

# RON

## *Romanticism on the Net*

### **Water**

Nigel Leask  
University of Glasgow

#### **Abstract**

The essay opens by reflecting on the elemental qualities of water and its manifold cultural meanings in Western art and literature as well as in other exhibits in *RÊVE (Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition)*. Keats's fascination with water, famously engraved on his epitaph in Rome, is linked to his Scottish tour of 1818 and his undescribed visit to the Falls of Foyers. The Scottish Highland tour was an open-air museum, linking up a series of spectacular waterfalls. Symptomatic of a new fascination with waterfalls shown by eighteenth-century garden designers and landscape painters, these watery spectacles aroused sublime euphoria in Romantic writers and picturesque tourists. Landowners capitalised on the Romantic obsession with waterfalls in establishing viewing sites and tourist infrastructure. Despite their ornamental and non-utilitarian nature, cascades demonstrated the "power" of water, a major energy source in the early pre-carbon industrial age. The second part of the essay analyses the reactions of a selection of literary tourists, from Dr Johnson to Sarah Murray and Coleridge, to the celebrated Falls of Foyers, opened up to tourism by Roy's military road through the Highlands, and later by Telford's Caledonian Canal. An afterward explores the demise of Foyers as a tourist site and its transformation into an industrial landscape.

#### **Biographical Note**

Nigel Leask is Regius Chair in English Language and Literature at the University of Glasgow. His book *Stepping Westward: The Highland Tour 1720–1820* (Oxford UP, 2020) was shortlisted for the Saltire National Book Awards 2021. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and a Vice-President of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies.

1. "Here lies one whose name was writ in water," reads the epitaph on Keats's grave in the Protestant Cemetery, Rome. Keats's name was engraved on stone, not "writ in water," but poets live and die by metaphors. Despite later regrets on the part of the poet's friends Charles Armitage Brown and Joseph Severn, this apparently self-effacing (anti-

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)inscription seems to have been the poet's dying wish, although it poses a conundrum (Reynolds).<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Roe suggests that Keats's preparation for death included "consigning" his name to water, "the element from which his poetry so often took life" (396). Critics and biographers have speculated that Keats's auto-epitaph was subliminally inspired by Bernini's baroque *Fontana della Barcaccia*, gently plashing under the windows of the house in which he lay dying in Rome's Piazza di Spagna: I'll come back to the poetics of falling water below. Appropriately for a literary museum, *RÊVE (Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition)* sports a wonderful selection of inkwells: [Petrarch's](#) (Watson), [Shelley's](#) (Mercer) and [a veneered desk](#) (Hovasee) combining those of Alphonse de Lamartine, George Sand, Victor Hugo, and Alexandre Dumas. But despite his stated wish "to be among the English poets when he died," Keats's message was that his name was "writ in water," not ink; and unlike ink, water is transparent and colourless, no medium for inscription. On the other hand (when not frozen), it's endlessly fluid, defying shape or form, reflecting light and colour in its mobility. Rather like the poet's famous account of the "poetical Character": "[It] has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated" (Keats, *Letters* 1: 387).

2. Water covers seventy-one percent of the earth's surface, and like earth, air and fire, is a quintessential element: both a necessity of life, and bringer of sudden death (viz. Shelley's drowning, or floods and rising sea levels in our era of climate change). It's not surprising that the meanings of water are as old as humanity itself. The powers of watery circulation are central to its renaissance cultural imaginings, addressed by Simon Schama's chapter

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“Streams of Consciousness,” in his magisterial *Landscape and Memory*. Schama explores how early modern hydraulic projects to harness natural waters combined with aesthetic representations of oceans, rivers, cascades, and fountains: including Bernini’s masterpiece, the *Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi* in Rome’s Piazza Navona, embodying the sacred myths of the rivers Nile, Danube, Ganges, and Plata. (Did the *Quattro Fiumi* steal some watery thunder from Keats’s quieter *Fontana della Barcaccia* in a nearby Roman piazza?) (292). Bernini’s sculpted fountains were in effect “designed waterfalls.” A more dynamic agency of water is addressed in stanzas 69–72 of Byron’s *Childe Harold IV* (discussed by Diego Saglia in his *RÊVE* contribution on [The Falls at Terni](#)) in which the poet apostrophises one of Italy’s most spectacular waterfalls, the *Cascata delle Marmore* at Terni, a key site on the eighteenth-century Grand Tour:

The roar of waters!—from the headlong height

Velino cleaves the wave-worn precipice;

The fall of waters! rapid as the light

The flashing mass foams shaking the abyss:

The hell of waters! (Byron, “Childe Harold,” lines 613–17)

For Byron, Terni is a romantic *beau ideal*, “worth all the cascades and torrents of Switzerland put together” (Byron, *Works* 75). Yet ironically (as he acknowledges in the notes to Canto 4) “it is singular enough that two of the finest cascades in Europe should be artificial—this of the Velino, and the one at Tivoli” (Byron, *Works* n122). Like Sharma’s renaissance fountains and other hydraulic projects, the 541-foot-high *Cascata delle*

