
I

Ascent

The least shift in syntax, tense-perception,
would reset the heavens.

—Gustaf Sobin, “A Portrait of the
Self as Instrument of Its Syllables”

Roussillon, Friday 17 November 1999, 4:20 P.M. *The only white in the landscape is the peak of Mont Ventoux, the appropriately named Col des Tempêtes [Peak of Storms], rising 1912 meters above the plains of the Vaucluse. Whatever the season, this mountain appears snow covered, hardly what one expects to see in Provence. (The peak is, in fact, covered with snow for about half of each year; for the other half, the limestone scree that blankets the peak above the timberline looks, at a distance, like a snowcap.) Seen from the village of Roussillon, it organizes the picturesqueness of the place by providing an inexorable and singular focal point, and it is rare that it doesn't, in our epoch of infinite photographic representation, solicit at least a casual snapshot. I stroll to the car to get the camera, return, and take one picture, adding to an infinite number of quickly forgotten photographs taken around the globe.*

Roussillon, Friday 17 November 1999, 4:25 P.M. *The white peak disappears, first as approaching clouds mask the sun and throw a vast*

shadow on the mountain, and then as the upper limits of the Ventoux are almost immediately obscured by a cloud bank, such that mountain and sky merge. It is almost as if the mountain didn't wish to be photographed, resisted representation, wanted to withdraw. Unlike Mount Fuji—everpresent in Japanese culture, even when invisible; of inexhaustible beauty and confounding grace; that absolute object which is the pure and exceedingly complex symbol according to which every other symbol, every other image in Japan, is oriented—Mont Ventoux appears as an empty sign. Empty in its difference from the rest of the landscape: a vast, strange natural monument to something unstated or unknown, its peak a beacon without a message (sign as analogue, unity in a continuum, object in a system, relative difference). Empty due to its sudden and frequent disappearances (sign as digital, unqualified alternation, on/off, one/zero, visible/invisible.) An object needs to disappear in order to become a symbol; yet it is as if the absence of the Ventoux somehow signals its presence—paradoxically, an inexpressible plenitude and an unimaginable emptiness—and nothing more. Mute semaphore, not living metaphor. Mont Ventoux appears as a pure, active principle, a secretive manifestation of natura naturans.



What follows is an account not, as would be the case in fairytales or myths, about what the mountain says, but about its inscrutable silence.



FIGURE 1. Mont Ventoux seen from the Toulourène Valley.



“We came across an elderly shepherd on a slope of the mountain who made every effort with many words to keep us from continuing our climb, saying that fifty years earlier, driven by a like youthful motivation, he had climbed to the very top and had brought back from there nothing but repentance, weariness, and his body and clothing torn by stones and bushes, and that no one had been known before or since to dare undertake a similar climb.”¹ So wrote Francesco Petrararch on the evening of 26 April 1336 to his confessor, Dionigio da Borgo San Sepulcro, priest in the Augustinian Order and Professor of Sacred Scripture. Petrararch wrote from the town of Malaucène at the foot of Mont Ventoux—the highest point in Provence, visible from nearly everywhere in the region, seemingly the prototype of the sacred mountain. The words, prophetic and disapprobative, of this unidentified shepherd constitute the earliest extant record of Mont Ventoux: a negative depiction of the mountain, suggesting desolation, emptiness, danger.² We neither know the shepherd’s name nor celebrate his exploit, but his warning should not be forgotten, since in a strange way it informs the future history of the mountain.

One might well imagine that Mont Ventoux would have offered an ideal site for a hermitage devoted to ascetic meditation, even mortification. But Petrararch would make of it something quite different. Having disregarded the shepherd’s warnings, Petrararch—his “delicate mind, seeking honorable delight”—along with his brother and their servants, made the ascent of the “Windy Mountain.” Visible from every direction, Mont Ventoux had long offered Petrararch—who had lived in the region since childhood—a challenge, and one that was recently resuscitated by his reading in Titus Livy’s *History of Rome* of how King Philip of Macedonia ascended Mount Hemo in Thessaly. From the summit of Mount Hemo it was believed that one could see both the Adriatic Sea and the Black Sea, a vista worthy of a conqueror’s ambitions. Petrararch’s conquest would be otherwise, and would give him the honor of being the first post-classical writer with a marked taste for landscape views. Petrararch expresses the ascent in allegorical terms already ancient. For those who seek the heights, the road is long and the burden heavy. Furthermore, while some (like his brother) ardously attain the peaks by traversing perilous ridges, others (like Petrararch) attempt easier paths, lazily meandering through



FIGURE 2. Mont Ventoux seen from Malaucène.

