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Precarious Ascent: Trace and Terrain in René Daumal's *Mount Analogue*

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*Abstract:*

*Mount Analogue* (1944) is René Daumal's esoteric contribution to the mountain novel genre and the wider cultural phenomenon of "mountain reverence." It records the fate of an expedition that has set out to scale the summits of a singular edifice, incomparably high, situated at the crossroads of the real and the imaginary. The topography of this uncharted terrain is paradoxical in the extreme, it subjects whoever tries to climb it to a series of unnerving, haphazard encounters, each of which complicate our classical models of space, action and orientation. For Daumal these paradoxes require nothing less than a new branch of knowledge, to which he gives the name alpinism (the novel is just as much a treatise on this art as a narrative of events). The article reconstructs the guiding principles of this method, their intersection with a series of related theoretical models, from Kant's sublime to Derrida's trace, as well as the specific aesthetic contexts across which Daumal's euphoric engagement with the mountain is affirmed.

### **Mountain Reverence**

"The poetic valorization of the mountain," "the discovery of the mountain as a source of exaltation," must be considered, writes Julien Gracq, "a revolution of capital importance in man's geographic *Weltanschauung*" (104-05). Having played a formative role in "the construction of what we call European Romanticism," over the course of the nineteenth century this discovery leaves transformed the set of attachments, projections and investments that make up the "landscapist sensibility." The mountain is even the emblem, if we follow Gracq one step further here, of a new form of aesthetic community and a new means of communicability. The sensibility to which it is tied—"the first organically European collective creation"—emerges under fundamentally altered conditions of production, transmission and reception. Having

developed concomitantly across several otherwise unconnected territories through the “remarkable phenomenon of a spontaneously unified echo chamber” (106), the Romantic community that finds itself in this experience is neither rooted in nor bound by the strictures of a geography conceived in nationalist terms. If this sensibility thereby disrupts the longstanding bond between poetics and nation that sees the former as nothing but a function of the latter, then the mountain is an expression of this new lingua franca, the first symbol forged under these new conditions.

In any case, on either side of its “discovery” this aspect of the landscape is attributed a very different sense. No longer disparaged as an anomalous presence within Nature’s design, an aberrant element at odds with the frames of reference underwriting Nature as something ordered; no longer seen as a terrain devoid of all charm, its asperity making it inhospitable, its verticality leaving it untraversable, resistant to all forms of cultivation and thus best left to itself at the landscape’s outer reaches, if it isn’t simply expunged altogether; no longer, finally, the scene of an anxiety that cannot be assuaged, the terrain upon which harmony with or mastery of Nature falters, instead the mountain becomes a primary setting for the “new ways of feeling” that increasingly make themselves known to the subject of experience in this period, whether these are experienced directly or vicariously.<sup>1</sup> The repercussions of the mountain’s discovery are not restricted to the aesthetic sphere alone. They extend well beyond it in more than one direction. To take one example, Alain Corbin has shown the extent to which mountain reverence informed the period’s revised idea of the expedition: “A revolution in travel occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century. A new experience would occupy a prominent place in people’s dreams [. . .] Travelers set out to acquire a new experience of space and of other people outside the normal context. They thirsted for grandiose scenery and wild landscapes, camped out on

mountains and contemplated the sunny peaks above calm valleys below” (508). In the context of this newly discovered terrain and the attributes for which it is now prized—a wilderness that breaks with the quotidian; a promise of sanctuary, of elevation, of panorama; above all, an intimation of the infinite—the expedition becomes exploratory, and here the mountain is not simply an excursion’s end-point, but an opening, the site of an encounter that holds out the possibility for augmentation. “The chief aims of travel,” Corbin concludes, “became self-affirmation and self-enrichment” (508). Not only does the mountain’s discovery redetermine the material and formal arrangement of the landscape as a whole, as well as the subject’s position within the schema of this environment, it has its part to play in recasting the configuration of faculties within the subject itself.

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René Daumal’s *Mount Analogue*, unfinished on account of his death in 1944, is situated some time after the high point of this phenomenon. The mountain’s valorization having long since become a commonplace, shopworn and frayed through overuse, its “capital importance” less and less apparent, by then it can no longer be treated as a privileged point of reference for the cultivation of aesthetic experience. “. . . We have seen certain regions of the earth come to be admired in our own time,” writes Paul Valéry in the same period. “Very soon people rush in, painters abound, and the place is desecrated by the innkeeper, the travel agent, and the photographer” (141). The mountain must no doubt be considered such a setting. Either it succumbs to the picturesque—an odious word for an odious sentiment, Daumal writes elsewhere (*Powers of the Word* 24)—or else it risks being reduced to nothing more than a leisure attraction, a site of mass recreation, and this to the extent that even its untamable element can apparently be placed in the service of modern rationalization, as a curative to the demands made

on a social order encompassed by this process. This attitude is prevalent in exemplary fashion in the documentation of the 1937 Paris assembly of the *Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne* (CIAM). Devoted to the problem of “Dwelling and Recreation,” to envisaging how these spheres of experience would appear under an optimal arrangement of social space, one of the congress reports notes that, for the pressure exerted by the modern city on its inhabitants to be made in any way tolerable, it requires periodic alleviation, in the form of access to clearly designated scenic spaces devoted to the provision of “full leisure.” These should be located well beyond the city’s confines and from them all traces of quotidian life should be eliminated. But what is striking here is the way in which such a setting is understood to facilitate recovery. It does so not by offering respite from the pressure in question, but by meeting it with an equal, if not even greater force. These leisure zones should impart “a violent reaction which can only be achieved by direct contact with nature of the harshest kind” (qtd. in Barsac 314-15). Of course the mountain’s attributes make it precisely such a site.<sup>2</sup> But all this confirms that the mountain is fated to see its potency incrementally diminish. If even the unwieldy, indomitable aspect of nature can be assigned a definite function, integrated into a network of rationalization that it therefore lies only ostensibly outside of, if it is reduced to nothing more than a subsidiary of the functionalist city, isn’t the mountain ultimately fated to become a space like any other?

