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# Sacred Alpine Space in Nineteenth-Century Narratives

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Emma Sternlof

From a modern vantage point, the Alps in the mid-1800s appear as an increasingly secular landscape. A long-standing stop on the Grand Tour of the European continent, the mountain range had been subjected to extensive scientific study; the region was evolving into a health retreat and athletic proving ground. However, as environmental historian Jon Mathieu contends, the modernization of the Alps in the nineteenth century was matched by a heightened sense of the range as an inherently sacred, spiritually important region.<sup>1</sup> Between the 1830s and 1850s, Victor Hugo, George Musgrave, and Charles Dickens each engaged with and recorded their impressions of the Alps and its religious sites. These sophisticated, highly literate travelers adopted existing vocabulary and tropes to describe sacred alpine spaces, both natural and man-made. Their narratives offer insight into the simultaneous “processes of secularization and of sacralization” that informed nineteenth-century attitudes toward the Alps.<sup>2</sup>

When Hugo, Musgrave, and Dickens traveled to the alpine region, they entered a geographical and cultural space shaped by centuries of Christianity. The faith was first introduced to the region by the Romans and grew in influence during Frankish rule. From 600 onwards, Christian missionaries streamed into the Alps, converting the common people and constructing a plethora of churches and monasteries over the ensuing centuries. By 1500, most of the major monastic orders were represented by Alpine institutions, including the Benedictines, Cistercians, and Carthusians. These monasteries were renowned as shelters for travelers, offering protection from thieves, dragons, and other dangers.<sup>3</sup> The medieval penchant for pilgrimage also touched the Alps, as the devout began visiting holy hermitages and remote relics.<sup>4</sup>

Although it was a primarily urban movement, the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century also permeated the peaks of the Alpine landscape. The Alps remained predominantly Catholic but some conversion occurred, especially in Switzerland and Austria; some Protestant dissenters fleeing persecution found refuge in mountain communities. According to Mathieu, two opposing conceptions of space and spirituality emerged in post-Reformation Christian

Europe. He writes, "In Protestant areas, the omnipresence of God was a central concept that set somewhat narrow boundaries on sacred topography. In the areas that remained Catholic, the attribution of sacredness to a physical-tangible landscape grew much stronger..."<sup>5</sup> During the Counter-Reformation, Catholic authorities consciously sought to imbue the mountain landscape with religious significance, encouraging landscape-specific sites and practices. Catholic shrines, small chapels, and large churches proliferated anew in the Alps, while Nativity scenes and passion plays symbolically transformed alpine meadows and valleys.<sup>6</sup>

During the Enlightenment of the 1700s, a new cult of the mountain developed around the Alps. This movement was ostensibly scientific and unmoored from traditional religion, particularly Catholicism. Nevertheless, this perspective employed a spiritual vocabulary to describe mountains as a source of emotional succor and moral renewal. The "sacralization beyond institutionalized religion" was expressed in scientific texts, novels, and poetry alike.<sup>7</sup> The Enlightenment, far from erasing the idea of the Alps as a sacred space, fused existing sentiment and scientific knowledge to create a new nature-based alpine spirituality. Notwithstanding the tradition of alpine monasteries, Mathieu argues, "In the 15th to 17th centuries, the mountains were considerably less sacred than in the 18th to 20th centuries."<sup>8</sup> Between the 1830s and 1850s, this view of the alpine landscape as a place of sublimity and spiritual transformation appeared in the travel narratives of Hugo, Musgrave, and Dickens; these narratives were also informed by the region's medieval past and enduring Catholic presence.

In 1839, a well-known French writer recorded his travels through the Alps with his mistress in letters to his wife. Already a literary sensation after the publication of *Cromwell*, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, and several collections of poetry, Victor Hugo was thirty-seven when he visited the alpine towns of Switzerland. *The Alps and Pyrenees*, a collection of his impressions posthumously compiled, translated, and published by John Manson in 1898, offers a lyrical demonstration of Hugo's romantic sensibilities. As an advocate for the lower classes and, at this point in his life, still conventionally Catholic, Hugo had a deep appreciation for the authentic faith of ordinary believers.<sup>9</sup> Throughout his alpine travel account, he combined aesthetic critiques of formal religious institutions with praise for homegrown spiritual spaces.

In his poetry and dramas, Hugo praised nature as the ultimate manifestation of harmony, beauty, and continuity.<sup>10</sup> His dispatches from the Alps reflect this personal philosophical bent and the broader trend of the mountain cult. In one letter, Hugo recounted his ascent of the Rigi, where he observed "... a marvelous assemblage of harmonious and magnificent things filled with divine grandeur. I turned round... seeking some sublime witness of that sublime landscape."<sup>11</sup> Imagining the massive movements of the earth that had shaped the peaks, Hugo reveled in his own inferiority in true romantic style.