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*Marmore* at Terni was artificial, engineered by the Romans in 271 BCE to drain wetlands flooded by the river Velino. Art and nature combined to create the sublime spectacle of water here in “the warm south,” although even in the “natural” fastnesses of northern Europe, artificiality and utility could also be features of watery spectacles, potentially compromising their wild aesthetic effect. Even Mary Wollstonecraft, generally a passionate advocate for “improvement,” expressed scruples on the effects of “taming” water when viewing the falls at Tröllhattan in Sweden in 1796, with their adjacent canal works (in another celebrated waterfall description that Richard Holmes reads as a source for Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”).<sup>2</sup> “Amidst the awful roaring of the impetuous torrents,” she complained, “the noise of human instruments, and the bustle of workmen, even the blowing up of rocks, when grand masses trembled in the darkened air—only resembled the insignificant sport of children” (Wollstonecraft 160).

3. Watery exhibits in *RÊVE* include the oceanic [Hellespont](#) of Lord Byron (Seth); [Fingal’s Cave](#) (Leask) on the basaltic island of Staffa, buffeted by wild North Atlantic waves; the [Falls at Terni](#) (Saglia); and two hermitages overlooking waterfalls in Scotland and Wales, the Duke of Atholl’s [Ossian’s Hall](#) (Falla) at Dunkeld, and the radical [John Thelwall’s smaller scale waterfall and hermitage](#) (Thompson) in his garden at Llwywen on the Wye. (Judith Thompson notes in her *RÊVE* entry that Llwywen’s “cascade of 8 to 9 feet height” waterfall was also artificial, a “Terni in miniature,” part of a project by the fugitive radical to reproduce the “wild romantic dell” in the Quantocks that inspired his friend Coleridge’s poem “This Lime Tree Bower.”) Considering *RÊVE*’s dedication to the romantic museum, it’s helpful to consider the Scottish tour of the romantic period as a kind of outdoor

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museum of waterfalls, the value of which as “semiophores” (to use Krzysztof Pomian’s term) depended on their removal from the circuits of utility or exchange, linking them to the symbolic capital associated with the sublime (Pomian 30; Leask, *Curiosity* 23–32). Byron’s lines to Terni, and Wollstonecraft’s at Tröllhattan, demonstrate the extent to which falling water (“tame” or “wild”) was a major obsession of the romantic generation, and as we’ll see, Keats was himself a lover of waterfalls. Perhaps the gentle plashing of the *Fontana della Barcaccia*, as he lay dying in Rome, recalled more thunderous (and less artificial) northern torrents, suggesting other possible readings of his self-effacing epitaph. It is to one such Scottish waterfall visited by Keats, the Falls of Foyers near Loch Ness, that I will devote most of this essay, exploring in some detail the verbal response of a variety of eighteenth-century and romantic period tourists.

4. But first an acknowledgement, in balancing the Romantic appetite for watery sublimity, that the primary role of water is more mundane, as a staple of quotidian human life—and, of course, for nonhuman animals like fish and other aquatic creatures, as a living environment. Essential to the biological life cycle, water offers humans a crucial medium for energy, transport, food, industry, and hygiene, although in serving those needs, it suffers degradation into sewage, waste, and pollution. Socially privileged Europeans sought to purge the toxicity of overconsumption by “taking the waters” in spa resorts across the continent, from Moffat and Buxton to Bagni di Lucca. But water also played a crucial role in the economic cycle. Marx and Engels note that water loses its life-giving qualities as soon as it is “made to serve industry, as soon as it is polluted by dyes and other waste products and navigated by steamboats, or as soon as its water is diverted into canals

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where simple drainage can deprive the fish of its medium of existence” (Marx and Engels qtd. in Malm, *Progress* 163). City dwellers like Keats experienced water tamed and harnessed by embankments, weirs, canals, sewage conduits, water pumps, and domestic containers. It’s interesting that the poet reaches for a domestic metaphor when describing “the first waterfall I ever saw” at Rydal in the mountainous Lakes, in an early letter written to George and Georgiana Keats on the 1818 “northern tour”: “It surpassed my expectation . . . in its tone and intellect its light shade slaty Rock, Moss and Rock weed—but you will see finer ones I will not describe by comparison a tea spout” (John Keats to George and Georgiana Keats). Actually, the next fall, Lodore, wasn’t “finer” at all, in fact, it was disappointing, and Keats was “damped by slipping one leg into a squashy hole” (John Keats to Tom Keats). To give Lodore its due, it was here that in 1823 resident poet Robert Southey was inspired to write another famous waterfall poem of the romantic period, “The Cataract of Lodore,” with its thunderous parataxis: “Rising and leaping, / Sinking and creeping, / Swelling and sweeping, / Showering and springing, etc. etc.”<sup>3</sup>