valleys, descending as often as ascending, creating a veritable labyrinth of the slopes. Yet how, indeed, can one reach a summit by descending!? Realizing his error, Petrarch finally attains the peak, reproaching himself in allegorical terms:

What you have experienced so often today in trying to climb this mountain you should know happens to you and to many others as they approach the blessed life. This is not easily realized by men, however, because although the movements of the body are visible, the movements of the mind are invisible and concealed. The life we call blessed is certainly located on high, and, as it is said, a very narrow road leads to it. Many hills also intervene and one must proceed from virtue to virtue with very deliberate steps. At the summit lies the end of all things and the limit of the path to which our traveling is directed.³

With altitude comes that rarefaction which shortens the breath, lightens the mind, and inspires the soul, whence the feeling of an “eternal instant” in the heart of the present, experienced by so many mountain



FIGURE 3. Mont Ventoux, slopes.

climbers. Either reach the summit or risk the abyss. But the summit must be attained with mind, not body; ephemeral, earthly pleasures must give way to immortal, spiritual truths. For every geography bears a point at which reality departs, and every site offers metaphors for both immanence and transcendence. The verticality of the monolith has always been a mark of the sacred: from the tumuli and cairns of the pagans through the holy mountains of the great polytheistic religions, culminating in those peaks sacred to the monotheistic faiths, the mountain is the *axis mundi*, connecting heaven, earth, and underworld. Uncover the layers of metaphor incrustated upon a landscape, and one will find a god.

At the summit, fascinated by the unrestricted spectacle, Petrarch stands as in a trance: “Clouds were beneath me. And suddenly what I had heard and read about Athos and Olympus became less incredible to me when I looked out from this mountain of lesser fame.”⁴ Allegorically situating the Ventoux between one of the holiest peaks of Christianity and the sacred mount of the Greek gods, Petrarch senses a nearly indescribable joy. As the sun was already slowly beginning to set, and the moment of descent neared, Petrarch looked



FIGURE 4. View from peak of Mont Ventoux.

around at what he had come to see: “The boundary between Gaul and Spain, the Pyrenees, cannot be seen from there not because anything intervenes as far as I know, but because the human sight is too weak. However, the mountains of the province of Lyons could be seen very clearly to the right, and to the left the sea at Marseille and at the distance of several days the one that beats upon Aigues-Mortes. The Rhone itself was beneath my eyes.”⁵ The description becomes hyper-real, almost hallucinatory, too lucid, too vast: the mountaintop is a panopticon, revealing the far reaches of the land, roughly equivalent to the limits of Provence and Languedoc.

Visibility is but a metaphor for vision, and Petrarch is seeking loftier things. Suddenly remembering that he had with him a copy of Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* (given to him by his confessor), he opens it at random and reads: “And they go to admire the summits of mountains and the vast billows of the sea and the broadest rivers and the expanses of the ocean and the revolutions of the stars and they overlook themselves.”⁶ As is so often the case, the mountain manifests its *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, through a revelation: the topos of this revelation is precisely the point where mountain and



FIGURE 5. Mont Ventoux, scree.

sky meet, a point of mystical fusion of the elements. Attaining the peak motivates the climber to abandon his physical situation and reorient himself towards a transcendental state. The world need disappear for the inner vision to reveal itself. In this Dantesque spectacle, the hyperreal becomes the unreal, evaporating into the truly real, that is, the absolute, the mystical.

Petrarch's inner vision was preconditioned by the Bible, as refracted through Augustine. But for Petrarch, the revelation evinces a double effacement: that of *the mountain itself before the soul* (for what is higher is inner), and that of *the soul before its god* (for what is inner is sacred). It is as if the mountain catapulted Petrarch into transcendence, a transcendence which, in the Christian context, is congruent with immanence, with the innate site of faith. Along with the mountain disappears the vanity of the world. For even the highest mountain is ephemeral, its grandeur sheer *vanitas*. The mountain is not even as dust. Such is a well-tempered transcendence, where sublimation takes the form of dematerialization and iconoclasm, both manifested in opposition to the mountain. A devout Christian, Petrarch cannot sacralize Mont Ventoux, as people of other faiths

had done before him; nor can he make a sacrifice on the mountain, for the biblical era of sacrifice is past. So instead, *he sacrifices the mountain itself*, a secret sacrifice to his god, to his poetry, to his soul. The mountain was abolished for the sake of the imagination.

