

# Poetry and Mountaineering in Leslie Stephen's *The Playground of Europe*

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Marjorie Hope Nicolson's seminal study *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (1959) richly illustrates the development of the relationship between poetry and the mountains. The history of poetry Nicolson deals with, however, stops at the Romantic poets and does not cover an important phase in the perception of the mountains thereafter, that is, the growth of mountaineering since the golden age of alpinism (1854-1865), which Arnold Lunn's *A Century of Mountaineering*, published two years before Nicolson's book, narrates. The increase in the number of people enjoying mountaineering and rock climbing created the possibility of a new, different mountain aesthetic, the possibility of 'mountaineering poetry', in which an actual experience of mountaineering and rock climbing has a significant role, rather than 'mountain poetry', which features a mountain but not primarily such experience.<sup>1</sup> Such mountaineering poems of high quality, however, did not spring up so easily (and arguably the form has not flourished yet).<sup>2</sup> Even in 1939, the literary critic, poet and mountaineer Michael Roberts lamented their absence in his lecture at the Alpine Club. Yet, Roberts in the same lecture named Douglas Freshfield and Geoffrey Winthrop Young as exceptions. Young's poems in particular are highly valued among mountaineers. His first poetry volume, *Wind and Hill* (1909), was praised by mountaineer-writers such as G. M. Trevelyan, Arnold Lunn and Wilfrid Noyce as the first convincing work of poetry of mountaineering.<sup>3</sup> However, Young's poetry has been generally neglected in British literary history. Literary criticism on post-Romantic mountain poetry is scarce in accordance with the paucity of such poems. The mountaineer-writer Robert Bates, as a notable exception, charts Victorian mountain poems in a chapter of his study *Mystery, Beauty, and Danger: The Literature of the Mountains and Mountain Climbing Published in English Before 1946* (79-124). Although he introduces a few poets who have mountaineering experience, such as John Addington Symonds, his argument is generally sketchy, and most of the poems he deals with are not written by mountain climbers, as the chapter title, 'Watchers from

Afar', indicates. Ann C. Colley's *Victorians in the Mountains: Sinking the Sublime* starts, as Colley herself states, where Nicolson's study ends (Colley 3). Although the study convincingly examines a number of ways in which the sublimity of the Alps is degraded in the Victorian age, and even includes chapters on the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins and Robert Louis Stevenson, who published some poetry volumes, it has little analysis of poetry. Thus, the relationship between poetry and mountains in the post-Romantic period is left largely unexplored.<sup>4</sup>

Against this background, it is worth investigating the relationship between poetry and mountaineering in Leslie Stephen's influential book, *The Playground of Europe*, which first appeared in 1871. It is not a book of poetry or poetry criticism but a prose text on mountaineering. Yet, it is a book written by a literary man well-versed in English literature (and literatures of other European countries) and a book in which poetry plays, as this paper aims to show, a significant part in an intriguing way. It is also important as a text of the Victorian era: the period marked by a dearth of noteworthy mountain poems between the Romantic era and Winthrop Young's Edwardian time.

*The Playground of Europe*, which has long been enjoyed as a classic of mountaineering literature, has recently been read as a locus of a number of interconnecting elements, such as politics, gender, class, psychoanalysis and aesthetics.<sup>5</sup> In terms of sublime aesthetics, studies which see in it a development of the Romantic sublime are of particular interest for this paper. While Colley places Stephen among the male mountaineers who seek to distinguish themselves as those who appreciate the 'savage sublime', which is unattainable for tourists and women, Kevin A. Morrison and Alan McNee advance the critique of sublime further. Morrison argues that Stephen replaces the mind's essentially ocular experience of the sublimity of the Romantics and John Ruskin with the lived, corporeal experience which includes the visual perception. McNee names such cognition typically seen in Stephen as the 'haptic sublime': 'The haptic sublime involves an encounter with mountain landscape in which the human subject experiences close physical contact—sometimes painful and dangerous, sometimes exhilarating and satisfying, but always involving some kind of transcendent experience brought about through physical proximity to rock faces, ice walls, or snow slopes' (151). Although literary discussion on poetry is outside McNee's scope, the importance of corporeality in *The Playground of Europe* is what this paper recognises. Physicality, not mere athleticism, which might be signified by its title and by the titles

of two other mountaineering classics published in the same year, Edward Whymper's *Scrambles Amongst the Alps in the Years 1860-69* and John Tyndall's *Hours of Exercise in the Alps*, plays an interesting role in the poetics in Stephen's volume.