This, a part of the wider cultural context within which *Mount Analogue* is written, is sketched in outline here to show the degree to which Daumal’s conception of the mountain will diverge from it. Not only does his novel retain an echo of the prior Romantic sensibility, it manages to propel the latter’s terms, against the general tendency of its own time, to an even greater intensity, reverence for the mountain carried to the point that it becomes feverous. In no way does this betray a pursuit of spent glory, a blind persistence with a now redundant subject.

Instead, with disarming acuity, the experience of the mountain is stripped of anything other than the aporia that, now as before, conditions it.<sup>3</sup>

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## Figment

Daumal's narrator recounts his part in an expedition that has set out to scale the summits of an apparently impassable edifice. It is impassable not only because of its height, which exceeds all common measure, nor because its whereabouts are, for properly speculative reasons, uncertain (caught in a "curvature of space" and thus deflecting the light that would ordinarily disclose it, it remains imperceptible to ordinary perception and can only be approached under very specific conditions [*Mount Analogue* 48-50]); it is impassable, first and foremost, because its actual existence remains to be established beyond all doubt. As the narrator first makes clear, never had it occurred to him to conceive of Mount Analogue as anything other than a fiction. He had always presumed that its existence was symbolic rather than real. Yet no sooner has this premise been established, it is straight away confounded by the conceit with which the novel begins and which continues to mark each of its subsequent episodes. The narrator has received an unexpected response to a half-forgotten article he has authored, a survey of the "symbolic significance" of the mountain as it appears across various ancient mythologies. The article, so we are told, should have been recognizable to whoever has read it as a "literary fantasy" (22); it gives every indication that its principal referent—the mountain as symbol of the absolute—is a work of the imagination, and thus something absent from reality in principle.<sup>4</sup> To take the text literally would be "absurd," and no one, so we are told, could have done so having acted in good faith. But this is precisely what the curious letter received by the narrator appears to do. Disregarding the narrator's authorial intentions, as well as the code of genre conventions in

which the text has circulated, the letter's sender, a Professor Sogol, issues an invitation to set out in pursuit of Mount Analogue, to treat this figment as though it were something real, to render it a reality by treating it as such. The subsequent sequence of events that unfurls across the novel—in which the mountain appears in a multitude of forms: as an object of scientific enquiry, a site of mystic experience, an entry in a traveller's logbook, the backdrop for a series of apologues, even a parlor game puzzle—therefore rests on this initial displacement, a productive confusion between fantasy and reality that sees the path of the narrative develop across registers ordinarily held apart from one another, so that their opposition is from the first suspended. Because of this conceit, whatever then occurs, no matter how fantastic, appears to bear the stamp of actuality. And this means that of the many genres Daumal's novel has a share in—from the *conte philosophique* to the adventure story, up to and including the marvel tale: these are Roger Shattuck's suggestions in his introduction to the novel (15)—prominent among them would be that form of fiction called utopian. As Ernst Bloch insists, while whatever a utopian text refers to is necessarily inexistent, present there *because* absent from reality, and this to the extent that, from reality's perspective, it appears to be impossible, nevertheless this entity “is not something like nonsense or absolute fancy; rather it is not *yet* in the sense of a possibility; *that* it could be there if we could only do something for it. Not only if we travel there, but *in that* we travel there the island utopia arises out of the sea of the possible—utopia, but with new contents” (3). Mount Analogue is precisely such a possible world for the expedition that goes in search of it. Only insofar as it is approached does it come into view, because only by being approached is it drawn out of the state of preclusion in which it otherwise languishes. And all this is expressed emblematically by the name of the “sound little ship” that carries the narrator and his fellow travellers towards their destination: “*The Impossible*” (56).

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## Alpinism

The passage mapped out by this expedition into uncharted terrain and the line of ascent it envisages draws upon an eclectic body of techniques, practices, stratagems and hypotheses. Pieced together these constitute nothing less than a new art, to which Daumal gives the name *alpinism*, and this “novel of symbolically authentic Non-Euclidean adventures in Mountain Climbing” (to recall the work’s eccentric subtitle), is as much a formal treatise on this art as it is a narrative of events. The author’s working notes, published alongside the novel proper and constituting a far-sighted document in their own right, make available in schematic form the guiding principles of this art, and on their basis it is possible to reconstruct what are for Daumal the fundamental topographic features of Mount Analogue’s terrain. Its point of departure is to treat the mountain not as an object of contemplation but a field of action:

Definitions. —*Alpinism* is the art of climbing mountains in such a way as to face the greatest risks with the greatest prudence. *Art* is here taken to mean knowledge realized in action. (103)

Precariousness is the prevailing feature of the mountain’s environment. At each moment, with each step, the subject of action is faced with a landform so hazardous, the vagaries of which are so extreme, it cannot rely on any existing standard of experience to guide its efforts. No rule can be established that would hold for every eventuality encountered, because the accident that essentially defines this terrain does not have a stable, invariant form (any suggestion of consistency is simply a mirage, produced by a generalized disorder). The threat that this accident



constitutes cannot be nullified once and for all, only postponed, and this places any prospective plan of action in a peculiar position. However coherent its itinerary is in and of itself, the mountain's reality confounds its implementation, which means the subject only advances through an act that is irreducible to what has been planned for, that is contingent, even gratuitous; for the alpinist, purposive action is dictated by chance circumstance.

Conversely, to take up a position in knowledge and cling to it irrespective of the traps that lay littered across this particular field of action amounts to an idealism that would prove, in reality, fatal. This stance is parodied by Daumal in the form of a prospective member of the expedition, a "devotee of Hegel," a proponent of "a school of mountain climbing roughly described as 'the German school.'" The narrator continues:

Its method could be described this way: you attack the steepest slope of a mountain along the least promising approach, the one which is most crumbling and exposed to rock-slides, and you climb straight toward the summit without allowing yourself to look for any convenient detours to right or to left. Usually you succeed in killing yourself, but sooner or later some national team reaches the summit alive. (44)

Needless to say, this character will make his excuses and withdraw from the expedition before it even begins. The method is preserved intact, but at the cost of its "realization in action." As Daumal says elsewhere, "Any metaphysics that is sufficient unto itself suggests the vain pleasure of a man who whiles away the hours reading travel guides and timetables, tracing out routes on a map, and thinks that he is actually travelling" (*Always Wrong* 11).