5. Unlike the more affluent poets Byron and Shelley, Keats’s experience of touring was domestic, not continental, except for his final fatal journey to Rome. His ambitious walking tour with Charles Armitage Brown in 1818 took him north through “Wordsworth” and “Burns Country,” to Loch Lomond, Inveraray, and then via a “cheap journey” by boat to Mull, Iona, and Staffa: watery enough due to incessant rain, but also taking in rivers, firths, mountain streams, and ocean prospects (Leask, “*Werry Romantic*” 56–71). Strange to say, no more waterfalls are described in Keats’s tour letters, although he must indeed have seen “finer ones” than Rydal. Maybe Keats would have said of waterfalls, like he

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said of mountains, “the effect is wearing away” (John Keats to Benjamin Bailey). The poet was already ill with an “ulcerated throat,” which determined his premature return to London by ship from Cromarty. So it was left to Charles Brown to mention, in a letter of August 7 written from Inverness, that on the course of their peregrination up the Great Glen and Loch Ness, the two pedestrians “have seen the grandest water fall in Europe,— they call it the Falls of Foyers” (Brown qtd. in Walker 216). Keats’s playful final letter from Scotland, to Mrs. James Wylie, jokes about his conspicuous fur hat (and a case of mistaken identity), before describing how he and Brown had been “wet through day after day, eaten oat cake, & drank whiskey.” Despite having been “*werry* romantic indeed, among the Mountains & Lakes,” unfortunately Keats left his response to “the grandest water fall in Europe” unwritten (not even in water) (Keats to Mrs. James Wylie). A pity, although he had a better excuse for failing to describe Foyers than William Gilpin half a century earlier, who had found himself baffled by the “spirit, activity, clearness and variety” of the celebrated Falls of Braan at Dunkeld. As Jonathan Falla describes in his *RÊVE* entry on Dunkeld’s “Ossian’s Hall,” Gilpin was put off by the coloured glass in the Hermitage: “Such decorations are tricks below the dignity of scenes like this.” Overwhelmed by the watery spectacle, Gilpin found himself unable to sketch the falls, complaining [of his pencil]; “my poor tool was to totally disheartened, that I could not bring it even to make the attempt” (Gilpin qtd. in Leask, *Stepping* 176). But Gilpin’s picturesque impotence didn’t deter scores of other visitors at Dunkeld, or indeed Foyers, as we will see below.

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6. The Scottish tour in the romantic period can be said to have joined up the dots between a series of “wild” waterfalls; as I’ve suggested above, an outdoor museum of spectacular water, like the Gray Mare’s Tail at Moffat, the Falls of Clyde at Corra Lin, the Falls of Aray near Inveraray, the Falls of Bracklinn at Callander, the Falls of Acharn at Kenmore, the Falls of Braan at Dunkeld, the Falls of Moness at Aberfeldy, the Falls of Bruar at Blair Atholl, “Reeky Linn” near Alyth, and perhaps most spectacular of all, the Falls of Foyers, near Fort Augustus. In her *Companion and Useful Guide to Scotland* (1799), the indomitable Mrs. Sarah Murray-Aust of Kensington exclaimed “the Reeky Linn . . . is the finest fall I saw in Scotland, except the Fall of Foyers,” although she had to revise her opinion when she saw the Falls of Aray (“I never saw a more picturesque fall”; Murray 194, 358). On the military road from Fort Augustus to Fort William, Murray was simply overwhelmed: “I was on the whole way in constant exclamation; —here is another; oh, how fine! How beautiful! how dashing!” (Murray 253).
  
7. What was it about waterfalls that inspired this sort of sublime euphoria? Like the aesthetics of landscape in general, the taste for waterfalls originated in eighteenth-century gardening practice, heavily influenced by the experiences of sites like Terni and Tivoli on the European Tour, within the designed landscapes of private estates. Writing in *Old Ways New Roads*, John Bonehill describes the pioneering estate portraits of the eighteenth-century Irish painter George Barret, and his Highland counterpart Charles Steuart, commissioned by the Duke of Atholl to portray the dramatic waterfalls on his Perthshire estates, including the Braan Falls as viewed from the Dunkeld Hermitage. The exhibition of waterfall paintings by Barret and Steuart in London was part of their enterprise to



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“develop Perthshire and the wider region as a touring landscape, worth viewing and writing about, sketching, and painting” (Bonehill 133–37). Aristocratic magnates like Atholl, his neighbour the Earl of Breadalbane, and the Duke of Argyll, all established hermitages, follies and “moss huts” as designed set pieces for waterfall viewing. Patrick Vincent’s *RÊVE* entry on [Le Temple de la Nature, Chamonix](#), erected in 1795 for the benefit of travellers visiting the Mar de Glace, demonstrates that such pavilions (often featuring “Visitors’ Albums” in which they recorded their impressions) were a trans-European phenomenon, even if this one was originally erected by the English (or Scottish) expatriate Charles Blair. Breadalbane’s “Hermitage,” erected for viewing the Acharn Falls near Taymouth, was littered with books, animal skins, and other accoutrements of a resident hermit: some of whom, as Jonathan Falla writes, were paid to occupy viewing pavilions “on the frontier where civilization leans dangerously towards the savage world,” albeit staged and controlled by their aristocratic employers. Maybe because the Falls of Foyers was situated on the forfeited estates of the Jacobite Frasers of Foyers, cadets of the Frasers of Lovat, on territory wasted by Hanoverian troops after Culloden, no such pavilion was ever constructed. Nothing more than “two rude pillars” by the road indicated the tourist path (Stoddart 2: 75). As Robert Southey complained in 1819, “it is not creditable to the owner of this property, that there should be no means of getting at the bottom of the Fall, and no safe means of obtaining a full view from any point, except from the high road, where it is so foreshortened as to be seen to great disadvantage” (Southey 178). In the next section, we will see how the quest for the best viewing point challenged romantic visitors like Sarah Murray and John Stoddart.