In analysing the way poetry and mountaineering interconnect in *The Playground of Europe*, this paper examines five essays which particularly feature poetry: 'The Old School', 'The New School', 'The Regrets of a Mountaineer', 'Sunset on Mont Blanc' and 'The Alps in Winter'; the last two being added to the second edition (1894).

### **'The Old School'**

The first two essays of *The Playground of Europe*, 'The Old School'<sup>6</sup> and 'The New School', are precursors of Nicolson's work.<sup>7</sup> They trace the history of how people have seen mountains and their beauty, the former in the pre-Rousseau era and the latter from Rousseau to the English Romantics.

'The Old School' follows the two main phases of the perception of mountains: the mountains haunted by dragons and demons, and the mountains exorcised of those creatures by scientific interests but still seen as terrible emptiness. Although poetry does not feature prominently in either stage, the essay suggests that the scientific mind is an important factor in Stephen's conception of mountain poetry.

The first quotation of English poetry on mountains in this essay does not belong to this era: a couplet from Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake* (1810), Canto I, Stanza XIV, which describes Ben Venue (729 m) of Scotland:

Knolls, crags, and mounds confusedly hurled,  
Seemed fragments of an earlier world (Stephen 27).<sup>8</sup>

Stephen quotes the text of the Romantic era in order to compare it with passages from the seventeenth century text *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681 and 1689<sup>9</sup>) by Thomas Burnet, especially those from the eleventh chapter, which deals with mountains. Stephen interestingly calls the passages 'poetical' (25). One of them runs as follows:

Look upon these great ranges . . . in what confusion do they lie; they have neither form nor beauty, neither shape nor order, no more than the clouds in the air. Then how barren, how desolate, how naked are they! How they stand neglected by

nature! Neither the rains can soften them nor the dews from heaven can make them fruitful (Stephen 26).<sup>10</sup>

Stephen comments on the contrast: 'Only Scott is content to play with the fancy which Burnet puts forward with all the seriousness of a scientific enquirer' (27). The intensity of Burnet's passage is not only imbued with the spirit of scientific inquiry, which exorcised superstitious demons and dragons, but also with the shock of facing the utter barrenness or wilderness of mountains which the inquiry has now revealed. Scott's lines, on the other hand, though using the same image as the one Burnet describes, lack this terrible uneasiness. Stephen seems to suggest that Burnet's prose passage is more poetical in its intensity than the verse passage of Scott.

The scientific mind, or the keen observation of the object itself, plays a key role in Stephen's poetics. At the close of the essay, he gives three examples of unsuccessful mountain poems in the early eighteenth century: a couplet from Edward Young's *A Paraphrase on Part of the Book of Job* (1719):

Who heaved the mountain, which sublimely stands,  
And casts its shadow into distant lands? (Stephen 32);

lines from Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (1711):

So pleased at first, the tow'ring Alps we try,  
Mount o'er the vales and seem to touch the sky;  
The eternal snows appear already past,  
And the first clouds and mountains seem the last.  
But those attained, we tremble to survey  
The growing labours of the lengthening way;  
Th'increasing prospect tires our wond'ring eyes –  
Hills peep o'er hills, and Alps on Alps arise! (Stephen 32);

and lines from Richard Blackmore's *Creation: A Philosophical Poem* (1712):

These strong unshaken mounds resist the shocks  
Of tides and seas tempestuous, while the rocks

That secret in a long continued vein  
Pass through the earth, the ponderous pile sustain;  
These mighty girders which the fabric bind,  
These ribs robust and vast in order joined  
These subterranean walls, disposed with art,  
Such strength and such stability impart  
That storms beneath and earthquakes underground  
Break not the pillars nor the work confound (Stephen 37-38).<sup>11</sup>

Stephen maintains that their failures as mountain poems lie in the fact that they do not intend to represent mountains themselves but to use them as metaphors for other things they want to render in their works. Young's and Blackmore's lines are designed to show God's almightiness. Young's lines are words of God speaking to Job, who curses his unbearable suffering; and Blackmore, although he uses the scientific knowledge of Barnet, states in the summary of the poem that the purpose of the work is 'to demonstrate the existence of a Divine Eternal Mind' (Blackmore 36). The Alps for Pope, who has not seen the real Alps, is a metaphor for the difficult path of the literary arts.