As a form of praxis that, above and beyond its immediate circumstance, must all the

while proceed with an ultimate end in mind—the summit—alpinism presides over a *course* of action. It is tasked with securing the continuity of this course, its uninterrupted movement onward and upward, facilitating the transition from one point of station to the next, all the more difficult in that the territory's haphazardness makes prior understanding of what these points consist in impossible. Without this effort there is nothing to ensure that an action would meet up with itself on the other side of the ever-present impasse which risks stopping it dead in its tracks.

If you slip or have a minor fall, don't allow yourself an instant's pause. Find your pace again as soon as you get up [. . .] Never halt on a shifting slope. Even if you think you have a firm foothold, as you take time to catch your breath and have a look at the sky, the ground will settle little by little under your weight, the gravel will begin to slip imperceptibly, and suddenly it will drop away under you and launch you like a ship. The mountain is always waiting for the chance to give you a spill. (104-05)

All this implies the need for an extreme rapidity on the part of the acting subject: "man acts the way lightning strikes" (*Powers of the Word* 4). The knowledge informing this art, if it is to maintain the action in motion, must be deployed the moment it is called upon, with as little delay as possible, reacting immediately to the ruleless unpredictability of the environment, spontaneous to the point that action and reaction are difficult to dissociate. The "prudence" this calls for therefore implies a process of continual invention and re-invention, a ceaseless expenditure with every step taken, which makes of every step the first.<sup>5</sup>

In this sense, the line of ascent drawn up here does not hold together as one: for the course of action it guides to remain unbroken, it must constantly contort, digress and bifurcate,

and this complicates the rudimentary distinctions between straight path and detour, forwards and backwards, upwards and downwards, motion and repose—whatever would otherwise inform a logic of orientation. Above all, the subject of action can presume nothing whatsoever about the field that is being traversed. A little further along in these working notes Daumal stages a few lines of stop-start dialogue with himself that open with a question: ““What do you mean by analogical mountain climbing?”” But whatever is offered by way of response to this query is not allowed to stand without being questioned in turn, until the exchange culminates in a final question, that as the dialogue’s last word, is left unanswered: “What is a mountain?” (103) This should be taken in all seriousness. For the alpinist, the fundamental object under examination remains to be determined, and this can only be decided upon in the course of scaling it. In this sense, alpinism develops as the *imaginary solution* to the question “what is a mountain?”<sup>6</sup>

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### **Boundlessness**

It is never brought into the foreground, at least not explicitly, but there is a Kantian context informing the narrator’s initial presentation of Mount Analogue. “What defines the scale of the ultimate symbolic mountain—the one I propose to call Mount Analogue—is its *inaccessibility to ordinary human approaches*” (24). Does this definition not draw upon the rhetoric of the sublime, more precisely, the sublime in its “mathematical” form? The edifice in question is of an order of magnitude that renders it “*absolutely large,*” “*large beyond all comparison,*” a “maximum” (Kant 103; 107). It shows itself to be fundamentally excessive with respect to the forms and proportions by which it would ordinarily be recognized, and it surpasses these limits in a way that refuses to yield to any measure. Such incommensurability is what makes of the sublime entity a singularity without counterpart: as Kant says, “we do not permit a

standard adequate to it to be sought outside it, but only within it. It is a magnitude that is equal only to itself.” And it is this that allows him to infer that the mathematical sublime, precisely on account of this incomparability, is that “*in comparison with which everything else is small*” (105). The narrator conceives of Mount Analogue in precisely these terms. It is the mountain that makes every other appear insignificant. It draws together these others in a series to which it itself doesn’t belong and in relation to which it itself can’t be placed. “Now, Sinai, Nebo and Olympus have long since become what mountaineers call ‘cow pastures’; and even the highest peaks of the Himalayas are no longer considered inaccessible today. All these summits have therefore lost their analogical importance” (24).

Since this magnitude cannot be made amenable with any measure other than its own, it does not pass through the recognized channels of representation. It can only appear there, Kant says, as a disruption, as something “contrapurposive for our power of judgment, incommensurate with our power of exhibition, and as it were violent to our imagination” (99). Hence the “unboundedness” that remains its fundamental feature. Daumal’s alpinist is well aware of the disturbance to which the mountain’s appearance is tied, whether it is broached as an object of vision (that which is seen) or vision’s instrument (that by which one sees): “Victor Hugo, coming down from the Rigi, which even in his day was not considered very high, remarked that the view of the world from high peaks does such violence to our visual habits that the natural takes on the appearance of the supernatural” (68).

Once this disruptive aspect of the narrative’s principal referent is acknowledged it perhaps accounts for an idiosyncratic formal feature of Daumal’s work. This concerns the fate met by description in the novel. If it is true, as Michel Leiris maintains, that “a description, of whatever kind it may be, always consists of discovering something human in its object, of

bringing down to our human height the inordinately large size that objects acquire from the fact that they are separate from us" (15), if every object is thus in a certain sense *mountainous* until re-calibrated by the work of description into a determinable form, then Mount Analogue may well be indescribable in the strict sense, the entity before which the efforts of description falter.<sup>7</sup> The mountain constitutes a limit to this particular exercise of the "power of exhibition." It resists being brought back down to "human height," to "ordinary human approach." (The narrator is insistent on this point: the presentation of a magnitude, so he argues, cannot be re-scaled in the way that the proportions of a building can be grasped through a scale model, for example—this would nullify its effect [23-24].) At stake here is an object that confounds the discursive register that is arguably the mainstay of literature as a form, or is at least subtracted from this form only with great difficulty. And it is certainly the case that over and above the descriptive detailing undertaken throughout the novel, as a rule Mount Analogue's topography is most starkly delineated when presented schematically. The tendency is discernible in the diagrammatic sketches of the mountain's dimensions and location that supplement the text at a certain point in the narrative. It is also apparent in an early draft of the opening chapter, in which Daumal has his narrator make plain the necessity for this mode of presentation: "What I have to tell is so extraordinary that I must take certain precautions. To teach anatomy, one uses conventional diagrams—rather than photographs—which differ in every respect from the object to be studied, except that certain relations—specifically, those that form the *thing to be known*—are preserved. I have done the same here."<sup>8</sup> What precipitates this deliberate turn away from description and its conventions, the suspension of a naturalist register in favor of schematic abstraction, so that the characteristic features of the region's terrain are reconstructed with as little concession as possible to the pictorial, together forming less an illustration of the landscape's outer appearance

