**Summit fever**

In her choice of title, Virginie Bailly identifies herself with the climbers of the *Mont Analogue*. If we want to understand how the painter is akin to a mountaineer, we have to take the detour via ‘Mount Analogue’.

*Le Mont Analogue*, a novel by René Daumal (1908-1944), was published posthumously in 1952. When the author died prematurely, the manuscript was left unfinished. The story is as follows. Eight adventurers find each other through a shared conviction. Somewhere there is a mountain that is infinitely higher than all mountains known so far, including Everest. This mountain has until now remained invisible and therefore unknown. This is because it is made of a material that causes a bending of space around it and thus makes it imperceptible to the eye. Every ship that passes it has the impression of sailing in a straight line, but in reality it is sailing in a curve around this invisible and opaque wall. If this mysterious mountain exists, it is the task of every true alpinist to reach its summit. These eight follow the call of the heights. Thanks to some ingenious reasoning, they are able to locate the mountain, somewhere in the Southern Ocean. They decide to make the journey to its coordinates on their yacht, the *Impossible*. They wait patiently until an opening appears in the curtain caused by the bending of space. They reach the foot of the mountain and start the climb.
The novel leaves them in their journey to the unknowable and the inexpressible. We can only guess at what the denouement of this story was going to be. The last chapter should have been given the title of ‘*Et vous, que cherchez-vous?*’ What are mountaineers actually in search of? What is it that painters ultimately seek? Is this the same question?

One of the eight participants is the painter Judith Pancake, who specialises in mountain views. Imagine if she had been able to set up her easel on the summit. What would they have looked like, her depictions of this *kataskapos*, as the Greeks called it, the visionary or unified view from a high altitude that encompasses and grasps everything?
Can Virginie Bailly’s paintings be considered as the missing link? Do they take us beyond the bending of space up to the mountaintop? Is the painter here in her own way a mountaineer?

The notion of something higher which for that reason is worth pursuing or which is an object of desire is as old as the origins of Western thought. When it comes to *height*, it is Plato who gave meaning to this orientation in our culture. René Daumal’s book has an unmistakably neo-Platonic background. It is the story of a spiritual ascent. It is as if Daumal were continuing the allegory of Plato’s cave. The ascent from the cave towards the sunlight has a sequel and takes the form of the climbing of the highest mountain, one that is elevated above all other mountains. The allegory of the cave becomes the allegory of the mountain. The ‘highest mountain’ is a way of representing ‘the place beyond the vault of the heavens’, or *hyperouranion topon*, as Plato called it. In this way, Daumal comes closer to Plotinus (203-270), the philosopher who is more Platonic than Plato himself. Plotinus’ *Enneads* are all about the ascent (*anagogè*) to the highest point that is essentially unreachable (*amèchanos*). According to him, this is also where we will find the ‘beauty beyond all beauty’.

The mountain that Daumal has in mind is clearly symbolic. It would appear to be inspired by all the mythical mountains, in the first place by Meru, which in Hindu mythology is the centre of the world,

is 450,000 kilometres high and links earth to heaven. Before George Everest gave his name to it in century, Everest was in Tibetan called *Chomolungma* or Mother Goddess, and in Nepalese *Sagarmatha* or Goddess of Heaven. Spiritual traditions all over the world have often considered mountains as privileged places where enlightenment could be found. Petrarch describes his climb of Mont Ventoux in 1336 in a way whereby he transforms his experience into a metaphysical symbolisation. It is at the top of *Monte Purgatorio* that Dante meets Beatrice, who initiates him into paradise. But ‘Mount Analogue’ can just as easily be a reference to the mountain that Juan de la Cruz climbed spiritually in *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (1578-1583).

René Daumal’s *Le Mont Analogue* is a similar allegory that fits into all these traditions. The mountaineers in his novel are more like pilgrims.

