Great Sentinel: Grand Monadnock in Poetry

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A mountain may appear in a poem as a sacred site, like Olympus, Sinai, Calvary, or Ararat; it may embody the sublimity or otherness of nature; it may represent human aspiration or some other desirable quality. Mountains as sacred sites abound in ancient poetry all over the world. As more personal experience, mountains rarely crop up in Western poetry before Wordsworth, but are common features of Chinese poetry from its beginnings and especially in the T'ang period of the seventh through tenth centuries C.E. An untitled poem by Shih Te summarizes the attraction of the mountain for the questing psyche:

> Far, faraway, steep mountain paths,
> Treacherous and narrow, ten thousand feet up;
> Over boulders and bridges, lichens of green,
> White clouds are often seen soaring.
> A cascade suspends in mid-air like a bolt of silk;
> The moon's reflection falls on a deep pool, glittering.
> I shall climb up the magnificent mountain peak,
> to await the arrival of a solitary crane.

(*Sunflower Splendor*, 29. Trans. James M. Hargett)

Only with the Enlightenment does Western poetry set aside the conventions of pastoral and religious verse and embrace the natural sublime. Rediscovering the imagination as the locus of sensibility, the English Romantics, especially Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, explore the idea that nature might be spiritual expression, might embody human emotions and afford a glimpse of the divine. Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) laid the philosophical groundwork for the rejection of the medieval Christian dogma of the fallen world. Replacing that glum vision with a new appreciation of natural beauty as an expression of God would be the task not of theologians but of painters and poets.

With the Romantic movement blossoming, American poets invoked the splendor of their relatively unspoiled landscapes by adopting the language of the natural sublime. Grand Monadnock, the most impressive mountain within easy reach of Boston, became the subject of many of America's nineteenth century nature poems. Boston was the cultural center of the nation in the first half of the century, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, of Harvard College and Concord, the foremost intellectual of the era and one of its best poets, was the first to memorialize Monadnock in a poem of some excellence.

Earlier published poems about the Grand Monadnock contrasted its sublimity with the brevity and scope of human lives:

Time rolls along with an oblivious tide
And soon will drown the voice of praise or blame.
the tallest monuments of human pride

Crumble away like ant hills, both the same.
How brief the echo of a sounding name,
The envy and glory of mankind!

(Albert Perry, "The Grand Monadnock," 1846)

Pride has always been a likely target for the poet. But before the Enlightenment, exalting the fallen natural world over the human, over the image of God, would be a risky stance for a Christian poem to take. Transcendentalism however, redefines our relationship with divinity and elevates natural beauty to spiritual significance comparable to our own. In a brief early poem, "Monadnock from Afar," Emerson queries his subject on the role of landscape in the divine vision:

Well the Planter knew how strongly
    Works thy form on human thought;
I muse what secret purpose had he
    To draw all fancies to this spot….

In his far more ambitious "Monadnoc" (1847) Emerson defines the mountain as "Pillar which God aloft had set / So that men might not it forget; / It should be their life's ornament, / And mix itself with each event." That is, Monadnock stands neither in the ruins of a fallen world nor as a detached sublimity of otherness but as "The people's pride," something that is part of our lives, placed there not to mock but to inspire and uplift. Later, in the "Ode Inscribed to W. H.

Channing," Emerson in a darker mood would claim that "The God who made New Hampshire / Taunted the lofty land / With little men," but this is another way of asserting that the mountain is not apart from but an interlocutor of human perception.

Continuing in "Monadnoc," Emerson, exploring its neighborhood, notes with his realist's eye that the people of the region in their poverty and squalor fail to live up to the mountain's inspiring presence. He compares them to the inhabitants of other places (Wales, Scotland, Hungary) where nature has enriched minds and lives, and then anthropomorphically asks whether if Monadnock can't similarly inspirit our citizens it should efface itself: "Sink, O mountain, in the swamp!" However, as he continues his explorations he finds sturdier folk busy with their commerce, taming the wilderness "For homes of virtue, sense and taste," paying homage, in their way, to the "World-soul" that Transcendentalism credits as a source of our spiritual well-being. Placing himself atop the mountain, Emerson hears it speak to him of its past and future, its place in the larger scheme of creation. Most notably, Monadnock awaits "the bard and sage, / Who, in large thoughts, like a fair pearl-seed, / Shall string Monadnoc like a bead." In response, the mountain will reward this Ur-poet with "Fountain-drop of spicier worth / Than all vintage of the earth." In the end, though, Emerson recognizes that the mountain doesn't actually speak but rather reflects our own imaginations by giving form to "the formless mind" and showing us something elusive of ourselves: "And though the substance us elude, / We in thee the shadow find." In this longish poem, Emerson argues that Monadnock represents not some fixed notion of the sublime but embodies whatever we bring to it. Our task is to realize what we can offer ourselves, and as a kind of catalytic force the mountain, like the rest of the natural world, can help find "the shadow," the Platonic refraction of an eternal actuality we can't directly perceive.

