of aging, Petrarch elaborates the nature of manly seriousness. This is one of the great meditations on the development of an inner conviction in the rightness of spiritual growth.

Many a poetic eagle took wing in the Renaissance proper, and even a distinctly unmedieval mode of rebellious soaring over peaks came into fashion with the flourishing of the myth of Lucifer, the outcast angel who can course over the earth beneath the heavens.¹ But the earlier sense never extinguished that when a human being reached a highest point beyond and over the ordinary haunts of humanity he entered into a numinous realm, and momentarily perhaps touched the divine. This is certainly the case in the verses to which the great late sixteenth-century neo-Latin poet Jacob Balde assigned the amply narrative heading "Ad D. Virginem in silva quietis, vulgo Waldrast, altissimo tyrolensium montium iugo propitiam Cum auctor ad eam inviseret" [To the propitious Divine Virgin at the Wood of Quiet, or Waldrast in the popular tongue, a high mountain of the Tyrolean Alps, As the author visited it]. The poet, a Catholic priest, is crossing a high pass in the Alps and stops to rest at a way marker under the serene sky. In the uncanny serenity of this wild place everything burdensome of the world naturally dies away without his actually leaving nature; it is as if the soul is premonitions of a heaven quite proximate, enveloping the mind while it is still located in sensory reality, and without explicit seeking. Tree limbs like gesturing arms seem to sweep the stars along. Looking down at the distant lowland fields and grottoes, the poet feels a desire to remain and accept a worthy grave in the tranquil spot. On the mountain top, the essence of the beneficence of the divine mother as Queen of Heaven becomes manifest. The archetype of the Virgin Mary, who suggests the purity of God's unfallen creation and its redemptive, nurturing powers, her reassuring music becomes virtually tangible in Balde's poetic utterance. I shall quote just the final lines to indicate the almost magical realization of the peace of the soul at this special moment and place of rest in the earthly journey:

O Quies semper memoranda Silvae
O tuum vere meritura nomen,
Da frui fesis aliquando vera,
Silva, Quiete.

I ask your indulgence for my crude initial rendering of these lines into English:

Woodland Rest, ever worthy of remembrance,
You will with greater merit bear your name:
Let the weary in due course enjoy that
Real rest, woodland.

The moment which Balde's poem captures recurs in the duly famous poem, known by its opening line ("Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh"), which Goethe left on the inside of a door of an Alpine hut more than a century later. The great Romantic lyricist Eichendorff has often stood in these woods on high. Many not conversant with German poetry are familiar with the related moment in European painting, for example, in "Man above the Sea of Clouds" by the great Romantic artist Casper David Friedrich, which allows us to look with a sophisticated viewer over the daunting glacial and snowy realm far above the ordinary human habitat. It is a virtual encounter with the infinite. Although Balde must certainly be counted among the poetic forerunners, he had no idea that only a century later European aestheticians, painters, and poets would be developing a concept and cult of the sublime more often than not associated with the grandeur of the Alps. This complex of ideas has been so frequently discussed in Western literary criticism that I shall restrict myself here to merely a reminder of the earlier eighteenth-century formulations linking the experience of mountain splendor with sublimity. Indicative of the new approach to the spiritually elevating qualities of the natural world is Edmund Burke's treatise, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (published 1756). Burke associates with the sublime aspects of nature and life exciting the idea of pain or danger; the experience of awe before the tremendous encountered in the world acquires an important status as a significant characteristic of the human mind. In *Kritik der Urteilskraft* [Critique of Judgment] (1788), Immanuel Kant pushes such thinking over the boundary-line separating Enlightenment rationalist from newer subjectivist aesthetics, and makes the mind itself the superior seat transcending nature. I cite here an illustrative passage in the translation by J. H. Bernard:

[I]n the immensity of nature and in the insufficiency of our faculties to take in a standard proportionate to the aesthetical estimation of the magnitude of its *realm*, we find our own limitation, although at the same time in our rational faculty we find a different, nonsensuous standard, which has that infinity itself under it as a unity, in comparison with which everything in nature is small, and thus in our mind we find a superiority to nature even in its immensity.