In 'The Old School', a set of passages by Barnet is the only 'poetical' piece on mountains of which Stephen approves. For him, the scientific mind which attempts keen observation of the mountains plays a crucial role in the birth of mountain poetry. He says: 'Before anybody had ever looked into the mountains closely, classified their flora and catalogued their strata, it was impossible for a poet to do better than make a few random allusions to their most obvious features' (33).

### **'The New School'**

Stephen begins the next essay 'The New School' with these words: 'We may begin by enquiring at what precise period the taste for mountain scenery became a recognised and vigorous reality' (36). Adding to the reality that the scientific mind discloses, vigorousness, which implies the robust physicality of mountaineering, is also a key concept for Stephen here. The essay mainly deals with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom Stephen calls 'the Columbus of the Alps, or the Luther of the new creed of mountain worship' (40), Horace Bénédicte de Saussure, who 'deserves the unfeigned reverence of every true mountaineer' (50), and English Romantic poets.

The first mountain poem Stephen refers to in this essay is Albrecht von Haller's *Die Alpen* (1732).<sup>12</sup> Stephen cites it as an example of the Rousseauesque ideal of simple life in the Alpine region uncorrupted by the vice of civilisation. Although Haller's poem precedes Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1759)—a milestone text in the perception of mountains—it shows, as Stephen remarks, 'a lively interest in the higher ranges, and an intimate knowledge of their phenomena' (46) and also a moral of unsophisticated peasant life. Stephen briefly mentions Oliver Goldsmith's poem 'The Traveller; or, a Prospect of Society' (1764) to illustrate how it shares the moral of Haller's poem.

The next piece Stephen introduces in terms of mountain poetry is not a work of a poet: Saussure's preface to his *Voyages dans les Alpes* (1779-1796). After summarising it (but not quoting from it or analysing its wording), he calls it 'a condensed summary of the great poem of the Alps' (52-53). 'Saussure', Stephen argues, 'was primarily a man of science; but he was one of the long series of Alpine travellers who have illustrated by example the mode in which the data supplied by science may be turned to account for poetical purposes' (50), and the work of scientists such as Saussure, James Forbes and Tyndall demonstrates 'how the accurate observation of Alpine phenomena, and the patient interpretation of the natural monuments, supplies the mountains with a new language as imposing and sublime as that which is spoken by the ruins of human workmanship' (51). In Stephen's mind, science, again, plays an important role in the perception of mountains and in their relationship with poetry.

Another 'poetical' example which represents mountain spirit is a quotation from a novel: Étienne Pivert de Senancour's *Obermann* (1804). It is, according to Stephen, 'a poetical expression of the sentiment more or less dimly present to the minds of all mountain-lovers', and also 'Rousseau's doctrine in a more spiritual form' (54):

Mais là, sur ces monts deserts où le ciel est immense, où l'air est plus fixe, et les temps moins rapides, et la vie plus permanente; là, la nature entière exprime éloquentment un ordre plus grand, une harmonie plus visible, un ensemble éternel. Là, l'homme retrouve sa forme alterable mais indestructible; il respire l'air sauvage loin des émanations soiales; son être est à lui comme à l'univers; il vit d'une vie réelle dans l'unité sublime (Stephen 53-54).<sup>13</sup>

Significant in this passage is not only the atmosphere of higher mountains but also the

implied strenuous climb to reach the height, both of which are lacking in the quotation from Haller's poem.

Stephen shifts to English writing in the last part of the essay. After mentioning the texts affected by picturesque and sublime aesthetics—the impressions of travels through the Alps by Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713); Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762); Horace Walpole (1717-1797); Walpole's friend Henry Seymour Conway (1721-1795); and Thomas Gray (1716-1771)—Stephen cites the lines of James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730) as an example which shows 'firsthand touches' rather than the artificial, second-hand quality of former examples of grand-tourists, who rely too much on the known aesthetics when they relate their impressions (58). Even then, Thomson's Scottish mountains (Stephen quotes lines 878-85 of 'Autumn') and Welsh mountains (lines 1161-68 of 'Summer') are 'in the background', enjoyed from a distance, and 'always vague, gloomy, and distant' (60).