"Monadnoc" is the most ambitious poem the Grand Monadnock has so far inspired. In the hundred years following, many poets have written Monadnock poems, including William Ellery Channing, of Emerson's own generation, Edward Arlington Robinson, Amy Lowell, Lord Dunsany, and, of all people, H. P. Lovecraft, whose "To Templeton and Mount Monadnock" concludes by situating the mountain in a blast of literary and patriotic rhetoric:

> Ancient Monadnock! Silent pine-girt hill,
> Whose majesty could move a Whittier's quill;
> Whose distant brow the humbler pen excites;
> Whose purpled slope the raptur'd gaze invites;
> Stand thou! Great Sentinel, though nations fall –
> In thee New-England triumphs over all!

Lovecraft would go on to write better poetry and far better supernatural fiction, but at least this early effort acknowledges Monadnock's literary aura as well as its regional distinction.

The most important Monadnock poem after Emerson's is Galway Kinnell's "Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock" (1964). Characteristic of his early work, this poem develops a sequence of perceptions, each complete in itself but linked to those that precede or follow. In the first, the speaker rises just before dawn and experiences a Keats-like sensation on hearing birdsong stop, leaving "the dimension of depth" exposed:

> 1
>
> I can support it no longer.

Laughing ruefully at myself
For all I claim to have suffered
I get up. Damned nightmarer!

It is New Hampshire out here,
It is nearly the dawn.
The song of the whippoorwill stops
And the dimension of depth seizes everything.

Birdsong, essential to the texture of the poem, dominates the second part:

The whistles of a peabody bird go overhead
Like a needle pushed five times through the air,
They enter the leaves, and come out little changed.

The air is so still
That as they go off through the trees
The love songs of birds do not get any fainter.

After which, the poem turns to flowers, a memory of a black seagull on the French coast, and the actual climb up Monadnock. In the fifth section, Kinnell roughly approximates the move Wordsworth makes in both in the immortality Ode and "Resolution and Independence" when the joy of contemplating nature abruptly turns into depression. In the latter poem, the thought that

someday “may come... / Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty,” threatens Wordsworth with the “despondency and madness” that engulfed Chatterton and the ill health and financial difficulties that consumed Robert Burns. Kinnell’s still more abrupt drop in mood is only momentary, but is presaged by the paradox of “something joyous” in birdsong he characterizes as elegiac:

> There is something joyous in the elegies
> Of birds. They seem
> Caught up in a formal delight,
> Though the mourning dove whistles of despair.
>
> But at last in the thousand elegies
> The dead rise in our hearts,
> On the brink of our happiness we stop
> Like someone on a drunk starting to weep.

Following this glimpse of despair, the speaker reprises almost parodically a key moment in Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”:

> I kneel at a pool,
> I look through my face
> At the bacteria I think
> I see crawling through the moss.

My face sees me,

The water stirs, the face,

Looking preoccupied,

Gets knocked from its bones.

Here Kinnell invokes the stanzas in which the mariner peers into the sea and watches water snakes moving "in tracks of shining white...// Blue, glossy green, and velvet black, / They coiled and swam; and every track / Was a flash of golden fire." For the mariner, this is a moment of redemption: "the self-same moment I could pray; / And from my neck so free / The Albatross fell off, and sank / Like lead into the sea." For Kinnell, however, this perception only reinforces his despair not only with an imaginary glimpse of the infectious underworld but by shattering his reflection and calling into question his psychic integrity.

By now it should be clear that Kinnell's poem is a veritable catalogue of English Romantic poetry cast into a contemporary existential drama. As his poem continues, it returns to the Immortality Ode (invoking his childhood), "Resolution and Independence" again, and most crucially, in section 10, Tintern Abbey's climactic lines, "While with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things":

In the forest I discover a flower.

The invisible life of the thing

Goes up in flames that are invisible,

Like cellophane burning in the sunlight.

It burns up. Its drift is to be nothing.

In its covertness it has a way
Of uttering itself in place of itself,
Its blossoms claim to float in the Empyrean,

A wrathful presence on the blur of the ground.

The appeal to heaven breaks off.
The petals begin to fall, in self-forgiveness.
It is a flower. On this mountainside it is dying.

Here Kinnell goes much further than Wordsworth in explicating the consequence of poetic insight. "The invisible life of the thing" dissolves and dissipates; instead of linking us to the divine it reverts to simply being a flower, and one that is dying, just as we are. Although Kinnell has invoked the whole history of romanticism in his poem about Monadnock, in the end he rejects one of the central tenets of Wordsworth and Coleridge, that seeing into the life of things enables us to see the hand of divinity at work. What Kinnell embraces and catalogues, however, is the stance, rhetoric, vocabulary, and commitment to individual perception, imagination, and the natural world that enables Romantic, modern, and contemporary poets to write about mountains, when poets locked into classical, renaissance, and neoclassical modes could not or did not.

Through seventeen centuries of Christianity, the poet's sensibility had been informed by a hierarchy that placed nature in the lower strata of concerns, beneath human culture and society, and more or less irrelevant to our relationship with God. Monadnock represents a post-Enlightenment aesthetic that replaces the medieval paradigm with a more humanist and imaginative approach to the world and the self. Invoking nature as a source of aesthetic engagement and arbiter of our relationship with divinity and our own psyches changed Western poetry in ways that would confound Chaucer, Donne, Milton, or Pope. But we write the poetry we need, and Monadnock for two hundred years has embodied that shift in aesthetic and cultural priorities. May it continue to inspire and shape the poets of the future.

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