Surely one of the most important directions for the apprehension of the sublime in Romanticism occurs when poets connect the tremendous power of great nature with the powers that are channeled through the human race—by the mind or spirit, as Kant suggested. Seen under one aspect, the sublime is awe-inspiring and can replace earlier religious emotions toward the overwhelming majesty of the crea-

tion. Terror inheres in the unfathomable spectacle of nature as it rises beyond the familiar levels where human beings can cope with its phenomena either physically or mentally. Yet such spectacles thrill the human heart with a secret promise of empowerment, if the hero or the race ever learns to tap the related sources in humanity. In the poem "Mont Blanc," written in the immediacy of his travel into the Alps, Percy Bysshe Shelley expresses this union of insights into the terrifying dimensions of nature and into the eventual realization of such potency since it must be shared by the human mind. As part three says, this tremendous "wilderness has a mysterious tongue/Which teaches"; and drawing the lesson, Shelley affirms his idealist faith in the mind's destiny, as in the rhetorical question of these ending lines:

The secret strength of things,
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

The Romantic exploration of the psyche included probing into its terrifying vastness and abysses, against which Shelley's hopes shielded him. There are innumerable Romantic poems and stories which lead us into frightening forested mountains as the correlative of penetrating into primordial or repressed levels of the psyche. Tieck's "Der blonde Eckbert," a Gothic tale of psychological horror, may serve to illustrate this thoroughly elaborated imagery by the end of the eighteenth century. One of the most celebrated cases of a balancing of sympathetic creative personalities is the relationship between Mary Shelley and her husband. It is curious how in her experimental story *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, Mary used the symbolism of the glacial and snowy wastes of Mont Blanc as a parallel imagery to that of the endless Arctic tracts, into which her narrator figure Walton draws us as the novel opens. This is the inhuman realm into which Dr. Frankenstein pursues his monster and in whose pitiless depths he dies in a love-death with this creature whom his own wayward Faustian mind has bodied forth. As we learn through Frankenstein's retrospective internal narration, the creature, Frankenstein's alter ego, commits a series of hideous murders that steadily sunder his maker from his family, his fiancée, and closest friend. On a deeper level, these crimes reflect his rejection of organic human and social relationships and the hubristic desire to replace the natural order with one dictated from the mind. Thus we may legitimately wonder whether the young runaway bride Mary was not examining on a subconscious level some of the frightening implications of the indomitable idealist fervor of Percy, the Romantic visionary whom she so admired that, upon his premature death, she devoted the remainder of her life mainly to cultivating his poetic legacy.

Even as high Romanticism waned in Britain and Germany, the doubleness of the mountain is resolved in the penultimate section of *Faust II* which Goethe closed in 1832, as if closing off an era. Entitled “Bergesschluchten” [Mountain Gorges], and occurring just before the play’s concluding eight lines entitled the “Chorus Mysticus,” the scene is reminiscent of the vision of the divine heights of nature found both in Far Eastern and European painting. One of the most frequent Western motifs is the natural chaos seen in the background of Renaissance paintings of the Virgin Mary. Imaginatively, we might well be in the precincts of an original Vaucluse, before any followers traced Petrarch’s way into the high wilderness. One of the internal witnesses of the scene is a Dr. Marianus, a projection of that aspect of the poet who, though not a Christian, and though raised as a Protestant, is ineluctably drawn to and contemplates the supernal beauty of Mary. The older medieval mountain of the soul and the Dantesque mountain of Purgatory recur in an inspired fusion. From the darkness of the ground we see penitents—among them the tragic victim of Part I, Margarete—climbing upward. They ascend toward the luminous apex which is constituted by the appearance of an all-comforting, peace-radiating Virgin Mary. It is explicitly at Mary’s command that the redeemed Margarete assumes a further role of leading the confused spirit of the dead Faust onward toward clarification. This is in consonance with the general statement of the Mystical Chorus that “Das Ewigweibliche zieht uns hinan”—the untranslatable final line of the drama. The utter simplicity of the Virgin’s queenly authority in the scene “Mountain Gorges” is breath-taking. Goethe’s poetry itself acquires numinosity through this archetypal manifestation. As Faust’s spirit follows Margarete as the pink cloud, Goethe’s image for the evanescent glow of nature’s constant metamorphosis, it is as if we are experiencing in Western drama that ultimate *rasa* or highest aesthetic sentiment of which classical Hindu dramaturgy speaks. We rise to a poetic insight when, in effect, our minds and hearts are dancing on the mountaintops in joyful appreciation of the symbolic drama.