than an index of relations between lineaments from which a set of topographical postulates can be directly deduced, what precipitates this if not that the mountain in question is “incommensurate with our power of exhibition”? The varied use of schema across the novel shows an attempt to develop a representational framework for an entity the characteristics of which cannot be grasped by description alone.<sup>9</sup>

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### **Labyrinth**

And yet at a certain point the affinity with Kant breaks off. Something of Daumal’s alpinism remains irreducible to the principles of Kantian aesthetics. Recall that the feeling of the sublime can take hold within the subject only inasmuch as the scene responsible for eliciting this feeling is surveyed from the sanctuary of a “safe place” (Kant 120). Whilst the subject is confronted by nature in “its wildest and most ruleless disarray and devastation,” exposed by this encounter to an “agitation,” and even, as already mentioned, a certain “violence,” ultimately the sublime experience must stop short of leaving the subject in real danger (99-100). Were it to do so, it would pass over into fear, pure and simple, and the ground of the experience would simply give way (120). However minimal, a distance or interval from the sublime event is the condition of being affected by it, and this distance is not merely formal: it pertains to the subject’s material existence, its living support, or, in Kant’s words, its “vital force.” It requires a sanctuary and this sanctuary must remain inviolate. Precisely this, however, is what Daumal’s alpinist cannot be sure of. The terrain of Mount Analogue is structured so that the requisite interval is never definitively secured. It can collapse at any moment, and if it continues to hold together, it only ever does so contingently.

This is confirmed by the definitive definition of the mountain’s topography, given in the

novel's opening stages.

*For a mountain to play the role of Mount Analogue, I concluded, its summit must be inaccessible but its base accessible to human beings as nature has made them. It must be unique and it must exist geographically. The door to the invisible must be visible. (24)*

Wherever it is viewed from, the topography delineated here is constitutively paradoxical. No matter what efforts are expended to ascend it, the summit appears to guard itself in its inaccessibility. It could even be said to recede to the degree that it is approached (and the fact of Daumal's death, having left the novel broken off in mid-sentence, does indeed ensure that the summit is left intact). The paradox does not end there. The summit is inaccessible but this doesn't mean it isn't available in its own way. Far from this casting it into seclusion, it is seen at all times and from all perspectives—that is to say, *it is never not seen*: “*The door to the invisible must be visible*”—and this arrangement is responsible for a series of distortionary effects, so many symptoms of mountain fever. For example, the force of the summit's patency, its excessive presence, can distract, can induce blindness to the dangers lying all around (“Keep your eye fixed on the top, but don't forget to look right in front of you”); equally its patency can beguile, giving the illusory impression that the peak is right here, within arm's reach, when nothing could be further from the truth (“Don't think you're there just because you see the summit” [105]).

And yet all this is complicated in turn by the unassuming yet formidable qualification made by the narrator here, heightening the paradox that encompasses this terrain still further. Not all of Mount Analogue is unapproachable. On the contrary, its lower regions lie open, freely

accessible. It therefore follows that the mountain's setting, when considered as a totality, encompasses the distinction between the accessible *and* the inaccessible, drawing them into a single continuum. If they remain essentially irreducible, there is no clear line of demarcation to separate them. And this means that *from the first step onward* the ground on which the alpinist stands is contiguous with the unbounded, the formless, always already exposed to the absence of ground. Whoever attempts to navigate the terrain cannot be sure beyond all doubt where one region ends and the next begins, nor which side of this threshold they stand on. This makes of the mountain a labyrinth, and it means the course of action that alpinism is tasked with securing is drawn into a space in which its future fate becomes opaque, a space so perplexing it appears to withdraw the very possibility of determining whether or not one has entered its field. Here is a setting with no safe place.<sup>10</sup>

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### **Trace**

Nothing easier to enter, nothing harder to exit; where there is a labyrinth, there is the need for a thread. Without a means of marking a trail, of sustaining contact with where it has set out from, an expedition risks forfeiting in advance a relation to the wider world beyond Mount Analogue, and above all the possibility of returning to this world from on high. After all, the mountaintop is only ever a midway point for the expedition that scales it. "You cannot stay on the summit for ever; you have to come down again . . ." (103). The imaginary solution to the mountain must therefore include a program for its descent, and not the ascent alone. It must do so in spite of the fact that the summit is unattainable, which therefore leaves this program in a peculiar state of superfluity, given its realization is so unlikely. Whoever approaches the peak has to presume, against all odds, that the impossible will happen, and that having happened, the



prospect of making one's way back down from on high is held open, that the ascent does not come at the cost of the descent.

For this reason alpinism rests in no small part on a theory of the trace. Admittedly this idea remains relatively undeveloped in the narrative as it stands, but from Véra Daumal's overview of the chapters left unwritten at the time of the author's death (101), it is clear that it would have been a key aspect of the final stages of the expedition. In any case, an apologue found amongst Daumal's working notes allows the premises of this theory to be reconstructed.