This is an explicitly *analogue* mountain. Analogy presupposes *two* and *something between* them that links the two together. The real mountain is one part of a duality. It is the visible, concrete reality which, by a certain likeness, can refer above and beyond itself to an invisible, unknown and unknowable reality. *Analogue* is often, and certain in this instance, *anagogic*. The mountain that is meant is the second part of an analogy. It is *like* a mountain, but not *really* a mountain. It displays a substantial likeness to it. This lies not in the form, the natural phenomenon, an eminence in the landscape formed by geological processes. The analogy refers to the human activity of climbing or, rather, the inner urge for the vertical, the irresistible longing for height. The analogue is ‘summit fever’ (Robert Macfarlane in *Mountains of the Mind*, 2003). The mountaineer is possessed by the same urge as the spiritual seeker, philosopher or artist. The mountain is in the mind, and is a ‘mountain of the mind’ even for the alpinist. The true alpinist is a neo-Platonist in heart and soul. The reference to *Le Mont Analogue* allows us in our turn to make the connection with Virginie Bailly’s work. We also encounter Mount Analogue in her paintings. Bailly paints analogue mountains, not mountains. It is a matter of the mountain within us, in our mind, of ‘summit fever’.

In *Peri tou kalou*, ‘On Beauty’ (*Enneads*, I, 6), Plotinus made the scope of beauty as *anagogè* into the root of Western metaphysics. True beauty is a pure idea, with no visible appearance, with no materiality, with no image, and with no possible image. It lies beyond the range of our imaginative powers. Fortunately there is also the concrete beauty in all its observable forms in nature and in human artefacts such as works of art. They allow us to catch a glimpse, a beam, a radiation of absolute beauty and to rise up to it, just as our deepest desire, our *eros*. *Eros* gives the soul wings, it becomes *pteros*, winged. *Eros* engenders beauty or is aroused by it.

The painter and the mountaineer are kindred spirits. The ‘analogue mountain’ gives us an insight into the analogy between the two. Both are winged, *pteros*, which means they are driven by *eros*, to be understood here as summit fever. It is their nature. The mountaineer puts his life at stake even though nothing forces him to do so, except for an inner need. So the analogue that links the painting and the mountain is not a matter of formal likeness, but a hidden force.

Daumal himself offers a few indications of the conditions under which a mountain can be called ‘analogue’: ‘*Il faut que son sommet soit inaccessible, mais sa base accessible*’. The foot of the mountain has to be accessible, but its summit is inaccessible by ordinary human means. It has to have the aura of inaccessibility and unreachability. The goal of spiritual upliftment is the immaterial ‘landscape’ that lies ‘above the vault of the heavens’. It is to be found in the endeavours and

capacities of every human, since it is ‘in the nature of the wing to lift upwards everything that has weight’ (Plato). In this sense, Virginie Bailly’s paintings are ‘immaterial landscapes’.
The task or the desire to be a mountaineer is the spirit of the painter. What drives the true alpinist is the irresistible call of the mountaintop. It is also that which all thinkers on beauty since Plotinus have put in the hands of the artist. Beauty is an *anagogic* or ascending process. The painter as a mountaineer, or Judith Pancake without climbing boots or a rucksack, but with the specific baggage of her own that enables her to move upwards.

As Plotinus says and Daumal repeats, the only thing we have at our disposal to start climbing upwards, the only things that are amenable to our perception, are the *poikilia*: the variety, diversity and variation of the world. We have to start by being aware of the richness and diversity of the world. Anyone who takes a good look at the world of the *poikilia* does so with the aim of opening his wings and is already on the way to something higher, to oneness. All multiplicity participates, in an elusive way, in the One.
A painting by Virginie Bailly follows the same axiom. It seems to be absorbed entirely into the *poikilia*. It is an environment of multiplicity and variety. Her ‘landscapes’ display an infinite diversity of ingredients, mainly painterly, but others too. No possibility remains unused. In the large formats everything demands attention to the same degree. ‘Minor’ events take place everywhere. Smears, lines, bands, touches, imprints, scribbles, strips, splashes, even barely visible figurative elements (brick walls, staircases, the suggestion of a human figure etc.), plus cuttings stuck on with glue. Flaky, cloudy, sharply outlined, tangled, clear, taut, organic... The painting is all proliferation, the intoxication of things, a tribute to abundance.
By fragmenting the painterly ingredients as much as possible, multiplying them, making them independent and diversifying them, she makes the summit unreachable or, at least, makes the way there long. How does abundance itself generate the unity of the painting, or how do they mutually create each other, dialectically?