Nietzsche desires something akin to this levitating buoyancy of the spirit in his philosophic narration *Also sprach Zarathustra* [Thus Spake Zarathustra]. It is typical of Zarathustra that he dwells in the heights and that his predilection for pinnacles and abysses is an objective correlative to the daring of his thought. Zarathustra characteristically dances along the mountain paths, so powerful is the revelation of the death of God, the message which impels him; and the paradoxical challenge is to bring the message down among mortals, because in effect it must have epochal, even convulsive, transformational consequences. Despite the enormous cultural distance that separates the Romantic idealist Shelley from Nietzsche, nonetheless we can see that the latter, too, identifies the vast, untapped power of the mountains with some eruption whereby a future burgeons out of the seeming

flatness, rebirth out of the decadence of an exhausted civilization. The coming of a literal eruption out of hidden depths that will blast apart the surface of a self-endangered European civilization in World War I is one of the grand themes of Thomas Mann's magisterial novel *Der Zauberberg* [The Magic Mountain], which he published in 1924, in the war's aftermath, as a warning against the not yet resolved threat. This, Mann correctly feared, might conduct again to catastrophe.

Elsewhere I have discussed *Der Zauberberg* as a modernist Bildungroman and its relation to the humoristic-encyclopedic tradition and therefore I shall focus here only on the question of the master-imagery which is announced by its title. Critics have eagerly and frequently followed up Mann's plenteous internal pointers to the interrelated numerological, alchemical, and hermetic symbolism with which Mann correlates overt literary references. For example, the mountain represents the seven stages in an alchemical process of heightening transmutation. The process culminates in conflagration, that is, in the seeming catastrophe out of which rebirth becomes possible. If we translate into the explicit parallel historical terms, the novel explores a mysterious process that conducted to the volcanic explosion of World War I and profoundly altered the complex compound of European civilization and world polity. Mann hoped the suffering had also specifically enabled a positive transformation of German culture, purging it of its dark, outmoded characteristics and bringing it into better relationship to the modern democratic societies. The mountain is at the same time the Venusberg in which the quester figure, Hans Castorp, must become entrapped and from which it is his destiny to emerge in altered state as a symbolic protagonist of the necessary transformation of the bourgeois age. To the extent that Hans is a transparent alchemical-hermetic experiment through which we observe the transformational process, the mountain is more generally the mountain of the human soul that emerges out of and radiates luminously above its dark ground. Like many traits that are Prussian black, Hans' alter ego, his darker cousin, Joachim must die and be relinquished. But of course Hans is a parodic Faust, among his other shadowings of many roles in literature, opera, and myth, so that we keep hoping for some rescue of a nobler Goethean perspective on the human scene, as we observe the motions of Hans' education. Early on in the novel, Hans is invited by his first important mentor and would-be Virgil, the enlightened humanist Settembrini, to interpret his situation in terms of the invertible Dantesque pattern, whereby ascending the mountain is simultaneously a descent into hell. These few reminders will suffice to underscore the crucial modernist techniques of montage and recycling of materials. If the great ironist Mann draws upon a myriad of references to the master-imagery of the mountain, he also effectively reinstates the whole inheritance so that, after we discount all the entertaining parodies, we regain possession also of the salvational elements. Just as Joyce

somehow leads his readers to affirmation of life by rubbing our noses in it in *Ulysses*, Mann somehow lifts us back up to the visionary peaks, in aspiration at least, despite the lingering horror of the World War, the point at which, in historical terms, we must arrive as readers.

I now turn to a different, but important way that a twentieth-century writer depicts the mountain as an actual or potential visionary peak, as a mysterious reality that for one strange moment at an epochal boundary both separates and links eras. This peak occurs in its symbolic version in the remarkable Renaissance epic *Os Lusíadas*, in which the poet Camoes celebrates the saga of Portuguese world-girdling exploration and colonization in which he himself was a participant. In canto nine, the gods honor the heroic wayfarer Vasco de Gama by vouchsafing him a vision of empire the fulfillment of which he cannot personally experience but to which his exploits will contribute a decisive character. He witnesses this glorious prospect from a mountain on the Island of Venus that is a poetic Elysium, much like a modern Aeneas, and also second Moses, a key shaper of his people's cultural future. In a sonnet, Keats refers us to the historically actual mountain from which we are cowitnesses with the intrepid Spanish explorer Bilbao, misnamed Cortez by the poet, and his men, "breathless upon a peak in Darien," when suddenly they are the first Europeans who view both the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans.