Stephen admits the excellent quality of the Lake mountain poetry of Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron, which, he says, is too obvious to illustrate with quotations. But he adds that their poetry is affected by the atmosphere of the district as well as by the beauty of mountains themselves and that their mountains are infiltrated by Wordsworthian 'sleep that is among the lonely hills' (a line from 'Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle upon the Restoration of Lord Clifford, the Shepherd, to the Estates and Honours of his Ancestors'), which, for Stephen, is a little too insular-minded (62). Thus he turns to examine the high Alps poems by Coleridge, Byron and Shelley. He regards Coleridge's 'Hymn before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouni' as a 'plagiarism', even though it has some fine lines (62). Byron's mountains are examples of 'vigorous poetry' but a little too affected by his misanthropy (62). In contrast, Stephen regards Shelley highly: 'Shelley's poetry is in the most complete harmony with the scenery of the higher Alps; and I think it highly creditable to the mountains that they should agree so admirably with the most poetical of poets'; 'his exquisite sense for the ethereal beauty of the high mountains pervades his whole poetry'; and 'There is something essentially congenial to his imagination in the thin atmosphere of the upper regions, with its delicate hues and absence of tangible human interest' (63).

Stephen praises 'Prometheus Unbound' in particular and quotes two parts of Asia's lines from Act II, Scene 3:

The keen sky-cleaving mountains

From icy spires of sunlike radiance fling  
The dawn, as lifted Ocean's dazzling spray,  
From some Atlantic islet scattered up,  
Spangles the wind with lamplike waterdrops (Stephen 64);<sup>14</sup>

and

the rushing snow,  
The sun-awakened avalanche—whose mass  
Thrice sifted by the storm had gathered here,  
Flake after flake, in heaven-defying minds  
As thought by thought is piled, till some great truth  
Is loosened, and the nations echo round,  
Shaken to their roots, as do the mountains now (Stephen 64).

These lines, Stephen insists, make readers feel as though they are actually on a high mountain peak 'not yet vulgarised by associations with guides and picnics' (64). In contrast, Stephen criticises Friedrich Schiller's 'William Tell' (1804) as crammed with second-hand knowledge from guidebooks on Switzerland. Stephen says the charm of mountain scenery 'lies in its vigorous originality' (67) with its rocks and glaciers having 'a character of their own', not invaded by the standardised monotony of civilisation (69).

'The Old School' and 'The New School' thus reveal Stephen's attitude towards mountain poetry. The key concepts are science and vigour. For Stephen, the former implies not the stasis of fixed-point observation but the active, physical involvement in the mountain environment indicated by the latter. Another interesting point in Stephen's historiography is the lack of Victorian poems. Although it is not unusual for history writing to avoid the too-recent past, no reference to any post-Shelley mountain poetry possibly means the absence of mountain poems which Stephen considers noteworthy.

### **'The Regrets of a Mountaineer'**

Stephen announces his retirement from dangerous climbing in 'The Regrets of a Mountaineer', first published anonymously in *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1867, the same year that Stephen married Harriet Marian Thackeray. Although there is no mention of



the marriage (or any marriage) as the reason for his quitting dangerous mountain climbing, it was obvious to some readers who knew the background that it prompted Stephen to write this essay (Hayman 225). In spite of his proclamation, though, he was to continue Alpine climbing.

The main purpose of this essay is not to grumble about an early retirement from the pursuit but to prove the meaningfulness of high mountain climbing against the criticism of such ventures. It was only two years since the accident on the Matterhorn in which four members of the Edward Whymper party died on the way down from the successful first ascent and the severe Alpine climbing-bashing which followed. One of the most influential attacks, and a more sophisticated one than simple accusations of foolhardiness, was John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* with its 1865 preface, which Stephen rephrases in this essay (306). In it, Ruskin regards Alpine climbing as mere athleticism and likens a climber to a bear having fun going up and down a soaped pole. According to Ruskin, furthermore, the true way of appreciating mountain beauty is rather by careful watching from below, which could be done even by an old person or a disabled person (Ruskin 25, 89-90). Stephen paraphrases this type of criticism in another part of the essay:

But I know some sceptical critics will ask, does not the way which he is accustomed to regard mountains rather deaden their poetical influence? Doesn't he come to look at them as mere instruments of sport, and overlook their more spiritual teaching? Does not all the excitement of personal adventure . . . incapacitate him from perceiving

The silence that is in the starry sky,

The sleep that is among the lonely hills? (323)

Stephen's aim in this essay is to disprove the Ruskinian view. Although Stephen quotes the Wordsworthian sleep in 'The New School' and dismisses its English parochialism as irrelevant to the atmosphere of the high Alps (61-62), here he insists that mountaineers understand this spiritual and poetical silence better than non-climbers. While he admits that mountaineering is a sport, he denies that it is reckless athleticism with no spirituality. For him it is 'a sport which . . . brings one into contact with the sublimest aspects of nature' (307). The challenge, thus, is how to prove it as persuasively as, but in a different way from, Ruskin, who 'covered the Matterhorn . . .

with a whole web of poetical associations' (308).