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8. Written in the 1750s and circulated in manuscript, Sir John Dalrymple's "Essay on Landscape Gardening" made much of waterfalls, recommending to Highland landowners that "particular care should be taken to mark and throw open all the natural cascades; these have not a relation to human life, yet by their motion and sound, rouse and animate the attention from the stupor which the view of great and dreary objects creates." Dalrymple's point supports historical geographer Edward Cole's claim that "the location of many waterfalls in ravines . . . contributed to the effect of a natural amphitheatre . . . allow[ing] waterfalls to serve as points of aesthetic interest in what were judged otherwise uninteresting tracts" (56). Dalrymple proceeded to theorise the psychological effects of cascades, offering us key insights into one of the eighteenth century's more enigmatic obsessions. When the water falls in "one regular sheet," he wrote, it creates "an enlivening sentiment": "when they are brought over in [this way], the continued sameness of the noise, and motion, and look, composes the mind also to an even continued tenor of thought. We love to read or sleep by the side of a purling brook, or a smooth cascade; but we are roused as at the sound of a trumpet, by the sight of a rough cataract" (Dalrymple qtd. in Leask, *Stepping* 150, 152). Dalrymple's trumpet metaphor gestures towards the importance of *sound* in constituting the sublime effects of waterfalls, strongly evident in Byron's lines on Terni mentioned above, "the roar of waters . . . they howl and hiss, / and boil" (Byron, "Childe Harold," stanza 69)
  
9. Such watery roaring stimulated the jaded nerves of Britain's overindulgent upper classes, as famously theorised by Dalrymple's younger contemporary Edmund Burke. Theorists of gardening like Dalrymple, or of the sublime and picturesque like Burke and Gilpin, as

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well as painters, poets, and travel writers, all conspired with the entrepreneurial schemes of wealthy landowners (and adventurous tourists) to create the aesthetic taste for wild waterfalls at home and abroad. In 1824, in a book on the Highlands and Islands “addressed to Sir Walter Scott,” the geologist John Macculloch boasted that, although he had not seen “every cascade in Scotland,” he had “seen a far great number than any other two-legged animal ever saw, and many more than were ever seen or possibly ever will be, by one person” (1: 60).<sup>4</sup> On this basis, he confirmed Charles Brown’s (and other romantic tourists’) high rating of Foyers, writing that “nothing can well exceed in beauty the combination of grandeur and profuse ornament which is here presented” (1: 375). At the same time, Macculloch both acknowledged and questioned the tendency to associate painterly and landscape connoisseurship: “[I]t cannot be disputed that Foyers is the first in order of all our cascades: but it is vain to attempt to compare it in respect of beauty with that of Tummel or those of Clyde, as it would be to compare a landscape of Cuyp with one of Rubens, or the bay of Naples with Glenco” (1: 376).

10. Dalrymple acknowledged that the aesthetic attraction of natural waterfalls and their immediate environs enhanced unproductive land, which couldn’t strictly speaking be “improved,” although this would change in the era of hydroelectricity. Peter Womack proposed in 1988 that “the channelled violence of the cataract exhibits an essence of natural energy which, wholly undebased by usefulness, nevertheless is strictly contained and doesn’t obstruct the progress of improvement” (82). Yet falling water had powered mills for thousands of years, and in the 1770s and 1780s was being harnessed to provide energy for industrial linen and cotton mills, until replaced by steam engines: water from

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the Falls of Clyde, for example, powered one of the world’s biggest cotton mills, downstream at David Dale’s New Lanark, both sites routinely described by Romantic tourists. Andreas Malm has demonstrated that the large-scale hydraulic projects of the 1820s and 1830s actually ensured English and Scottish millowners renewable energy at a lower price than that available from coal-burning steam engines. The nineteenth-century triumph of steam engines over water-driven mills “was due to the industrialists’ refusal to submit to the collective discipline that a common management of hydraulic resources would have imposed: how to be sure that the energy needed would be available at the right moment, how to guarantee paying only for one’s own motive power, and how to expand a factory easily” (Malm, *Fossil Capital*; Bonneuil and Fressoz 108–09). One effect of the triumph of steam-powered factories, dependent on transportable fossil fuel rather than the proximity of waterfalls, was the urbanisation of industry, establishing those “dark Satanic mills” that enabled capitalists to exploit the labour of an urban proletariat, cutting the costs incurred by maintaining the paternalistic order of rurally located mill towns like New Lanark. In this sense, the aesthetic “power” of waterfalls is easily troped as industrial energy, perhaps the “political unconscious” of romantic period “landscape aesthetics” (Leask, *Stepping* 111).