When you strike off on your own, leave some trace of your passage which will guide you coming back: one stone set on another, some grass weighed by a stick. But if you come to an impasse or a dangerous spot, remember that the trail you have left could lead people coming after you into trouble. So go back along your trail and obliterate any traces you have left. This applies to anyone who wishes to leave some mark of his passage in the world. Even without wanting to, you always leave a few traces. Be ready to answer to your fellow men for the trail you leave behind you. (105-06)

An expedition's progress through uncharted territory is dependent upon the trace for its success. The trace acts as a marker, an anchor, a potential coordinate for a course of action. It provides a means of orientation, of making legible one's passage through the terrain, to oneself or another, as and when needed. Above all it makes it possible to re-trace one's own steps, to recover a previous point of station along the course of action unfolding. Passage through the terrain without this facility would be directionless, exposed without defense to the deviousness of the labyrinth. And from this it follows that a trace is always situated at a juncture of some sort. It

marks the spot where a decision has imposed itself on the alpinist, a choice between possible pathways, each branch of which excludes the other. Whichever trail is opted for, then, the trace's inscription remains supplemented by those not taken, which are therefore retained in a *potential* state, so that they may be taken up at a future point, if and when this proves necessary.

But as Daumal also makes perfectly clear, a trace is neither indelible nor infallible. Whilst its inscription is a necessity here—to be clear, it cannot not be traced: “Even without wanting to, you always leave a few traces” —nevertheless, as Jacques Derrida recalls time and again, “There is no trace *itself*, no *proper* trace” (66). From the first moment it is traced, the integrity of its *sens*, its meaning and direction, is always already threatened. On the one hand, the trace cannot cease to signify, it cannot help but emit a signal of some kind. One cannot pass by “one stone set upon another” and not find oneself implicated in some way: “In the mountains a man becomes very attentive to any sign indicating the presence of one of his fellow men” (*Mount Analogue* 94). And yet on the other hand *what it is* that a particular trace signifies is equivocal in the extreme, even for the one who has traced it. Its fundamental sense is never given once and for all. It can change, unexpectedly and inadvertently, without any modification whatsoever of its outward appearance, leaving it to signify something else entirely than what was initially intended. “Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself” (Derrida 23). In this sense the system of traces on which the expedition is dependent for its bearings cannot be relied upon, even provisionally. A trace misleads, not accidentally but essentially. And it does this by rendering the true path and the wayward one indistinguishable. A sign that was meant to mark safe passage can always end up exposing its recipient to the precise opposite: dead end, digression, or worse. The very thing that was meant to secure the course of action, to provide it with a framework, is what ends up leading it astray.

If the expedition is to make its way forward, then—and it has no other means of proceeding—it must tend to the traces it leaves in its wake, returning to a trace that has proven itself errant with a view to correcting it. “So go back along your trail and obliterate any traces you have left.” The fate of the alpinist is caught up in this pataphysical discovery: a mountain is scaled in two opposing directions at once. The movement charted across its terrain is bifurcated, a step forward must be supplemented by a step back. In any event, what this confirms is that a trace is, in principle, revocable. This is even its fundamental feature: there is no ineffaceable trace, “erasure belongs to its structure” (Derrida 24). And if this is the case, to turn back towards the site of inscription implies an effort that is interminable. Even an ostensibly straight line between two points is potentially exposed to a form of circuitousness without conceivable end. How could one re-trace one’s steps, how could one return to a trace, intending to erase it, without potentially generating further traces in turn? If one leaves traces “even without wanting to,” would this not also apply, and perhaps nowhere more so, to the trace’s erasure? And how could it be guaranteed that the erasure of the trace was not itself misguided, or at least premature; that, progressing a little further along the trail, the effacement would not show itself to be equally ill founded? The erasure of a trace isn’t any less fallible than the tracing of a trace. Erasure is not the trace’s truth, but simply confirmation that the trace is never proper, traced or erased. Which means there is nothing to ensure that the trace, once erased, will not have to be corrected in turn, by being re-traced, and so on, *mise en abîme*. Daumal touches on this in disarming terms in an earlier text: “*Space is the universal tomb, not the image of my freedom*. When the horizon ceases to be the receding image of freedom, when it is no more than a bar placed before the eyes and man feels himself guided by the hands of space, then he will begin to know what it means to be free” (*Powers of the Word* 4). This is the maddening logic to which alpinism, as a theory of the

trace, is exposed at each turn. And it is why *aporia*, the impossibility of passage (*a-póros*), impinges upon all of its actions.

Is it possible, then, to envisage a way of out of this impasse, a means of resolving this otherwise interminable play of traces? Yes and no.<sup>11</sup>

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### **Crystal**

This question leads us, finally, to the apogee of Mount Analogue's terrain, that which every effort is ultimately aimed at, the summit itself. In Daumal's working notes, as well as in the novel itself, there is no doubt a line of thought that considers the summit to be the mountain's solution. It persists there as something like a temptation, mystical or idealist in turn, and this is evident from the first presentation of the mountain onwards. "[I]n the mythic tradition," explains the narrator,

the Mountain is the bond between Earth and Sky. Its solitary summit reaches the sphere of eternity, and its base spreads out in manifold foothills into the world of mortals. It is the way by which man can raise himself to the divine, and by which the divine reveals itself to man. (22-23)

No doubt it is here that Daumal's far-reaching engagement with spiritualist doctrine is most acutely felt.<sup>12</sup> But it is also here, at the highest height, that the *aporia* to which alpinism is subject acquires its fullest force, because it returns at the heart of the turn taken to remedy it, breaking apart the solution to the mountain's puzzle from the inside, as it were. In what sense does the

summit constitute a solution here? Inasmuch as to accede to its ground is synonymous for Daumal with the accession of absolute knowledge. (Of course this aim is already anticipated in the figure of Sogol, who sits at the head of the expedition and whose name expresses in inverse form its guiding principle.)

From the viewpoint of the summit, Mount Analogue would finally be given up in its entirety to the subject of experience. It would become representable as a totality. “What is above knows what is below,” writes Daumal in a fragment guided by this premise,

but what is below does not know what is above. In climbing, always take note of difficulties along the way; for as you go up, you can observe them. Coming down, you will no longer see them, but you will know they are there if you have observed them well. One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up.