As if in surreal continuation of the hyperreal state of fascination at the summit, the mountain now appears to Petrarch as if but a cubit high, and he makes the descent with his mind's eye turned inward, immersed in harmonious and sacred inspiration. This vision is striking: it is as if the landscape were reduced to one of those medieval Byzantine or Italian images, where the mountain—an artifice of grotesque, broken, stepped terraces—is so small that the depicted saint is of the same height, and easily peers over the peak. In Petrarch's account, the Ventoux is first glorious then insignificant, wondrous then denigrated, breathtaking then deformed. Yet this transformation bears a certain amount of equivocation; it is more than just a rhetorical expression of Petrarch's revelation or a conventional means of depreciating the world, since it partakes of a profound shift in the experience of nature that originated during Petrarch's lifetime. Even if the fourteenth-century experience of the sublime is still primarily relegated to the deity, a new wonder is manifested at the natural world; even if the aesthetic is still limited to the beautiful, a new fascination arises before the grotesque; even if poetry is still centered on the spiritual, novel psychological nuances and increasing attention to detailed description arise. If Petrarch felt the need to shrink the Ventoux—first beautifully described in realist rigor, then imagined as a grotesque miniature—to the size of stage decor, it was in order to reconcile what he would have felt as contradictory needs: love of nature and love of God. The Ventoux exists for him in its full duplicity: natural wonder and artificial simulacrum of the imagination. It has been widely noted that Petrarch's letter on the ascent of Mont Ventoux contains the first post-classic appreciation of a landscape view in and for itself, however much the description is couched in the theological tradition. Neglected, however, is the fact that his representation of the Ventoux is twofold and equivocal: first a realist description of the landscape, then an integral part of an allegory of religious revelation.⁷ It is as if the two representations of the Ventoux, realist and allegorical, coalesced into that sort of irrational or paradoxical perspective typical of the epochs before the early Renaissance reinvention of one-point linear perspective, that is to say a perspective that combines multiple points of view and incompatible

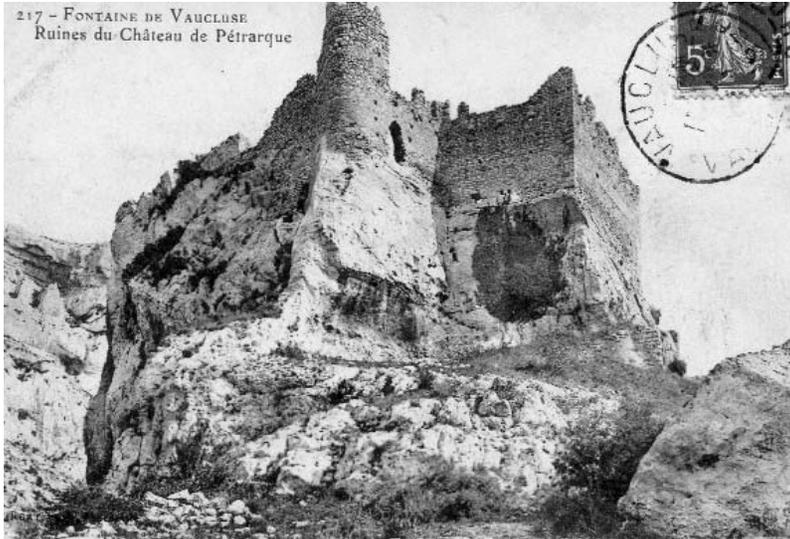


FIGURE 6. Ruins of the chateau of the Bishops of Cavaillon (improperly referred to as the chateau of Petrarch).

pictorial features: conflicting scales, inconsistent lighting, incompatible objects, contradictory styles. This representational amalgamation is fully expressive of the existential paradoxes that defined the era, where a single image may simultaneously serve classical, biblical, descriptive, and decorative purposes. The effects of this hermeneutic complexity on art and poetry are well expressed by Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter in *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World*: “If we can say that in Virgil the reality of landscape is an integral aspect of the interpretation of reality as a whole, for the Middle Ages we must say that natural phenomena are available, in more or less stereotyped form, as a mode of expression for an interpretation of reality which transcends or even denies those phenomena[. . .] The fluctuations between allegorical, symbolic and typological landscape depend on the immediate pressures of that interpretation. They depend also on the nature of the poem.”⁸ For Petrarch, landscape description exists in the context of both the expression of worldly reality and the transcendently based denial of that very same reality. Theologically, the disappearance of the Ventoux would imply a



FIGURE 7. Fontaine-de-Vaucluse.

valorization of transcendence; practically, it would permit the displacement of Petrarch's sensitivity to nature onto another milieu, one more propitious to his quotidian and writerly needs. For Petrarch was not to become a saint upon a mountain. But how does this effect the destiny of Mont Ventoux?