#### **The Falls of Foyers**

11. The Falls of Foyers (Gaelic *Eas na Smùide*; “The Smoking Falls”) comprises two waterfalls, the “Upper” and “Lower,” situated above the southeast Bank of Loch Ness, about twenty miles from Inverness and ten from Fort Augustus. Their early popularity was

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based on the fact that easy access was afforded by the construction of General Wade's military road along the south bank of Loch Ness, connecting the Hanoverian garrisons at Inverness and Fort William. Foyers outflows into Loch Ness, the largest freshwater lake by volume in the British Isles, which after 1803 was incorporated into the Caledonian Canal by Thomas Telford in a massive engineering feat that included twenty locks between Inverness and Fort William, linking the North Sea with the Irish Sea, only completed in 1822. This juxtaposition allows for comparison between the aesthetics of waterfalls, the picturesque attractions of freshwater lochs, and the utilitarian harnessing of water in canal construction.<sup>5</sup> But the fact that the Falls of Foyers were situated in a war zone until the final suppression of Jacobitism in the 1750s added to their frisson. Susan Oliver argues that a key episode in Scott's *Waverley* (1814), set immediately prior to the '45 Uprising, is inspired by Tomkins's plate of the "Upper Falls of Fyers," published in Thomas Pennant's *Tour in Scotland 1769*. The eponymous English hero has his breath taken away as the Jacobite heroine Flora Mac-Ivor waves down at him from a pine-tree bridge, towering 150 feet above the roaring cascade (Oliver 15; Pennant 199). In *Three Perils of Women* (1823), James Hogg recounted how a party of "English ladies and gentlemen," visiting Foyers shortly after Culloden, were horrified to see "the body of a red-coated dragoon hover up slowly in the boil of the whirlpool . . . and again disappear" (404). Anachronistic as this was (there were no English tourists at Foyers in 1746, although plenty of soldiers), the association of the falls with recent Jacobite guerrilla tactics added an extra dimension to their sublime affect, absent from waterfalls in Wales or Northern England.

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12. One of the first travel writers to describe Foyers was Edmund Burt, who visited them around 1728 while collecting rents from forfeited Jacobite estates on behalf of the government (although his book wasn't published until 1754). In *Letters from the North of Scotland*, he noted that

at a Place call'd *Foyers*, there is a steep Hill close to it, of about a Quarter of a Mile to the Top, from whence a River pours into the Lake, by three successive wild Cataracts, over romantick Rocks; whereon, at each Fall, it dashes with such Violence, that in windy Weather the Side of the Hill is hid from Sight for a good Way together by the Sprey that looks like a thick Body of Smoke. This Fall has been compared with the Cataracts of the *Tyber*, by those who have seen them both. (185)

13. Burt's letter reminds us how early the taste for "romantick" landscape was being registered by travel writers, while underlining that sites on the domestic tour were frequently compared to those of the well-established Italian "Grand Tour," like the Falls of Terni, or in this case, the Falls of Tiber near Rome.

14. One traveller who had toured extensively in Italy, as well as in Egypt and the Ottoman lands, was the antiquarian Richard Pococke, author of *A Description of the East* (1743–45). In the narrative of his ambitious six-month Scottish tour in 1760, Pococke (underemployed as an Irish Anglican bishop) provided a rather dry, quantitative description of Foyers. He admired the fact that its waters fell "in one sheet about ten or twelve feet wide, and as I conjectured a fall of nearly 100 feet" (Pococke 101). The narrow

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aperture from which they flowed made the falls particularly spectacular after heavy rain, but travelling in a dry season, Poccoke had to rely on hearsay. Harking back to Burt, in the narrative of his 1769 tour, the Welsh traveller Thomas Pennant eschewed Poccoke's quantitative description, employing emotionally charged hyperbole and giving agency to the water by the use of active verbs, as well as emphasising the effect of the spray which gave Foyers its Gaelic name: he described "a vast cataract, in a darksome glen of a stupendous depth; the water darts beneath the top thro' a narrow gap between two rocks, then precipitates about forty feet lower into the bottom of the chasm, and the foam, like a great cloud of smoke, rises and fills the air" (Pennant 199). As Edward Cole notes, "commonly in the period . . . water was described as having some kind of active agency, sometimes even with the implicit inference of an emotional state," like the "furious cascade" which was one of Foyer's speculative etymologies (also clear in Byron's lines on Terni from *Childe Harold IV* quoted above; Cole 57; Stott 81).