Stephen does not rely on poetical works for his defence but instead uses the interesting analogy of literature. He compares mountain beauty to a page in a Greek play, which for those who do not understand the language is a nonsensical set of black symbols. For the scholar, however, it would 'reveal some of the noblest poetry in the world' (319). Likewise, 'no one can decipher the natural writing on the face of a snow-slope or a precipice who has not wandered amongst their recesses, and learnt by slow experience what is indicated by marks which an ignorant observer would scarcely notice' (319). The climber learns 'the language spoken by every crag and every wave of glacier' (320). Here, mountain climbing is a practice of critical reading (or the twentieth century practice of 'close reading', to put it in an anachronistic way) for understanding and appreciating the work of sublime nature.

Stephen often draws a contrast between the mountaineer and the traveller and asserts the former's superiority in experiencing the poetical: 'The bases of the mountains are immersed in a deluge of cockneyism... whilst their summits rise high into the bracing air, where everything is pure and poetical' (329); and 'You feel the force of the line I have quoted from Wordsworth [i.e., 'The sleep that is among the lonely hills']. . . . None of the travellers whom you can see crawling at your feet has the least conception of what is meant by the silent solitudes of the High Alps' (334). In Stephen's argument, the mountaineer thus becomes a true critic/appreciator of the mountain poetics.

The problem lies in how this aesthete mountaineer conveys his critique of mountain spirit. Stephen exemplifies two opposite approaches—one is 'tall talk' with excessively florid language, and the other with reticence, humour and cynicism—and suggests that neither is relevant (308-309). Considering their near-absence from this essay, works of poetry also appear to be inapt. The measures Stephen takes instead are to faithfully record the details of physical and mental experience, telling what the mountaineer does and how he feels in the mountain environment. It might work. The poet mountaineer Geoffrey Winthrop Young speaks highly of this essay: 'I should doubt if, for mountaineers, there is any writing which re-creates more sincerely the splendour of the hills and the magical feelings we have felt among them than certain passages in the *Alps in Winter* and in the *Regrets of a Mountaineer*' (Young xi). Or it might not. Stephen's meticulous style is seen by some as 'a little too carefully constructed and accurately phrased' (Annan 97) and that it may 'soon become wearisome', as Stephen

himself suggests at one point (337).

### **‘Sunset on Mont Blanc’**

‘Sunset on Mont Blanc’, first published in *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1873, deals with Stephen’s ascent of Mont Blanc to experience sunset at the summit in 1873 (Hayman 225). Mont Blanc is the best mountain for Stephen (‘no Alpine summit is . . . comparable in sublimity and beauty to Mont Blanc’, 257) and this essay is his favourite (Zink 65; Annan 96). While Stephen praises Shelley’s Mont Blanc poem in the essay ‘The New School’, here he says that Mont Blanc is ‘too savage for poetry’ (262). Although Shelley’s ‘Mont Blanc’ does feature the savageness of the mountain, what Stephen means here is the savageness faced in an actual climbing experience:

. . . any one who has been caught in a storm on some of his higher icefields, who has trembled at the deadly swoop of the gale, or at the ominous sound which heralds an avalanche, or at the remorseless settling down of the blinding snow, will agree that at times he passes the limits of the terrible which comes fairly within the range of art (262).

The challenging task, then, is how to find a literary expression—the task for a literary man like Stephen—to represent the mountain when the aesthetics of the sublime, which the Romantic poets have fully developed, may not be appropriate.

Stephen admits that, on the other hand, there are moments of the ‘right blending of the sweet and the stern’ which are more suitable for the sublime aesthetic. A particular example is Mont Blanc at sunset. As Stephen quotes from Shelley’s ‘The Cloud’, it is a moment when ‘the sunset is breathing . . . its “ardours of rest and of love”’ (262).<sup>15</sup> The beauty of Mont Blanc at sunset, however, has been too popular among tourists. Stephen’s ambition, then, is to experience it on the very summit, an experience few people can savour. His party, which includes the French artist and mountaineer Gabriel Loppé, thus leaves Chamonix on the early morning of 6 August.