The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, attempting to fathom the profound relations between the flesh of the body, language, and the world, sees symbolic overdetermination such that all objects, great or small, may obtain metaphysical import: "any entity can be *accentuated* as an emblem of Being."⁹ Mont Ventoux would seem to be an exception to this rule as it is continually obfuscated, as it perpetually withdraws. At the point where Petrarch concludes his letter describing the ascent, it would appear that the allegory is complete, and the hermeneutic circle closed: from Dionigio da Borgo San Sepulcro's gift to Augustine's wisdom, from Philip of Macedonia's worldly ambitions and the anonymous shepherd's cynicism to Petrarch's revelation, from profane to sacred, from immanence to transcendence, from self to God. But for Petrarch, the mountain could not become metaphor, since the highest things cannot be effectually metaphorized. The Ventoux resists

metaphorization. Its emptiness is not that of a floating signifier, magical, open, ready to take on any signification. To the contrary, it is so massive, opaque, anchored, that it absorbs all signification, like a black hole. It is a mountain that does not participate in the Zen parable: before enlightenment, a mountain is just a mountain; during the quest for enlightenment, a mountain is everything but a mountain; after enlightenment, a mountain is once again only a mountain. The Ventoux is the anti-Fuji.¹⁰ The Ventoux is resolutely uncircumscribable; its symbolic barrenness, desolateness, desertedness is absolute.

For much of his creative life Petrarch lived beneath the cliffs of Fontaine-de-Vaucluse, a point from which the Ventoux is invisible. However, mountains would come to constitute one of the central tropes in Petrarch's work; not only his poetry, which abounds in mountain metaphors, but also his essays and letters. Petrarch wrote *De vita solitaria* [The Life of Solitude, 1346] to try and convince his friend Philippe de Cabassolle, Bishop of Cavaillon, to move back to Fontaine-de-Vaucluse and inhabit his castle, which dominated the village. As an argument, Petrarch proffers the praise, in the words of Seneca, of both the sources of great rivers and that feeling of almost religious mystery caused by deep caves upon mountain cliffs, thus linking mountains to both religious sentiment and poetic inspiration.¹¹ This latter symbol conflates Petrarch's two major topoi, the mountain and the grotto. In *Secretum* [My Secret, 1347]—an allegorical autobiography in the form of an imaginary discussion with Saint Augustine, his spiritual guide to Mont Ventoux—Petrarch situates Truth on a mountaintop. The metaphors are the same: one must leave the beaten path, the plains can be freely seen only from the top of the hill, the earthly body must be abandoned, and the soul must ascend to the heavens. Yet he writes not of Mont Ventoux, but the Atlas Mountains, the site of his vast epic poem, *Africa*. In the words of Horace, Petrarch offers an image comparable to the central icon of both the Gothic and romantic sensibilities:

The tallest trees most fear the tempest's might,
The highest towers come down with most affright,
The loftiest hills feel first the thunder smite.¹²

For Petrarch, as for so many following the Christian tradition, the mountain would be a privileged topos of inspiration; however, as he already knew from his famous ascent, it is not without risk and

anguish that the summit is conquered. Petrarch's relation to the Church was in great part determined by his identification with Augustine. This is clearly stated in *Secretum*, where the narrator, Francesco, speaking of his interlocutor, the Augustine of the *Confessions*, admits: "I seem to be hearing the story of my own self, the story not of another's wandering, but of my own."¹³ Yet however powerful this identification, Petrarch's path decidedly diverged from that of Augustine, and Petrarch's metaphors were put to very different uses. For all identification is misidentification, whence the origins of literary creativity.

In his letter on the ascent of Mont Ventoux, the citation from Augustine's *Confessions*, "And they go to admire the summits of mountains . . .," was transformed, above all else, into an allegory to express the state of Petrarch's soul. The "sacrifice" of Mont Ventoux was a precondition of his self-revelation. But what did these very same lines mean to Augustine? The saint continues in this state of wonder that men, in their fascination with the world around them, might overlook themselves: "They do not marvel at the thought that while I have been mentioning all these things, I have not been looking at them with my eyes, and that I could not even speak of mountains or waves, rivers or stars, which are things that I have seen, or of the ocean, which I know only on the evidence of others, unless I could see them in my mind's eye, in my memory, and with the same vast spaces between them that would be there if I were looking at them in the world outside myself."¹⁴ What Petrarch elides is the fact that this citation appears, in the tenth book of the *Confessions*, within the context of Augustine's analysis of memory. The mountain in question is unreal, a mere appearance; it exists not without but within, as a sensory image imprinted on the mind, as memory. The true panopticon is not a site in the world, nor the sight of the world, but the power of the imagination. And yet, however abstract this particular passage on sensory experience and its resultant memory may appear within the context, for Augustine it is imbued with both a profound attachment to spiritual transcendence and a passionate, pathetic dramatization of earthly love. One need only turn back to the eighth book of the *Confessions*, the culminating scene of his fierce inner struggle between earthly temptation and spiritual truth. In the summer of the year 386, as he begins to lose control of himself, as his speech disintegrates and his gestures become uncontrollable, as the very existence of the world becomes uncertain, he takes refuge in the small garden of his house in