(103)

The summit's vista offers an unfettered survey of the terrain that has been navigated in order to arrive there (as if absolute knowledge consisted of nothing more than the recuperation of the movement undertaken towards it). Above it, nothing further, below it, nothing withheld from it, the gaze at this altitude is in principle all seeing, panoramic (“ . . . the exaltation on heights that reveal the kingdoms of the earth . . . ” writes Valéry in the essay already mentioned [142]). And not only does this point of view give unconditional access to whatever is surveyed, the knowledge this grants forms a repository one can draw on as one makes one's way back down

towards the point of departure. Of course, on account of its inaccessibility, one can only speak hypothetically about this perspective, but it is as if its aspect held out the promise of a momentary exit from the labyrinth, as if the chaotic prevarication of the trace was stabilized, finally making available safe passage across the terrain. It would even be the point at which the equivocation between fantasy and reality that structures each of the narrative's episodes would finally be resolved, in reality's favor, if we take one of the narrator's fellow alpinists at his word: "At high altitudes [. . .] there's no place for the fantastic, because reality itself is more marvelous than anything man could imagine. Could anyone dream up a gnome or a giant or a hydra or a catoblepas to rival the terrifying power and mystery of a glacier, the tiniest little glacier?" (67)

But at the same time the same summit bears another set of properties, the effects of which appear irreducible to those just mentioned, and this works to confound the alpinist schema at the moment of its expected realization. With the culminating step, the point at which this body of knowledge is meant to finally coincide with its object, something causes this step to falter.

Only once does Daumal's narrator allow himself a clear intimation of what the summit's prospect might actually look like. He does so, moreover, giving the impression that this inaccessible plateau has been conquered, that it is before him, around him, there and then as he is writing, as though the expedition had arrived or was on the cusp of arriving at its destination.

On high, remote in the sky, above and beyond successive circles of increasingly lofty peaks buried under whiter and whiter snows, in a splendor the eye cannot look upon, invisible through excess of light, rises the uttermost pinnacle of Mount Analogue. (39)

Each feature of the vista alighted upon here exposes the summit's standpoint to a fundamental

complication. Acceding to its terrain apparently does nothing to lessen its inaccessibility. The absolute vision it is meant to consolidate, the bond between knowledge and vision it is meant to confirm, is instead left indistinguishable from its opposite. At this vertiginous height, the gaze is struck blind, hollowed out by a revelatory light that forces one to look away, to shield one's eyes (gestures which do nothing to mitigate its excess). Something of the apocalyptic nature of this scene makes itself known in a song the narrator tells us is sung in the summit's vicinity, and which is being sung—again, to reiterate the narrative conceit here—as he is recording his impressions. The verse makes clear that, even as the mountain burgeons upward and exceeds its terrestrial setting, its extension opening onto the beyond by piercing the canopy of sky that usually gives a landscape its sense of enclosure, the summit's vista nevertheless retains certain clearly delineated features.

There, on a summit more pointed than the finest needle,  
 He who fills all space resides unto himself.  
 On high in the most rarified air where all freezes into stone,  
 The supreme and immutable crystal alone subsists.  
 Up there, exposed to the full fire of the firmament  
     where all is consumed in flame,  
 Subsists the perpetual incandescence. (39)

Here, then, is Mount Analogue's landscape laid bare in its most extreme form: an impermeable block of colorless matter, translucent to the point of transparency and thus seemingly radiated

from within, light passing through it as if it was not there. Its outer contours do not enclose it within the limits they ostensibly trace, and this leaves it indiscernible from its surrounding environment (a further sense in which it is unbounded). No longer lending itself to sensory representation, the landscape here is an abstraction and yet entirely real, a *manifest* invisibility: “The supreme and immutable crystal.”<sup>13</sup>

But this means that once its threshold is crossed, the summit conspires against the already precarious logic informing the arrangement of the lower regions. It sweeps away the ground on which it has been approached, and nowhere more so does this show itself than in relation to the trace. Along the mountain’s uppermost span, the terrain is such that a trace can no longer be left there. The higher one ascends, the less patent a trace becomes, until even its provisional efficacy is suspended (this and all that rests on it: the possibility of navigation, of maintaining contact with the base, of plotting a movement through space, even of situating oneself *in* space). No doubt the summit considered as a traceless environment is a longstanding motif of mountain reverence.<sup>14</sup> But with Daumal the trace’s annulment is carried a step further. Once the mountain’s terrain becomes crystalline and accedes to a state of pure pellucidity, there is no longer a recognizable surface or subjectile, no longer a *tabula* upon which a trace could be inscribed or, more perplexingly, in relation to which it could be erased. For this reason the summit cannot in any proper sense be traversed. It lacks even the most rudimentary characteristics of a ground, and it therefore confounds any conceivable schema of orientation: across it a trail cannot be laid, a signal cannot be dispatched, communication, with oneself or another, cannot come to pass. The crystalline landscape is an a-signifying space: it offers no means of re-tracing one’s steps, of making one’s way back down, of even maintaining the general directional sense that would allow one to say in which direction down is. If it is true that,



when viewed from the base, “*The door to the invisible must be visible,*” it is no less the case that once one passes through this point of entry onto its other side, it appears to close shut, without leaving any vestige of having ever been an opening.

If, then, the possibility of the trace is thereby revoked, isn’t this the sign that the summit is less a means of exiting the labyrinth than the moment its puzzle is made absolute? At the highest height, the labyrinth appears all the more tortuous for taking the form of a blank, featureless expanse, without dimension, gradation or horizon, a labyrinth that does not even offer the possibility of passage. It is a space within which one cannot even be lost, if to be lost presumes a correct way of advancing, and because it cannot be marked in any way, one cannot hope to return from its heights. The moment that alpinism tentatively codifies a rule of sorts, the mountain discloses the part of itself that proves to be this rule’s exception, rendering the rule inoperative. With the summit alpinism as a body of knowledge therefore encounters a limit. The total disclosure of its object exposes it to a danger that no conceivable act of prudence could counter, that even suspends the capacity for action altogether. But in a certain sense to encounter this limit is already to find oneself on its other side, and this marks the precise moment at which mountain reverence gives way to mountain fever.