In his account of this expedition, there are only four quotations of poetry: from Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s ‘Sir Galahad’ (1842), John Milton’s ‘L’Allegro’, Philip Sydney’s ‘Astrophel and Stella’ and Tennyson’s ‘Tithonus’ (1860). They are not mountain poems, and the fragments of them Stephen uses here are not to describe Mont Blanc itself. Stephen starts the journey with lines from ‘Sir Galahad’: ‘This mortal armour that I

wear, / This weight and size, this heart and eyes, / Are touch'd and turn'd to finest air' (Stephen 263)<sup>16</sup> to express how the early morning mountain air shakes off the languidness of London life from his body.

The next occasion when Stephen quotes a poem is when the party takes a rest on the top of Dôme du Goûter (4,304 m) and looks down at the surrounding mountains. Stephen likens them to ripples made by the dropping of a pebble onto the still surface of water, and then to music: 'plaintive modulations of some air of linked "sweetness long drawn out"' (Stephen 266), borrowing line 140 of 'L'Allegro': 'Of linked sweetness long drawn out'.<sup>17</sup>

When next Stephen quotes a poem, the party is already on its way back. The full moon reminds him of Sydney's lines: 'With how sad steps, O Moon, thou climb'st the skies! / How silently, and with how wan a face!' (Stephen 275). Its 'silly expression', for Stephen, is 'a bad imitation of the sun' (275). To the reader of this essay, the pale moon appears to be a metaphor for poetry or for any language that fails to describe the special moments of sunset on the summit which Stephen experienced. He writes: 'even the most eloquent language is but a poor substitute for a painter's brush, and a painter's brush lags far behind these grandest aspects of nature. The easiest way of obtaining the impression is to follow in my steps' (268). Thus emphasising the actuality of mountain experience, Stephen still attempts to describe the crucial scene of the sunset on the summit, not depending on poetry or any other literary works but with his own prose:

And now . . . began the strange spectacle of which we were the sole witnesses. One long delicate cloud, suspended in mid-air just below the sun, was gradually adorning itself with prismatic colouring. Round the limitless horizon ran a faint fog-bank, unfortunately not quite thick enough to produce that depth of colouring which sometimes makes an Alpine sunset inexpressibly gorgeous. . . . (272)

As he tries to relate all the details, his rendition, risking tedious lengthiness, runs to three full pages.

Coming back to the Grands Mulets Hut (3,051 m) with the last light of the sun completely gone, Stephen comments: 'A great poet might interpret the sentiment of the mountains into song; but no poet could pack into any definite proposition or series of propositions the strange thoughts that rise in different spectators of such a scene' (277). Poetry appears for the last time to illustrate not the spectacle of the sunset but the state

of his mind in the after-effect. He says he is in 'some indefinite mixture of exhilaration and melancholy' (277), which resembles what Tithonus, who lost his mortality, feels when he looks down 'those dim fields about the homes / Of happy men that have the power to die' (277).<sup>18</sup> Stephen/Tithonus longs for something utterly lost yet comforts himself with its memory.

'Sunset on Mont Blanc' shows Stephen's subtle use of poetry. While he mistrusts it as a means of capturing his mountaineering experience, he successfully lets it render a shadowy, uncapturable remainder of the experience.

### **'The Alps in Winter'**

In the winter of 1877, an interim between the sudden death of his wife in the winter of 1875 and his second marriage in 1878, Stephen made his first winter expedition to the Alps. It impressed him so much that his Alps visits thereafter were always to take place in winter (Hayman 228). 'The Alps in Winter', first published in *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1877, is its literary outcome.

Stephen is particularly harsh on poets in this essay. He says that the voice of the Alps 'speaks in tones at once more tender and more awe-inspiring than that of any mortal teacher' and that '[t]he loftiest and sweetest strains of Milton or Wordsworth may be more articulate, but do not lay so forcible a grasp upon my imagination' (281). Close to the end of the essay, he also says:

Byron's exploitation of the scenery becomes a mere impertinence; Scott's simplicity would not have been exalted enough; Wordsworth would have seen this much of his own image; and Shelley, though he could have caught some of the finer sentiments, would have half spoilt it by some metaphysical rant. The best modern describers cannot shake off their moralising or their scientific speculations or their desire to be humorous sufficiently to do justice to such beauties (301).

