Knock it Out of Them': The Matter and Meaning of Stone

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Abstract
"'knock it out of them': The Matter and Meaning of Stone" works out the force of stone as inscribed in three interrelated German Romantic texts that speak the language of hardness to tell tales of petrification. They are Novalis' "Henry von Ofterdingen" (1802), Ludwig Tieck's "The Runenberg" (1804), and E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Mines at Falun" (1819). While Novalis lays out stones like the syntax of an ur-language, and Tieck likens a tablet of precious stones to runes, it takes Hoffmann to drive the search for a record-engraved jewel down into a mine, where the substance of stone best reveals itself: deep, dense, impenetrable. These qualities suggest that there exists between stone and writing a likeness, a kinship, in the twining of matter and meaning.

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Introduction

Stones do not move of their own volition. They rest in "the depth of [their]…being" (Tieck, n.d., p. 75), have "density," "impenetrability," and "permanence" chiseled onto their surface and hold inside the promise "to remain…unaffected…by blows" (Bachelard, 2002, p. 157). Stones are epic, and "their cold looks" (Tieck, n.d., p. 75) tell tales of petrification. In 1802, Novalis wrote in The Novices of Sais "Whether anyone has ever understood the stones…I do not know…so rare [is] an understanding of the stone world; [it] cover[s] the sensitive beholder with a rind of stone that seems to grow inward" (p. 91), and so it does. Before long, dead matter accumulates: first encrusts the heart, then permeates the will and, in doing so, "teach[es] us the language of hardness" (Bachelard, 2002, p. 158). In Ludwig Tieck's "The Runenberg" (1804), Christian first hears his father tell of rocks and "mountains, where he had traveled in his youth…and there immediately awakened in [him] an overpowering urge, a feeling that [he] had now found the way of life meant for [him]" (p.84), and he reads "[i]n a book…an account of the nearest large range of mountains…and…laid [his] travel plans accordingly" (p. 84). The flatlands recede soon enough, but Christian is lead ever deeper into the Runenberg ("rune mountain").

"[T]he cliffs grew steeper, the verdure disappeared, the bare mountainsides called to him as though in angry tones, and the wind drove him before it with a lonely moan" (p. 86). With no vegetation to hold on to, Christian has to lean into the rock to keep from falling, though he himself had only just unearthed a plant and done so "[u]nthinkingly" (p. 83). "[H]e pulled a projecting root from the earth and started in sudden fright to hear in the ground a dull moaning, protracted subterraneously in piteous tones, which died mournfully away in the far distance. This tone penetrated his inmost heart, it seized him as though he had unwittingly touched the wound of which the moribund body of nature was painfully expiring" (p. 83). Christian had pulled out of the earth the homunculus-like root of a mandrake, and it cried out from the injury. "Alraunwurzel," or "murmuring root," is the German for "mandrake." Its name invests the plant not just with power of expression. Tieck writes the word into his text as "Alrunenwurzel," substituting "raun" ("murmur") with "runen" ("runes"), the mysterious letters of the Old-Norse alphabet, to this day preserved as inscriptions on rune stones.

Body

In a way, the Alraune is Christian himself: a youth uprooted from his homeland and in search of meaning in the mountains. Indeed, during the moon-lit night, a text is handed him outside the castle ruins on the peak of rune mountain: "a tablet blazing with inlaid stones, rubies, diamonds, and all kinds of jewels….With its various lines and colors the tablet seemed to form some strange, incomprehensible pattern" (p. 87-88). It is magnificent, of course, but lost as soon as found and its message never settled. Later, memory flickers when, transmuted, it reappears as the money left to Christian by the stranger, after whose departure he nightly "busied himself with it a great deal….counting the gold pieces with utmost zeal" (p. 93-94), until he must account for his behavior and reveals that the metal "'tries to whisper words of love in my ear….When I touch it with my fingers, it grows redder and more splendid for joy. See for yourself its glow of rapture'" (p. 94). The father can do no more than scold his son: "'savage stones…have deranged your mind and planted in you this devastating

hunger for metals'" (p. 96). Despite of what is plain to see, Tieck never drives his tale of metals underground but stops it short above, at the entrance of an abandoned mine shaft. It is E.T.A. Hoffmann who, in "The Mines at Falun" (1819), sends his protagonist Elis Fröbom down into the subterranean world: to behold a dream garden with "plants of flashing metal" (p. 317) or "strange metallic flowers" (p. 318) and to retrieve a jewel meant for a wedding gift, because "'[d]own in the mine there lies, encased in metals…the pink sparkling almandine on which is engraved the record of [Elis' and Ulla's] life'" (p. 335). Metal runs through the stone, and Elis sets to mine it. Though torn and with a disquieting sense of foreboding, he implores old Torbern "'It is down there that my treasure lies, my life, my all….Climb down with me, show me the richest veins and I will dig and bore and labour and behold the light of day no more!'" (p. 331). The primeval world of rocks below his feet no longer presents itself as a mountainous cave to explore but opens up before him as a "smouldering crater" (p. 326), an "enormous" (p. 321) wound of violence in an uprooted landscape, and from then on the miners' invasion of the earth comes with great burden and at high risk…but matter calls.