15. Visiting in a dry month, Poccoke's dependence on hearsay to evoke the sublimity of the Falls in full flow was elaborated by Dr Johnson in 1773, who, despite his general lack of enthusiasm for Highland landscapes, made an exception for Foyers, whose setting he described as having "all the gloom and grandeur of Siberian solitudes." However, he added:

[W]e visited the place at an unseasonable time, and found it divested of its dignity and terror. Nature never gives everything at once. A long continuance of dry weather, which made the rest of the way easy and delightful, deprived us of the pleasure expected from

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the falls of Fiers. . . . [W]e were left to exercise our thoughts, by endeavouring to conceive the effect of a thousand streams poured from the mountains into one channel, struggling for expansion in a narrow passage, exasperated by rocks rising in their way, and at last discharging all their violence of waters by a sudden fall through the horrid chasm. (Johnson 83–84)

16. As so often on Johnson's Highland tour, imagination was called upon to alleviate disappointment with the physical spectacle before him.
  
17. A very different literary traveller from Pococke and Johnson, the Ayrshire poet Robert Burns, made a twenty-two-day, six-hundred-mile tour of the Highlands and Lowlands in August-September 1787, during which he visited "cascades, prospects, ruins and Druidical temples" (Burns, *Letters* 1: 166). Burns was basking in the celebrity of his "Kilmarnock" [\*Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect\*](#) published the preceding year, as featured in Gerry Carruthers's *RÊVE* entry. Yet the poems inspired by his Highland Tour largely eschewed the Scots "dialect" of Kilmarnock for fashionable picturesque diction: Burns set to composing a number of poems and songs celebrating the Falls of Moness, the Acharn Falls near Taymouth, the Falls of Bruar, and the Falls of Foyers. "Written with a Pencil, standing by the Falls of Fyers, near Loch-Ness," is clearly an exercise in the kind of enamelled English verse being recommended to him in 1787 by the Edinburgh literati. The poem makes compulsory reference to an earlier best-selling Scots poet (lines 594–98 of James Thomson's *Summer*), and includes a fashionable personification of "viewless



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Echo,” playing upon the importance of the waterfall’s sonic qualities to balance the visual affect:

Among the heathy hills and ragged woods  
The roaring Fyers pours his mossy floods;  
Till full he dashes on the rocky mounds,  
Where, thro’ a shapeless breach, his stream resounds.  
As high in air the bursting torrents flow,  
As deep recoiling surges foam below,  
Prone down the rock the whitening sheet descends,  
And viewless Echo’s ear, astonish’d, rends.  
Dim-seen, through rising mists and ceaseless showers,  
The hoary cavern, wide-surrounding, lowers.  
Still thro’ the gap the struggling river toils,  
And still below, the horrid caldron boils ————— (Burns, *Poems* 285)

Burns’s language resurfaces in John Stoddart’s prose description of Foyers as the “great wonder of the country,” published a few years later in his *Remarks on Local Scenery and Manners in Scotland* (1801), despite his criticism of the Ayrshire poet for having “wholly erred with respect to poetical effect . . . mere picture is not the province of the poet” (2: 75–78). I’ve rendered verbal borrowings from Burns’s poem in bold in the following excerpt, which is virtually a prose poem in itself:

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The bold rocks *louring* on each other, from the opposite sides, form a deep jagged chasm of several hundred feet. . . . Through the “*shapeless breach*” bursts a *torrent*, which, confined by the narrow channel above, shoots in one unbroken column, *white as snow*, into a deep *cauldron*, formed by the black rocks below. By the vast *height*, and the large body of the water, a quantity of spray is created, which forms a perpetual shower, glittering like dew on the verdure around, casting a transparent *mist* over the gloomy *caverned* rocks, and *rising* like the smoke of a furnace, into the air. . . . No spot, however, which I have seen, is at all comparable to this, in the strong and sudden impression which it produces. . . . There is something in the darkness and imprisonment of wild overhanging crags, inexpressibly awful; . . . their grandeur is heightened . . . by the *ceaseless* toil of the *struggling* river, by the thundering sound of a thousand *echoes*, and . . . by the mighty summit of Meal Fourvouny, rising beyond the lake. (Stoddart 2: 75–78)

18. Stoddart visited the falls with two local gentlemen, Mr. Fraser of Farraline, and the landowner Mr. Fraser of Foyers, so was well informed about the locality, but he also complains about the difficulty of achieving a satisfactory viewing position, given the absence of a tourist pavilion remarked upon above. He recommended a station “opposite to the road [which] affords far the most complete prospect,” from which his travelling companion the painter John Claud Nattes took the sketch for the fine engraving published in Stoddart’s book (fig. 1; Stoddart 2: 72–73, 77–79).



Fig.1. “Falls of Foyers,” after a painting by John Claude Nattes, in John Stoddart, *Remarks on Local Scenery and Manners* (London, 1801), vol. 2, facing page 76. By permission of Glasgow University Library, Special Collections.