Stephen admits that his writing itself is 'the folly of describing the indescribable' and even a 'profane' act (300).

This essay, however, gains a series of praises. As cited above, Winthrop Young expresses admiration for it (Young xi); Maitland calls it a 'prose-poem' (Maitland 88); the mountaineer and writer Douglas Freshfield comments that some passages of it 'have hardly been surpassed by any lover of mountains, even by Ruskin' (Maitland 103); the

mountaineer and politician James Bryce commends it, along with 'Sunset on Mont Blanc', as best showing 'a poetical appreciation of the sublimity and solemnity of high mountains' (Bryce 145). Even in 1972, another mountaineer/writer, Arnold Lunn, confesses that it is the best Alpine literature he ever knew (Lunn, 'Playground' 1).

The poetic, or magical, quality of this essay does not come from works of poetry, which Stephen finds unreliable in expressing the atmosphere of the winter Alps. Although he occasionally mentions them—a line from Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' to describe the specific blue of Lake Thun (288), couplets from Thomas Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* to visualise the inside of an Alpine cottage (291), and a mountain from Milton's 'Lycidas' to compare the Galenstock (3,586 m) of the Urner Alps with it (295-296)—they play only minor roles in this essay. One exception might be a slightly changed version of Shelley's 'Lines written among the Euganean Hills' to describe a situation in which Stephen's party wades through deep snow to a mountain hut:

One's soul is sinking into that sleep  
Where the dreamer seems to be  
Weltering through eternity (Stephen 295).<sup>19</sup>

It successfully conjures up the mood of eternal sleep and dreams, which is the base tone of this essay, as Stephen says 'the whole region [of the Alps] becomes part of dreamland' in winter (281). It is this mood which gives the essay its poetic quality.

The word 'dream' appears frequently in this essay, which itself has a dreamy quality, with a shapeless, centre-less flow. Unlike 'Sunset on Mont Blanc', the essay does not focus on one particular expedition. Although consistent in his attempt to convey the charm of the winter Alps and his consciousness of its difficulty, Stephen's writing shifts inconsistently from one thought to another, from one image to another, until near the end of the essay his tone and style suddenly become those of his other expedition report essays in the book, such as 'The Schreckhorn' and 'The Rothorn'. The reader thereby suddenly finds him/herself in the middle of snow and wind with the Stephen party:

We were in that dim upper stratum, pierced by the nobler peaks alone, and our next neighbour in one direction was the group of Monte Rosa, some sixty miles away, but softly and clearly defined in every detail as an Alpine distance alone can

be. Suddenly, without a warning or an apparent cause, the weather changed . . . (296).

After this brief exciting moment, though, Stephen abruptly leaves the reader and returns to his musing on the impossibility of communication:

To me the Wengern Alp is a sacred place—the holy of holies in the mountain sanctuary, and the emotions produced when no desecrating influence is present and old memories rise up, softened by the sweet sadness of the scenery, belong to that innermost region of feeling which I would not, if I could, lay bare (300).

The essay ends with a fragmentary vision of descent from Lauterbrunnen in the evening. It is, however, cut off shortly with his words ‘But I am verging upon the poetical’ (302) and with a worldly vision of his party ‘struggling for coffee in the buffets of railway stations’ (302).

Considering Stephen’s disbelief in poetry as a medium for expressing mountaineering experiences, which is frequently expressed in *The Playground of Europe*, the fact that he is often called a poet may sound ironical. As James Bryce’s words suggest, however, something different from mere irony underlies Stephen’s attitude towards poetry. Bryce, too, calls him a poet, but he means by that ‘a man penetrated with so high a sense of what poetry may be that he will not venture into verse lest he should be unable to rise to the standard which verse ought to maintain when employed upon the noblest aspects of nature’ (Bryce 145). Stephen is in the interim between the Romantic era when many successful mountain poems were produced and the time when what McNee calls the ‘haptic sublime’ was to be crystallised into a work of poetry. It is a challenging time for poetry, when the full-blown practice of mountaineering finds a place only in prose writings. In this regard, *The Playground of Europe* can be read as a critique of the relationship between poetry, mountains and mountaineering.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This categorisation is slightly different from Abbie Garrington's differentiation between 'mountaineering literature' and 'mountain literature'. The former is a 'mountaineer-authored work whose primary concern is to convey the experience of a climb', such as 'technical accounts, dispatches, expedition reports, guidebooks and advice columns, climber memoirs, and biographies'; while the latter includes 'both this former category and other work (whether fiction or non-fiction) which addresses mountains, mountaineers, or the practice of mountaineering, but does not do so primarily in technical terms, or with the primary aim of speaking to other mountaineers' (Garrington 45).