Although he admired the artistic and architectural elements of formal, urban alpine churches, Hugo preferred rustic, even superstitious, examples of popular piety. In Küsnacht, he visited the “showy and ornate” town church; in Luzerne, he found the rococo Jesuit church “loud and aggressive.”<sup>12</sup> He was far more taken with the mystery and reverence surrounding an enigmatic statue in a nearly inaccessible cavern on Mount Pilatus: “...A supernatural statue of white stone some thirty feet in height... serving its term of confinement, and dreaming of the mysterious workmen who carved it. The mountaineers call this figure St. Dominic.”<sup>13</sup> As Hugo climbed the Rigi, he admired rudimentary painted Stations of the Cross along the way, examples of the post-Reformation Catholic drive to sanctify the landscape. Inside a mountain chapel, he found the sight of “a somewhat dilapidated altar encumbered with Catholic profusion, a Madonna, innumerable withered flowers, innumerable vases with the gilding worn off... the iron collars of convicts with their chains” deeply moving.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, after visiting William Tell’s house-turned-chapel, Hugo found the space aesthetically displeasing: “A dilapidated interior, wretched frescoes on the walls, a miserable altar decorated with Italianate frippery, coloured wooden vases and artificial flowers, two gibbering beggars who sell you William Tell souvenirs for a few sous...”<sup>15</sup> However, he noted with reverence the presence of a much-loved Madonna and the poignant petitions written in the travelers’ book.

In the second volume of 1857’s *A Pilgrimage into Dauphiné*, George M. Musgrave offered a highly detailed account of his stay at the Couvent de la Grande Chartreuse, the founding institution of the Carthusian monastic order. An Englishman, minister, and travel writer who had already published a *Ramble Through Normandy*, he consciously set himself in a long line of “Enthusiasts and Poets, Philosophers and Theologians, Moralists and Sentimental Travellers” who had visited the institution.<sup>16</sup> At the opening of his account, Musgrave employed the same quasi-religious, romantic language as Hugo. In describing the craggy, precipitous landscape surrounding the monastery, he mused, “...I cannot recall to mind any tract of European mountain scenery more saddening in its gloominess, more forlorn in its solitudes, more sublime in its beauty, or more impressive in its natural features and moral and religious associations...”<sup>17</sup> As Mathieu explains, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a vocabulary of mountains emerge “from the border area of esthetic and religious experience... In return, these literary and linguistic innovations had an influence on religion in a narrower sense.”<sup>18</sup> The Reverend Musgrave’s use of this vocabulary demonstrates how far the concept of sublimity had permeated mainstream discourse; the language of natural spirituality had come full circle by the mid-1900s.

After sentimental swooning over the Alps’ natural spiritual power, Musgrave took a more academic tone. He included a lengthy history of the Grande Chartreuse within his narrative, explaining that St. Bruno

founded the order in 1083, tracing the various iterations of the monastery that were destroyed by avalanches or fires over the course of the centuries, and describing the dispersal of the order during the French Revolution. The Grande Chartreuse had been restored after Louis XVIII assumed the throne in 1815. However, noted Musgrave, "...The day of their power and the influence of their existence as a religious body are past forever... [They] pay dues to the State as tenants... their revenue is insignificantly small."<sup>19</sup> Next, Musgrave offered an incredibly detailed description of the monastery's interior, even specifying the exact length of the marble kitchen table. He detailed the monks' dress and hairstyle, the process of joining the order, and the rigid requirements of silence and prayer. Every process of monastic life, from the preparation of elixirs for sale to the milking of the fifty cows, was granted a thorough explanation.

In addition to his more anthropological and historical digressions, Musgrave also approached the Grande Chartreuse as a dissatisfied tourist. His room, with its coarse blankets, poorly constructed table, and missing fireplace "bore a most melancholy aspect... the gloomiest berth in all my experiences."<sup>20</sup> In observing matins, he was offended by the Carthusians' lack of musicality: "I think I have never heard any sounds so unharmonious, harsh, and repulsive... Nothing could be more wearisome, flat, or unprofitable... less like 'reasonable service' of God, or less conducive to the rise and progress of religion in the soul."<sup>21</sup> For the sake of comparison, he noted an 1820 visit to the Great Saint Bernard, sadly recalling that order's gift for monastic music. Musgrave also criticized the monks at length for failing to re-install a guestbook after the monastery's restoration, defending tourists' right to leave their mark and emphasizing the monks' poor sense of humor. He reserved particularly harsh words for the breakfast offered to travelers: "Have you seen a bucket of slimy, grayish composition, resembling soapsuds and lime, mingled with wood ashes...? There it stood, thick and slab... oatmeal... lukewarm and beginning to *set*, like gravy in mid-winter..."<sup>22</sup> This superficial nitpicking, however, was only the beginning of Musgrave's monastic critique.