19. Sarah Murray, whose enthusiasm for waterfalls I’ve already mentioned, visited Foyers in 1799 just prior to Stoddart and was, of course, “in ecstasy with all around me,” as she laid claim to the status of a heroic female connoisseur. Defying gender decorum, Murray represented the act of viewing falling water as a strenuous physical activity, especially considering the lack of a viewing station: courting danger in overcoming this obstacle became as much part of the sublime experience as the view itself once obtained:

To get to this station [at “green bank” in front of the Falls] was a bold adventure (for a woman) when the ground is wet, being obliged to creep from one slippery bank to

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another, and to step from rock to rock, supported only by stumps and branches of birch, and in continual danger of tumbling headlong over pieces of rock, and into bogs. . . . On my return . . . I met four travellers, males, not very active in body. . . . They stared at me, as much as to say,—how came you there! . . . [M]y shoes and stockings were by that time complete brown boots, so covered were they by dirt and slime. (Murray 243–44)

Beyond outdoing complacent male visitors, Murray’s efforts were repaid by the sublimity of the waterfall, which she experienced as an act of bodily endurance, with particular attention to the deafening power of sound:

The noise, as it was a flood, was beyond belief; it was impossible to hear any other sound; and the spray, in a great degree deprived me of sight and breath; and obliged me to lay myself down on my stomach . . . and every now and then, by gulping, and shutting my eyes for relief, I was by intervals enabled to look and breathe; to admire, and I might say, almost adore. . . . I was in a few minutes pretty well drenched. The want of breath and sight obliged me to quit this grand work of nature much sooner than I wished. (Murray 244–45)

20. In complete contrast is my final example, Coleridge’s account of the falls in his Highland notebook for September 6–7, 1803, detailing his “wild journey” through the Highlands after “breaking away” from the Wordsworths at Arrochar on August 29. Given that he claimed to have “walked 283 miles in 8 Days,” it is extraordinary that he had the time or

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energy to devote himself to such an original verbal description of Foyers (including line sketches), in which he experimented with a new language for representing the aesthetic effect of waterfalls, and landscape description in general. Elaborating on previous descriptions of the *Eas na Smùide* (as we'll see, he mentions his friend Stoddart by name), Coleridge looked down from the military road: "a prodigious Depth! and see a fine narrow fall at the bottom, a volume of smoke the Foam seems, or like the softest plumage of the Eagle or Ostrich." It's an utterly original metaphor for the spray, and typical of the intensely figurative style of his journals (Coleridge 168). Planning to revisit the falls in the company of a guide the following day, he spent a "miserable scream night" at the local hostelry, the "General's Hut." Initially disappointed on his return visit the next morning, the fall "at length grew into sublimity & its own dimensions / on my first calculation I made it not exceed 110 feet, and the whole height of the chasm 220—but it grew upon me, & my feelings at least coincided at length with Stoddart's account / the plumage of the fall, the puffs of Smoke in every direction from the bed of plummy foam at the bottom, the restless network of Waves on its Pool" (Coleridge 169). Here Coleridge inserted a diagrammatic sketch to visualise the description.

21. Oddly anticipating Keats's teapot-spout metaphor at Rydal, Coleridge reached for another crockery trope for Foyers (he's also the first traveller there to mention midges, a major obstacle to the summer enjoyment of Highland waterfalls):

The vase-like Shape of the fracture out of which it comes, as if one side of a huge vase had been chipped out, & this stream flowed out at the rim / you see up into the vase,

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and its rim is wreathed with delicate Birches / the water atoms driving away the myriads of midges, now driven away by a puff of wind / —the fall & pool in a noble inverted Chamber of 300 feet high, with a long winding antechamber / only a very few Trees in the Chamber itself, one Oak Tree, where \* is on the Vase [referring to the diagram]. (168–69)

Coleridge uses the metaphor of the vase to engage the reader's imagination more precisely than literal description of the scene could do, although it is notable that he hardly mentions his affective response to the sublime waterfall, emphasised by both Stoddart and Murray. The trees surrounding the waterfall are given as much attention as the fall itself, underlining the importance of immediate environment for the aesthetic effect of falling water. Descending through "sweet delicate birches" to Loch Ness, Coleridge gives vent to his frustration at the difficulty of linguistic description, his desire to push picturesque convention beyond the limits prescribed by Gilpin and his followers: "O Christ, it maddens me that I am not a painter or that Painters are not I!" (170). By cultivating precise (but often figurative) linguistic attention to the forms of landscape, Coleridge seems to have been seeking a form of mental self-discipline to curb the terrors of his dream life, so frighteningly evoked in his contemporary poem "The Pains of Sleep," but with the effect of taking romantic nature writing in a new direction (Ball; Baker).