Milan. This is the scene of his grief, his madness, his transformation, his salvation: "I was dying a death that would bring me to life."¹⁵ Frantic, violent, agonizing, he knew that to complete the journey all that was required was an act of volition. Whence such will? "Why does this strange phenomenon occur?"¹⁶ He was at odds with himself, rent asunder in a "monstrous state," a Manichean split between two wills—carnal and spiritual—a will cleaved between the residual evil of primordial sin induced in the world's first garden, and that goodness which is the sacred meaning of existence. To do or not to do? At the height of anguish and despair, in a torrent of tears, he went out into the garden and sat under a fig tree. This would be the site of his revelation and salvation, for he heard the voice of a little child from a nearby house repeat, over and over, as if speaking to him alone, "tolle, lege; tolle, lege" (Take up and read). Remembering that Saint Anthony had been admonished by a public reading of the gospel, Augustine opened the Bible at random and fell upon the Pauline epistles, reading words as if addressed expressly to himself: "Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites."¹⁷ He was saved, and received his baptism at the hands of Saint Ambrose in 387. Augustine entered the City of God through the portal of his garden.

It was another garden—that of the house he shared with his mother in Ostia, awaiting their sea voyage to return to Africa in the year 387—that would be the scene of Augustine's greatest pathos. Referring to that fateful moment, Augustine writes of that supremely mystical exchange with his mother that took place in an all so worldly garden:

Our conversation led us to the conclusion that no bodily pleasure, however great it might be and whatever earthly light might shed lustre upon it, was worthy of comparison, or even of mention, beside the happiness of the life of the saints. As the flame of love burned stronger in us and raised us higher towards the eternal God, our thoughts ranged over the whole compass of material things in their various degrees, up to the heavens themselves, from which the sun and the moon and the stars shine down upon the earth. Higher still we climbed, thinking and speaking all the while in wonder at all that you have made. At length we came to our own souls and passed beyond them to the place of everlasting plenty, where you feed Israel

for ever with the food of truth. There life is that Wisdom by which all these things that we know are made, all things that ever have been and all that are yet to be.¹⁸

This ascent—which necessitated no mountain, which elided all body—resulted in a moment of total spiritual love for his mother and ecstatic mystical union with God, where the soul is silent and the “dreams and the visions of his imagination spoke no more.”¹⁹ The soul of Augustine was transfigured, and his mother was converted. Five days later she died. Such is the ascent, the love, the death, all occluded by the abstract considerations of memory in book ten, a philosophical work of mourning. *This* sad and dramatic ascent is the secret behind Petrarch’s revelation, the pathos masked by his own very different, very wordly longings.

For Augustine, it is not the garden that constitutes true sanctuary, but memory, that “vast, immeasurable sanctuary,” containing earth and heaven, circumscribing the self.²⁰ When in book ten Augustine relegates the entirety of the material world to memory, he does so from the position of one who has gained the spiritual world. The remembrance of the ascent evokes both the *specific* pathos regarding his mother’s death augmented by the ecstasy of his mystical union with God, and the *general* sense of eschewing the vanity of the world, to celebrate true faith. Neither the garden of immanence nor the mountain of transcendence are of any consequence; neither the dividedness of the will nor the perils of the journey are of any actuality. As the ultimate proof of his spiritual rebirth, even the trauma of his mother’s all-too-earthly death has been subsumed by a work of mourning that owes its mental space to memory itself, the proper place of all things of this earth. Such is true faith.

Augustine’s relation to landscape might be considered in terms of what Chris Fitter, in his study *Poetry, Space, Landscape*, considers the “ascetic sublime,” where the horror of abominable, extreme landscapes—imposing, vast, remote, wild—serves religion as both a means of mortification and a mark of worldly vanity. “The stupendous in landscape is sought only for contemptuous eclipse by the pure *virtus* of an indomitable mental transcendence.”²¹ Nature may be seen either in the light of a perfect creation or as corrupted by the Fall. A certain tradition of biblical exegesis deems mountains to be horrifying flaws upon the earth, deformed excrescences that are warnings against human ambition, pride, and hubris. Their extravagant,



FIGURE 8. View of fields and Mont Ventoux.