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## **Coda**

A final confirmation of the paradoxical circumstance in which the logic of the trace is caught here is shown in a further enigmatic episode that occurs some way along the journey’s course. Having finally located the “new world” in which Mount Analogue stands, the expedition finds that it is not without precursors. Across the mountain’s lower regions, a series of settlements have gradually developed, made up of those who at one time or another attempted to

scale this edifice, but were unable to progress any further.<sup>15</sup> Marking the precise locale at which each previous attempt at ascension has faltered, these colonies stand as monuments to the summit's inaccessibility. Several of the characteristically eccentric rituals and customs of these "mountain people" are recorded by Daumal's narrator with an ethnographer's diligence, but what stands out amongst them is the precious material prized by this small-scale civilization above all else. It is to the colonies of Mount Analogue what gold is to the wider world—its contingent properties are taken as a sign of intrinsic value—and it is the only form of currency, incidentally, that can secure the assistance of a guide for the journey to the summit. "Peradam" is the name given to this scarce and enigmatic stone. Scattered across the mountain's landscape—although not entirely arbitrarily, its incidence is greater the higher one climbs—*transparency* is its distinguishing property, and this makes the search for these stones "difficult and even dangerous," again increasingly so the higher up the terrain one progresses.

It is a true crystal and—an extraordinary instance entirely unknown elsewhere on this planet—a curved crystal [. . .] This stone is so perfectly transparent and its index of refraction so close to that of air in spite of the crystal's great density, that the inexperienced eye barely perceives it. (78)

Where gold shines, the peradam hides, in plain sight. And given what has been said about Mount Analogue's topography, then beyond a certain height, wouldn't the crystal's indiscernibility approach an absolute state, culminating in an arrangement between trace and terrain that would be, strictly speaking, unrepresentable, that would not even be able to appear *as* unrepresentable? A transparent stone on a transparent expanse, one invisibility superimposed upon another: at Mount

Analogue's outermost reaches both trace and terrain would be undetectable, not only in themselves, but in relation to one another. The minimal degree of difference between them would no longer hold, and without this difference neither could be made to manifest as what it is. If there is still a trace here, it cannot serve as a marker, "one stone set upon another," because it no longer stands out against the ground upon which it is cast. On this terrain the trace is always already erased, and its erasure appears to leave no trace. But equally, in the absence of the trace, the terrain itself isn't thrown into relief. Unmarked and unmarkable, it cannot be treated as a ground. With this truly obscure arrangement, Daumal places transparency in the service of something other than clarity. Coinciding without remainder, trace and terrain are together consigned to the void: that which bears no mark, that which has no ground.

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<sup>1</sup> Margorie Hope Nicolson refers to this reorientation of the century’s “dynamics of taste”—all the more remarkable for its abruptness—as a transition from “mountain gloom” to “mountain glory” (the terms of this opposition are taken from Ruskin) (17). For a vivid presentation of this gloom as a prevailing attitude, albeit in an earlier historical period—the mountain considered, at best, a “necessary evil”—see Christopher Hussey’s study *The Picturesque*. He quotes from John Evelyn’s travelogue, which has this to say about a journey across the Alps: it was “as if Nature had here swept up the rubbish of the earth . . .” (85-86).

<sup>2</sup> This is noted explicitly by the report in question, and it is the impetus informing several CIAM associated projects of the time, foremost amongst which would be Charlotte Perriand’s remarkable plans for a series of high-altitude, prefabricated mountain refuges, aiming to formalize access to this new terrain. See the pages on this newly emergent Alpine “leisure architecture” in Barsac’s study of Perriand (316-38).

<sup>3</sup> Of course Daumal is not alone in turning to the mountain at the precise moment it has been reduced to a *poncif*. It is even possible to speak of a minor genre here, an eclectic collection of works within the modernist canon that show a fascination for the mountain in this state. For

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example, a similar gesture is found in Robert Walser’s work—this will be our first digression into this genre—albeit undertaken in a different way: there the mountain is made disquieting once more, not by stripping back its familiarity, but accentuating it further still, drawing the mountain even further away from the wilderness that was the previous site of its reverence, and inscribing it all the more firmly within the familiar, so that its homeliness is pushed to the point that it tips over into the uncanny. Consider “the bewitching unnatural mountains” that appear in *Kleist in Thun* (1913). They appear in an exaggeratedly artificial, highly embellished guise, which sees them treated as part of a domestic setting: “Not a breath. Hardly a stir. The mountains are like the work of a clever scene-painter, or look like it; it is as if the whole region was an album, the mountains drawn on a blank page by an adroit dilettante for the lady who owns the album, as a souvenir, with a line of verse. The album has pale green covers. Which is appropriate” (20).

<sup>4</sup> As Roger Caillois says of the fantastic: it is what “cannot *exist*, properly speaking: it cannot be part of nature, of the attested universe” (349).

<sup>5</sup> We have here a model of action entirely in keeping with that drawn up by *Le Grand Jeu*, the experimental group in which the young Daumal played a prominent part. See, for example, the manifesto that stands at the head of the opening issue of the group’s eponymously titled journal. There the “Big Game” is introduced as, among other things, a “game of chance”: to play along is to allow one’s actions to be led by what occurs contingently, that which occurs “only once” *and* “at every moment of our lives”: “To search out the favorable attitude and the sign that drives the world forward is our aim [. . .] Attitude: we must place ourselves in a state of complete receptivity, which means to be pure, to have made a vacuum in ourselves” (Gilbert-

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Lecomte, 128). This makes Mount Analogue a metonym of *Le Grand Jeu*, a space navigated on the basis of this game's principles.

<sup>6</sup> We use this formulation to insist on the little-noted pataphysical spirit in which the ascension of Mount Analogue is conceived and conducted. From his earliest writings, Daumal is entirely committed to the absurdist science inaugurated a generation earlier by Alfred Jarry. This is made apparent above all in the former's 'Pataphysics and the Revelation of Laughter' (1929), in which he recalls Jarry's watchword: "Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments." To this Daumal adds: "Thus it is the opposite of physics, as knowledge of the specific and irreducible" (*Powers of the Word* 17). A paradoxical science of singular cases and exceptions, of what cannot be integrated under the generality of a law: this is precisely what the anomalous terrain of Mount Analogue calls for, and it means we must consider alpinism a branch of pataphysics.