One of my favorite novels of the mid-twentieth century, Alfred Bertram Guthrie's *The Big Sky* (published 1947), conjures the mythic proportions of the extension of the European world, in its New World metamorphoses, and the actions that underlie our present condition, separated from that tremendous originary discovery by pre-Europeans and then newcomers. The two major types of exploration recorded by Euroamerican and postcolonial writers have been the great sea voyages and the formidable overland treks into essentially alien realms. *The Big Sky* is concerned with the second great push westward by the settlers of the eastern coast of North America who have already created outposts beyond the chain of the Alleghany and Appalachian Mountains and the Great Lakes. The novel is set in the period after the inspiring explorations of Lewis and Clark, who in the years 1804 to 1806 with their Indian guides, and still using older technology, penetrated beyond the river system of the Mississippi and the Missouri, over the forbidding Rocky Mountains, and down the river system of the Snake and Columbia, establishing the prospect of a transcontinental connection and route. As Lewis and Clark were ascending the Missouri toward the Rocky Mountains, Wordsworth, poetic practitioner of the egotistical sublime, was writing *The Prelude* on his own spiritual development, seeing in wild nature "The types and symbols of Eternity." Quite conversant with European literary and painterly terms, which appear on cue in the published *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, Lewis knows he is gazing at a sublime spec-

tacle when he faces the Great Falls of the Missouri and the snowcapped peaks of the Rockies.

In the relatively brief interlude of the following several decades, the recently invented steamship rose to dominate the lower Mississippi and then eventually the upper stretches, the Ohio, and the Missouri. *The Big Sky* follows the fortunes of the restless adventurers who have followed the lead of Lewis and Clark in moving by river craft into the still largely uncharted territories of the Indian peoples of the upper Great Plains, before any wagon trails have been traced. Gradually, living among the indigenous peoples under the big sky, the main protagonists, Boone Caudill and Jim Deakins, merge with the aboriginal culture to a significant degree. Their adventure of arriving at the headwaters of the great rivers gives way to the adventue of ascending into the secret heart of the as yet not fully disclosed continent. The American intruders reach and dwell in the high country amidst the enormous mountains which are a bastion holding together the Indian universe. But among the signs of the impending tragedy for the white men who have been adopted into tribal roles in the mysterious fastness of the American interior is the arrival of an agent of another particular kind of modern visionary, a Bostonian named Elisha Peabody who, on behalf of powerful financiers, is seeking for the key to the transcontinental passages by which, eventually, a great railroad can span from ocean to ocean. The betrayal of the secrets of the tribes who use these interior trails will be one of the many woundings by which the magnificent, still mysterious and sacred heartland is violated. It is inevitable that the heroes will fall and must lose forever the blessing of the strange interlude in which they are graced by the privilege of living in the spirit of the interior, under the big sky. One of the most powerful symbolic moments in the novel occurs in the depth of winter, among the highest peaks, where the two friends are trapped after a skirmish with an enemy tribe. Jim manages to climb onto a pinnacle in the blinding whiteness and shoot an elusive mountain sheep. He feeds morsels of its liver to the dangerously weak Boone and saves him. This is clearly a sacramental act, in which the elusive essence of the high country is expressed. When Jim becomes the sacrificial victim to the human weakness of Boone, the pattern of the fall is confirmed. But magically, for a breathless instant in the core of the novel, we feel the mystery of the original vision of that high place of the interior, the sacred center that will be profaned. By the time we have come downhill and downriver with the broken, inadequate Boone, who has himself killed everyone and everything he loves, we readers know that—already in the mid-nineteenth century—the tourists' current version of the United States is in the cards. The act of entry foredooms the pristine natural world, but we remain longing for that lost sense of integral being.

In summary, the heightening metaphor that attaches to the mountain is found in conjunction with the theme of spiritual struggle, heroic daring, the quest

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for union with the divine, and inexplicable noumenal encounter. It is my hope that this brief sampling from Western literature will offer suggestive points that, in a future global comparatism, can be brought into a meaningful correlation with the thematics and imagery of other great literary systems.

Note

1. I am grateful to Thomas Kerth and George C. Schoolfield, editors of *Life's Golden Tree: Essays in German Literature from the Renaissance to Rilke* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996), for permission to reuse several passages relating to Balde and Goethe from my essay "Baroque High: Above It All with Balde."