<sup>2</sup> An interesting direction is Simon Bainbridge's argument, in which he convincingly redefines some Romantic poets as mountaineers. He thus locates mountaineering poems in the Romantic period rather than the post-Romantic period (Bainbridge, 'Romantic Writers' and 'Writing').

<sup>3</sup> Hankinson 98; Lunn, *Century* 138; and Noyce 156-58.

<sup>4</sup> Recent criticisms of Victorian poetry, such as Armstrong (1993), Bristow (2000), Davis (2002), Hughes (2010) and Bevis (2013), are almost silent on this issue, although they discuss related topics, such as masculinity, imperialism and nature.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Freedgood reads in *The Playground of Europe* the masochistic enjoyment of risk, and management of it, involved in mountaineering, which reflects a desire for imperial mastery in the Victorian middle-class English male. Hansen puts *The Playground* in the context of British middle-class, imperial cultures (Hansen, 'Albert Smith'). He later treats it in the wider context of modernity (Hansen, *Summits*).

<sup>6</sup> First published as 'The Alps in the Last Century' in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1870.

<sup>7</sup> Surprisingly, however, Nicolson refers to Stephen only once: his *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century*, not *The Playground* (19-20).

<sup>8</sup> Stephen slightly changes the original lines, which run, 'High on the south, huge Benvenue / Down to the lake in masses threw / Craggs, knolls, and mounds, confusedly hurled, / The fragments of an earlier world' (Scott 211).

<sup>9</sup> The first part was published in 1681 in Latin and in 1684 in English, the second part in 1689 in Latin and in 1690 in English.

<sup>10</sup> There are minor punctuation differences from the original (Burnet 197).

<sup>11</sup> Stephen interestingly misquotes 'That storms above' (Blackmore 45) as 'That storms beneath'. It seems natural for Stephen the mountaineer to see a storm beneath.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen wrongly claims that it was published in 1728 (46). The lines Stephen quotes are those describing the waterfall of Staubbach in Lauterbrunnen: 'Ein Wand'rer sieht erstaunt im



Himmel Ströme fliessen, / Die aus den Wolken zieh'n und sich in Wolken Giessen' (Stephen 47) ('The traveller beholds with astonishment rivers flowing towards the sky, and, issuing from one cloud, hide themselves in the grey veil of another'; Haller 30).

<sup>13</sup> 'But up there, on those desert peaks, where the sky is more vast and the air more stable, where time flies slower and life has more of permanence: there does all Nature proclaim with eloquence a lordlier order, a more visible harmony, an eternal unison. There is the form of man adaptable and yet indestructible; he breathes the wild air far away from social emanations; he belongs to himself and to the universe, and lives with a true life the glorious unity' (Senancour 39).

<sup>14</sup> The original lines start with 'And far on high the keen sky-cleaving mountains . . .' (Shelley 244).

<sup>15</sup> The original Shelley lines (Stanza 3, lines 9-10) are: 'And when Sunset may breathe, from the lit Sea beneath, / Its ardours of rest and of love,' (Shelley 302).

<sup>16</sup> The original lines are: 'And, stricken by an angel's hand, / This mortal armour that I wear, / This weight and size, this heart and eyes, / Are touch'd, are turn'd to finest air' (Tennyson 110).

<sup>17</sup> Milton's original lines are: 'Lap me in soft Lydian airs, / Married to immortal verse, / Such as the meeting soul may pierce / In notes with many a winding bout / Of linked sweetness long drawn out . . .' (Milton 28).

<sup>18</sup> The original lines are: ' . . . when the steam / Floats up from those fields about the homes / Of happy men that have the power to die' (Tennyson 97).

<sup>19</sup> Shelley's original lines are: 'And [the ship] sinks down, down, like that sleep / When the dreamer seems to be / Weltering through eternity' (Shelley 110).

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