Something miraculous must happen *between* these ingredients. In the invisible *intermediate space* that links these elements together.
The unity is broken and restored. The painting is both at the same time. The *between* makes it into a pictorial field. This gives the painting space a charge of energy. The space of the painting depends on the tendency towards linkage in that which remains separate. Everything is in an odd way stretched towards unity. This energy flows through the painting. It is an emergence into unity in a state of *genesis*.

The *space* of the painting is the coherent field that is *induced* by all forces, just as physics refers to induction in connection with an electric charge. It is the invisible, but experienceable aspect of the painting.
The intensity of energy arises in the *between* of the forms. Beauty does not lie in the forms, though they are indeed (but also no more than) the necessary way towards it. It *happens*, *actively* in the *between*, the area between the forms. The location of beauty is in the uncertain *between* which again and again has to find an unpredictable way.

An inexplicable in-between space grows. Everything is oriented towards everything, by attraction, by a hidden force or energy that forces the parts together, to interaction or integration. These paintings are a tribute to the abundant and various and, in this only possible way, a tribute to that One, that one beauty that Plotinus calls ‘beauty above beauty’ and which depicts nothing.

Just as the mountaineer never gives up before he reaches the summit – however much hardship it costs him – the painter endeavours to achieve the painting. By constantly leaving out, adding, shifting, breaking up, rearranging and patiently *looking*, she decides at which moment the miracle of the painting has occurred. The summit fever has led to the unreachable point. The feeling that dominates at that moment must be comparable to that of the mountaineer who sees his efforts rewarded.

As a result of their viewpoint, some of Virginie Bailly’s paintings give us a concealed clue. They are dizzying, as if we were looking into great depths from a steep cliff. They suggest that they are *kataskapos*: the higher, ‘elevated’ view from the mountaintop of the world of multiplicity below. It is as if they had a cartographic view of the ‘landscape’. The painter has mapped Mount Analogue. The *terra incognita* has been explored.

Virginie Bailly’s paintings are distant views, *kataskapos*. That is what Plotinus would call the painter’s view. They are all-encompassing and therefore without perspective or, rather, encompassing all perspectives in a field of dynamic connection.

The adventurer who finally reaches the summit – Maurice Herzog on Annapurna in 1952, Edmund Hillary on Everest in 1953, plus the many unknown climbers before and after them who were or are driven by the same fever – does not immediately retrace his steps. He both realises and laments that he is by necessity obliged to make the descent again. He stays on the summit as long as possible to absorb the beauty and silence, at the place where he ‘is alone with Aloneness itself’ (Plotinus). It is hard to let go of this moment and to distance oneself from the tendency to attribute to it an eternal value – it does not necessarily have to be as extreme as George Mallory, who died at the top of Everest in 1924.

Those who climb to the tops of mountains do so because of the beauty that awaits them there. They are attracted by the beauty of the spectacle *Of Mountain Beauty*, as John Ruskin was already aware in 1856. The same applies to the art-lover. Those who yearn for beauty seek the heights. The representation of the idea of higher things is to be found in what is beautiful.

But are we, the viewers, good mountaineers? We are expected to be patient when, as viewers, we stand ‘at the foot of the mountain’, meaning when we start to probe the painting. Patience is needed to ‘open one’s wings’. A contemplative eye is in no hurry. A lot of time is required to absorb the painting. The brief look of those who visit contemporary art, being used to artworks that have to rely on their *unexpectedness*, is not sufficient. We have to realise that a painting that justifiably demands the epithet ‘beauty’ is highly improbable and extremely rare. We are always faced with a *miracle*.

René Daumal’s *Le Mont Analogue* fortunately remained unfinished. What might the summit have offered, except for perfect silence and beauty? Virginie Bailly’s paintings help us to imagine the missing conclusion of the novel. The joy of reaching the top is confronted with the longing and the sadness that is an inherent part of it: somewhere there must be a mountain that is even higher. The completed climb has not completely banished Mount Analogue from the mind; on the contrary, it has refuelled the summit fever.

Francis Smets