### **Afterword: Powers of Light and Darkness**

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22. Given the rich harvest yielded by descriptions of the Falls of Foyers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century showcased in the passages I've discussed, it's disappointing that Keats wasn't inspired to add to the bounty. Telford's Caledonian Canal rendered the site even more accessible to visitors after its completion in 1822, although sadly the canal, which cost a staggering £912,000 (half of which was contributed by the government), proved to be "a commercial white elephant" (Jonsson 257–60).<sup>6</sup> Increasingly the nineteenth-century tourist route followed the northern shore of Loch Ness via Castle Urquhart, along the new road which is now the A82, bypassing the old military road on the southern shore, and with it the Falls of Foyers. *Black's Picturesque Tourist for Scotland* (1860) doesn't even mention Foyers, recommending the Glen Urquhart route instead. Moreover (partly assisted by Telford's canalisation) the environs of the Falls soon became an industrial landscape, causing a great reduction of its water flow: interestingly, the *Cascata delle Marmore* at Terni suffered the same fate. In 1896, the North British Aluminium Company built a smelting plant on the banks of Loch Ness powered by electricity generated from the river Foyers, one of the earliest of its kind in Europe, although strongly opposed by conservationists like Canon Rawnsley, John Ruskin, and Welbore St. Clair Baddeley. Opponents of the scheme were appalled when "a spokesman for the company stated . . . that the falls would not be injured, only there would be no water in them" (Stott 81). A waterfall without water?
23. The aluminium plant was closed in 1967 and is nowadays an "industrial monument": in 1975, the site became part of the Foyers Pumped Storage Power Station. The three-hundred-megawatt pumped-storage hydroelectricity system uses Loch Mhòr (feeding the

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river Foyers) as its upper reservoir. The head at Foyers is 108 metres, although the principal fall is only thirty metres in height. It nevertheless drains a basin of more than 250 square kilometres, and before the hydroelectric plant was set up, had a mean discharge of about 12.5 cubic metres (Stott 80–81). If the flow of the falls is greatly reduced, its water now produces clean renewable energy, a sustainable contribution to combatting the current global climate crisis. Water is thankfully not scarce in Scotland, as in the increasingly drought-afflicted global south, the crisis of which serves as a reminder of the continuing importance of water in all its forms to human life, and to the future of our planet afflicted by “the warming condition” (Malm, *Progress* 11).

24. Visitors to the Falls of Foyers today will encounter lines from Robert Burns’s poem engraved on slates on the steep path that winds down the forested slope from the road at Upper Foyers, a graceful memory of its days of romantic fame. The information board warns visitors that “the paths are steep in places and can be slippery and rough underfoot. Please wear appropriate footwear.” It is advice that Sarah Murray would have done well to have heeded. But there again, a whiff of danger still hovers around the falls, like that registered by Burt, Stoddart, James Hogg, and the English traveller John Bowman, who likened the cauldron of Foyers to “the pit of Acheron” (Bowman 152–53). Thankfully, the powers of (hydroelectric) light have replaced the powers of darkness, as manifest in 1900, when the celebrated Satanist Aleister Crowley purchased nearby Boleskine House near the banks of Loch Ness below the Falls, and where he and his cult members resided until 1918. In 1970, Boleskin was purchased by Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page, an avid Crowley enthusiast, who seems to have found here his own stairway to heaven. Reputedly



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one of the most haunted houses in Scotland, Boleskine was destroyed by two fires in 2015 and 2019, although planning permission is now being sought by a charitable foundation to preserve it as a centre of heritage research. In the spirit of *RÊVE*, the writers I've discussed address the falls as if they were a Romantic masterpiece viewed in an open-air gallery or museum, but I've also indicated the surplus meanings, whether cultural, ecological, or political, that inflect their aesthetic appreciation of falling water. Both the site's romantic fame, and its more utilitarian "afterlife," suggest that (like Keats's epitaph), the variegated history of Foyers remains literally "writ in water," as much a monument to romantic transience or ephemerality, as to the dynamic powers of nature.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> One *RÊVE* contributor suggested during a Zoom seminar that the point was that “Keats’s name *was* writ in water, but that this gravestone seeks to redress this impermanence—i.e., Keats did not *wish* for his name to be written in water (but felt destined for it to be so).”

<sup>2</sup> “One half [of the water] appearing to issue from a dark cavern, that fancy might easily imagine a vast fountain, throwing up its waters from the very centre of the earth” (Wollstonecraft 159).

<sup>3</sup> Although Thomas Garnett recorded another version of this poem addressed to the Falls of Clyde at New Lanark on his 1798 Scottish Tour (Garnett 2: 227).

<sup>4</sup> Without acknowledging Dalrymple, Macculloch here elaborates his theory of the aesthetic power of waterfalls arising from their giving life and animation to the surrounding landscape.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Southey, travelling with his friend Thomas Telford, the chief engineer, described the Caledonian Canal as “the greatest work of its kind that has ever been undertaken in ancient or modern times . . . directed everywhere by perfect skill, and with no want of means” (185).

<sup>6</sup> The cessation of the Napoleonic Wars, the contraction of the Highland economy, and the revolution in steam navigation rendered the splendid new canal obsolete as soon as it opened: “In 1839, merely 2.5 percent of the shipping around northern Scotland passed through the canal” (Jonsson 260).