Strikingly, Musgrave used his visit to the Grande Chartreuse as fodder for a scathing denunciation of the monastic life. A description of a monastic cell prompted musings on the wrongheaded nature of religious seclusion. After providing the Latin motto of the order, he offered a positive translation before adding, "...Keen and sarcastic expositors... would render it somewhat less charitably... 'While all the world in light and knowledge speeds, the monk in darkness stands, and tells his beads!'"<sup>23</sup> At the close of the account, Musgrave's long-held desire to visit the monastery and understand the motivations of its inhabitants gave way to profound disappointment: "We cannot but look upon these benumbed and listless saunterers through the wilderness as on so many runaways from the field of exertion... their heavenly Father's will, and their Master's business they are content to muse upon... but no relish have they for his work..."<sup>24</sup> For Musgrave, the order's alpine location exemplified

its greatest flaw, reflecting an unwillingness to engage with the sufferings of society. In addition to the parables of the buried talents and the light under a bushel basket, he invoked another biblical example, crying, "...These men have set their city *on a hill*, and *hid* it!"<sup>25</sup> He repeatedly attacked the order's geographic isolation as representative of spiritual cowardice: "...He who, fleeing like a bird to the hills, returns no more to the conflict with earthly trials and temptations... is rebuked even by the heathen..."<sup>26</sup> While praising the remote landscape's sublime beauty and "religious associations," Musgrave criticized a religious institution for existing there. Whether this dissonance speaks to specifically anti-Catholic sentiment on Musgrave's part, or to a personal distinction between natural spirituality and organized worship, the account betrayed competing conceptions of sacred alpine space.

Musgrave's countryman Charles Dickens differed from him in both literary leanings and religious temperament. By the time he visited the Alps in 1846, Dickens was the highly regarded author of works like *The Pickwick Papers*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and *A Christmas Carol*. Where Musgrave was an Anglican clergyman, Dickens was more moderate and broad-minded in his religious views, although he was a harsh critic of evangelical Christianity and Roman Catholicism.<sup>27</sup> Like Hugo's letters and Musgrave's travel guide, Dickens' correspondence reflected the conception of the Alps as a landscape of universal spiritual merit. In an August 2, 1846 letter to John Forster, his friend and eventual biographer, Dickens drew on the existing Romantic vocabulary of sublimity to describe his journey through the Alps: "Mont Blanc, and the Valley of Chamounix, and the Mer de Glace, and all the wonders of that most wonderful place, are above and beyond one's wildest expectations. I cannot imagine anything in nature more stupendous or sublime."<sup>28</sup> He described the feeling of physical and spiritual inferiority induced by the towering peaks, which he compared to "Gothic pinnacles."<sup>29</sup> This conception of mountains as the "cathedrals of the world" was a widespread trope of the period.<sup>30</sup>

In a September 6, 1846 letter to Forster, Dickens described a group excursion to the Great Saint Bernard. His description of the surrounding landscape again revealed the enduring influence of romantic alpine language: "[The last league of the ascent,] lying through a place called the valley of desolation, is very awful and tremendous, and the road is rendered toilsome by scattered rocks and melting snow."<sup>31</sup> He had little respect for the Great Saint Bernard brothers as a group, dismissing the mystique of the monastic house as "a piece of as sheer humbug as we ever learnt to believe in, in our young days. Trashy French sentiment and the dogs (of which, by the bye, there are only three remaining) have done it all."<sup>32</sup> Dickens criticized what he perceived as laziness and greed among the brothers, observing that they relied on servants to maintain the road, "which has not been important or much used as a pass these hundred years," and subtly extorted money from travelers.<sup>33</sup> In his typically witty way, he described to Forster the scene at dinner, "with a grim

monk, in a high black sugar-loaf hat with a great knob at the top of it, carving the dishes.”<sup>34</sup>

However, Dickens also allowed that life as a brother at the Great Saint Bernard, despite its cold and isolated location, was far less limited than one might expect. In fact, he explained, “...It is an infinitely more exciting and various life than any other convent can offer; with constant change and company through the whole summer; with a hospital for invalids down in the valley, which affords another change; and with an annual begging-journey to Geneva...”<sup>35</sup> He noted with pleasure that the brother who served dinner could speak some English and had just received a copy of *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens was also willing to attribute a moment of transcendence to the monastic institution itself, musing, “At five o’clock in the morning the chapel bell rang in the dismallest way for matins: and I, lying in bed close to the chapel, and being awakened by the solemn organ and the chaunting [sic.] thought for a moment that I had died in the night and passed into the unknown world.”<sup>36</sup>