Gaston Bachelard recognized the geological "fecundity of mines" (p. 188) but also that "[m]etal is the reward of a dream of brutal power" (p. 182). Notice the distance between here and there: In Novalis' Henry von Ofterdingen (1802), Bildungsroman and travelogue, a miner tells Henry's company of the "wondrous architecture that has so strangely founded and paneled our earth" (p. 86), of the miner's "quiet reverence" (p. 65) for his work and "diligen[t] and constant watchfulness" (p. 71) over his world. The novices, as well, "went down into caverns" (p. 7) to explore "how the earth was built" (p. 7). They follow the summons of their teacher in a romanticized scholarly pursuit, and this is only natural: when intent on uncovering harmonies, lift the veil that prevents you seeing them. By contrast, the golden veil in "The Runenberg" is not for Christian to lift; rather, only because he is caught under its spell does he follow the incitement of the old woman of the woods and then forever disappears. "'Marvelous, immeasurable treasures…there must be in the depth of the earth. O, to find them, raise them, take them for oneself! O, to press the earth to one's bosom like a beloved bride until she gladly yields her most precious possessions in love and trembling'" (p. 98-99).

When depth drives desire, the need for descent is more than obvious; it is necessary. And when "[a]fter a number of hours and great effort the father succeeded in reaching the abandoned shaft[,] he saw footprints impressed…at the entrance and turned back weeping" (p. 99), because he knows better than to follow them. Elis is the one who climbs into the mine at Falun, and when he does, you feel the temperature drop: "no blade of grass grew in the barren rocky chasm, but jagged cliffs and boulders towered up in strange forms, some like gigantic animals turned to stone, some like colossal humans. In the abyss there lay in wild profusion rocks, slag, burnt-up ore" (p. 312). In Novalis and Tieck, mines are "treasure-houses" (Hoffmann, 1982, p. 316), certainly, but in Hoffmann, the mine takes on a technical quality, becomes a depository to be quarried, a burrow that, "for the sake of vile profit" (p. 316), projects down so much farther, and dangerously so. Regardless, Elis never lets go "the subterranean realm of metals and precious stones" (p. 333).

He is not the first. The novices, too, "gathered stones…and arranged them in rows of many different kinds" (p. 7). One student, especially, was singled out and returned

from an excursion "carrying a humble little stone…and laid [it] in an empty space among other stones, where many rows came together like spokes" (p. 13). Collectively, they formed more than a "great cipher" (p. 3) but a measured syntax, a tempered grammar…as if of Sanskrit. Stones are the ur-language, and for Christian it resounds in the "plaints" (p. 83) of nature everywhere, in earth, water, or wind: "'I understand the[ir] sighs and moans….They are the living corpses of earlier magnificent worlds of stone'" (p. 96) he tells his father. It is what he had learned from the mandrake, the murmuring Alraune, but its second self, the Alrune, tells of an affinity between stone and writing, an understanding that rocks are runes, indeed, that the mountain will answer to the name "rune."

It is here that Christian first received the bejeweled tablet, and its script had already marked him before he "ran his fingers over the pattern, which at once passed over invisibly into him" (p. 88); when he "held it in his hands" (p. 97) a second time, "[t]he figure and the gay gleams pressed in upon his senses with instant power" (p. 97). Can this be called reading? Perhaps not, but the father emphatically declares the pattern an inscription: "'Throw this writing away, it makes you cold and cruel, it is bound to petrify your heart'" (p. 98) he warns his son, and he may well be right if what exists between stone and writing is a likeness, a kinship. Elis had long since joined the family of miner Pehrson Dahlsjö, but before his wedding, he "ceased to speak of the subterranean realm at all" (p. 335), as though he had filled his mouth with rubble and descended into a place where human language no longer covers. He trembles that the almandine may see "the light of day" (p. 335), but a landslide swallows them both on the morning of the wedding. During Henry's nightly excursion, no one can tell who or what was devoured in the caves they visit, but bones "were to be found at the entrances" (p. 76), where they lay about on the floor like scattered graphisms of what in us is most like stone.

Conclusion

On his last visit, he had turned quite gruff, Christian intimates that each pebble and chunk of quartz he bears "[on] his back" (p. 100) is precious and encases a glowing core. "'It is only that these jewels are not yet cut and polished….The outward fire that causes them to gleam is still buried in their inward hearts, but one only has to knock it out of them….' With these words, he picked up one stone and struck violently against another, so that red sparks sprang forth" (p. 100). Christian knows that stones can take a beating, yet give away nothing, give up nothing, and neither does their bearer, who turns around and walks directly back into the mountain. Thereafter, "[t]he unhappy wanderer was never seen again" (p. 101). It is the end, but a kindly sentence and unassuming words heave the power of stone and are the reason we cannot forget the mysterious fate of Tieck's Christian. Hoffmann's Elis, on the other hand, once "buried . alive" (p. 337), is granted an epilogue, the return of the body fifty years later: it "appeared to be petrified when they brought it to the surface….completely free of decomposition" (p. 336-37) but once outside the mine, "the body…was beginning to dissolve into dust" (p. 338). Perhaps, Elis had never been meant for the open air: there is a sympathy between the "sulphurous…vapors" (p. 321) and the "vitriolic water" (p. 336) of the mine and the leaden body of Elis, but what remains of him is so lightweight, it must be put to rest in the heavy confines of Koppaberg Church in Falun. The old miner in Novalis' *Henry von Ofterdingen* came from the mining town of Eula. When he, Henry, and their company chance upon the hermit

Count von Hohenzollern while exploring a cavern, their eyes at once fall onto a “table consit[ing] of five large stone slabs put together like a box. The top slab had carved into it a life-size male and female figure, which held a wreath of lilies and roses; on the side was [written]: on this spot Friedrich and Marie von Hohenzollern returned to their fatherland” (p. 82). A stone tomb in a mountain cave is twice removed, but on the same grounds, it is the proper place for the twining of stone and writing, of densest matter and doubtless meaning that crushes like no landslide can.

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