<sup>7</sup> Compare this perspective with the almost limitless faith shown in description by Rousseau during his exile on Île Saint-Pierre, where this technique is presumed capable of redoubling the Book of Nature in all its inexhaustible detail: "I set about doing the *Flora petrinsularis* and describing all the plants of the island, without omitting a single one, in sufficient detail to occupy myself for the rest of my days. It is said that a German did a book about a lemon peel; I would have done one about each stalk of hay in the meadows, each moss in the woods, each lichen that carpets the rocks; in short, I did not want to leave a blade of grass or a plant particle which was not amply described" (65).

<sup>8</sup> Here we quote from a later edition of the novel than the *City Lights* original edition, as the latter does not include this draft material (Note from the French Edition 109).

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<sup>9</sup> On this point mention should be made of another great work of the period devoted to the problem of the mountain, Ludwig Hohl's *Bergfahrt* (translated into English as *Ascent*). Begun in 1926 but not published until 1975, this novella puts into play an entirely different set of literary conventions to *Mount Analogue*, but one can nevertheless identify several points of intersection between the two works, chief among which is a recognition of the mountain's indescribability. This is an ever present concern of Hohl's narration, which continually probes the conditions of representing such an entity—"Cliffs are always more complicated than they appear from afar, and every description is necessarily a description from afar (otherwise the description would never end)" (75)—and this leaves its mark on the structure of the narrative in a number of ways. To take one example, at the culmination of a chapter in large part conducted in the "alpinist's language," given over to an almost scientific description of the seracs encountered across the mountain's terrain, this mode of presentation all of a sudden gives way to a wild, unrestrained profusion of images, entirely out of keeping with the guidebook prose it has been juxtaposed with: the mountain's glaciers come forth as "a tumult of figures or forms, like matterhorns or vampires' teeth, an arrangement of lions or bears, caricatures of a baker or miller's boy with his sack on his back, an alderman with a black hat, a mourning woman hung with cloths from head to toe, of crocodiles and dragons" (38). Isn't the free play of the imagination here—the exaggerated specificity of these figures, the extreme contingency of the detail alighted upon—precisely the effect of the mountain as something "incommensurate with our power of exhibition"?

<sup>10</sup> Understood as such this topography is in complete accord with the model of space presented by Georges Bataille in the critical dictionary of the *Encyclopedia Acephalica*:



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“Unfortunately space remains a lout, and it is difficult to enumerate what it engenders. It is as discontinuous as it is devious, to the utter despair of its philosopher-papa” (75).

<sup>11</sup> “For those who ask us about the *Grand Jeu*, we answer once and for all to any and every question: ‘Yes and no.’” (*Powers of the Word* 8)

<sup>12</sup> On this aspect of the author’s work, see Kathleen Ferrick Rosenblatt’s expansive study, *René Daumal: The Life and Work of a Mystic Guide*. She shows how this spiritualist context in all its variations, from Hindu philosophy to the doctrine of Gurdjieff, remains a formative point of reference within the world of *Mount Analogue* (xiv), and this leads her to read the novel, written as it is after the conversion to Gurdjieff’s teachings, as an allegory of this conversion, “the diary of an escape” undertaken with a view to leaving behind the prison of the ego, achieved through the techniques of self-renunciation that these spiritualist doctrines provide (197-211). She also makes clear the extent to which this influence definitively set Daumal at odds with the various avant-gardes with which he was initially associated; for example, she quotes a letter to Daumal from Julien Torma who, speaking as a representative of the pataphysical circle, chastises his colleague in the following terms: “[I]t’s obvious you believe in a kind of God. In spite of all your finesse, dear René, you’re on a pilgrim’s progress” (56).

<sup>13</sup> This configuration of lineaments bears more than passing resemblance to the centerpiece of Bruno Taut’s architectural fantasies—the “crystal mountain” (122)—and his *Alpine Architecture* of 1919 constitutes a case of mountain fever every bit as pronounced as Daumal’s. In this utopian work Taut presents a series of outlandish proposals for the development of Europe’s existing mountain ranges, which would modify the natural landscape along its highest vistas with a variety of constructions, ranging from small scale, decorative appendages to edifices eclipsing the size of the peak itself, compounding its magnitude still

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further. Crucial here is that these structures, whether domiciles or follies, would be rendered exclusively in glass, initiating an unprecedented mimetic interplay between architecture and environment, the condition of which is the respective transparency of these materials.

<sup>14</sup> Consider Byron's *Manfred* (1817), in which the Jungfrau peak is presented as follows: "And here on snows, where never human foot / Of common mortal trod, we nightly tread / And leave no traces (quoted in Nicolson 10). Or Max Frisch's contribution to the mountain genre, written around the same time as *Mount Analogue*, where this tracelessness appears in the form of *silence*. Of the summit's soundscape Frisch writes: "It is as if this silence over the world dissolves all thought; you can hear nothing but your heart beating, or now and then the wind whistling past your ears. And if a black chough should happen to glide round the rock and then disappear with a horse croak, there still remains the lonely silence, which envelops all life and swallows every cry as if it had never been, this nameless silence, which is perhaps God, perhaps nothingness" (22-23).

<sup>15</sup> This, incidentally, is the moment in the narrative where the pursuit of the "supreme and immutable" is marked most forcefully by the novel's wider historical context. The account of the expedition's arrival on *terra incognita* is undoubtedly framed through the period's colonialist imaginary. The mountain proves to be located, so the narrator tells us, in a region without "natives": "All inhabitants have come from elsewhere, from the four corners of the world like ourselves." And it is for this reason that, once ashore, the expedition unexpectedly finds itself in the company of "Western Europeans" (French is the lingua franca in which they communicate), *as well as* "African and Asian types and even races now extinct," these latter the "descendants of the crews, slaves, or sailors brought to these parts ever since the remotest times by seekers of the Mountain" (81).