In *Little Dorrit*, published several years after his visit to the Great St. Bernard, Dickens set a pivotal encounter at the monastery and included many details from his own experience in the narrative. As the Dorrits and their companions approached the monastery, Dickens vividly conjured the lonely landscape’s spiritual power: “When [night] at last rose to the walls of the convent of the Great Saint Bernard, it was as if that weather-beaten structure were another Ark... A craggy track... as though they were ascending the broken staircase of a gigantic ruin, was their way now.”<sup>37</sup> The novel’s description of the monastery itself, with its “strong arched galleries... thick walls pierced with small sunken windows,” matched that from Dickens’ correspondence.<sup>38</sup> As the party departed, Dickens offered a more uplifting image of the monastery’s surrounding landscape, underscoring both its changeable nature and constant sublimity: “...The mountain air was so clear and light that the new sensation of breathing it was like having entered on a new existence... The solid ground itself seemed gone, and the mountain, a shining waste of immense heaps and masses, to be a region of cloud...”<sup>39</sup>

Dickens’ novel offered a more sympathetic view of the monks than his correspondence might suggest. The party of English travelers is joined at dinner by a brother “who no more resembled the conventional breed of Saint Bernard monks than he resembled the conventional breed of Saint Bernard dogs;” was this character inspired by the Pickwick-reading monk that Dickens himself encountered?<sup>40</sup> Strikingly, Dickens cast two of the fictional Englishmen as mean-spirited and condescending. In the novel, the unconventional brother calmly responded to their needling queries, explaining that only three of the famous dogs resided at the monastery, that there was little call for them to save lives, and that they were crucial to the monastery’s fundraising mission. One visitor mocked the Great Saint Bernard’s mission, while another opined on the

dreariness of life in the Alps. In response, “With a deprecating smile, the host gently raised and gently lowered his shoulders... Monsieur and he did not see this poor life of his from the same point of view.”<sup>41</sup> In a final break with his own skepticism about the real-life brothers of the Great Saint Bernard, Dickens put his fictional monks to work clearing the pass.

These three writers shared a conviction of the natural alpine landscape’s inherent spiritual power. However, they drew on other existing tropes to describe man-made religious sites in very different ways. For Victor Hugo, with his Romantic literary sensibilities and sympathy for the lower classes, the aesthetic appreciation of grassroots spirituality outweighed any opposition to Catholicism in his descriptions of small-scale sacred alpine spaces. George Musgrave, the single-minded Englishman, approached his stay at the Grande Chartreuse with a travel writer’s eye and a narrow religious viewpoint and described the institution and its inhabitants accordingly. In his take on the Great Saint Bernard, Charles Dickens weighed the positives and negatives of his experience and the alpine monastic project as a whole; the variations between his correspondence and his fiction reflect his own flexible perspective. These three accounts, spread across only three decades of the nineteenth century, belie the common narrative of steady, linear European secularization. Even in an age of increasing commercialization, the Alps remained a transcendent landscape. In the mid-nineteenth century, the man-made sacred spaces amid the alpine spires and valleys remained a powerful inspiration for intellectual criticism or spiritual contemplation.

### ENDNOTES

1. Jon Mathieu, "The Sacralization of Mountains in Europe during the Modern Age," *Mountain Research and Development* 26 (2009), accessed November 13, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4540654>, 348.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 68-72.
4. Andrew Beattie, *The Alps: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 77-78.
5. Mathieu, "Sacralization," 345.
6. Beattie, "Cultural History," 80-81.
7. Mathieu, "Sacralization," 347.
8. Ibid., 348.
9. Joanna Richardson, *Victor Hugo* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 81.
10. Ibid., 89.
11. Ibid., 39-40.
12. Ibid., 14, 25.
13. Ibid., 18-19.
14. Ibid. 37-38.
15. Ibid., 13.
16. George M. Musgrave, *A pilgrimage into Dauphiné* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1857), 155.
17. Ibid., 156.
18. Mathieu, "Sacralization," 247.
19. Musgrave, *Pilgrimage*, 181.
20. Ibid. 207.
21. Ibid. 200.
22. Ibid. 210.
23. Ibid. 190.
24. Ibid. 230.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid. 233-234.
27. "The Dickens Project," University of California Santa Cruz, accessed December 8, 2012, <http://dickens.ucsc.edu/resources/index.html>
28. John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (New York: Sterling Signature, 2011), 245-246.
29. Ibid., 246.
30. Mathieu, "Sacralization," 348.
31. Forster, *Life*, 250.

32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Charles, Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, Google Books, accessed November 16, 2012, [http://books.google.com/books/about/Little\\_Dorrit.html?id=UNKT3AklbLsC](http://books.google.com/books/about/Little_Dorrit.html?id=UNKT3AklbLsC), 412.
38. Ibid., 414.
39. Ibid., 430.
40. Ibid., 418.
41. Ibid., 421.

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