

Romanticism and Rocks Workshop
Neuchâtel, 23 October 2026

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS AND BIOS

Panel 1: Rocks and Romantic Literature

- *Aditi Jain (Université de Neuchâtel):* ‘weep to have what he may lose.’ A close look at rocks and Books, in *The Prelude*

It is curious that an autobiography that is a collection of books has a book named *Books*, in which also appears a dream sequence about books. What this paper draws attention to, however, is the geographical setting and imagery surrounding this dream, while he remained ‘seated in a rocky cave/ By the sea-side.’ While rocks have long held the function of grief and memory in Wordsworth scholarship, this paper takes a close look at Book V of *The Prelude*, shedding light on Wordsworth’s attempts to use rocks as placeholders for what he calls those ‘raptures’ that are now ‘for ever flown’ and only appear in ‘immortal verse,’ or *books*, as words that ‘move us with conscious pleasure.’ It points out the striking balance that Book V creates between the imagery of rocks and books (or ‘Euclid’s Elements’), particularly through the ‘Arab dream’ passage, suggesting the poet’s urge to once again find space in words for what Man can only ‘weep to have.’

Bio: Aditi joined the University of Neuchâtel in September 2026 as a Doctoral Assistant working under the supervision of Professor Patrick Vincent. She has previously studied at the Universities of Delhi and St Andrews, and works on British Romanticism, particularly the poetry of William Wordsworth. She is currently co-editing *Poems, In Two Volumes (1807)* for the Oxford World's Classics series.

- *Jerome Chemin (Université de Dijon):* ‘This grand laboratory of Nature’: Where Davy's chemistry met the eternal rocks

From the marble quarries of Carrara to the volcanic slopes of Vesuvius and Auvergne, and across the Alps and Pyrenees, Humphry Davy found in rocky landscapes a sense of permanence and a record of profound geological change. Far from treating mineralogy as a static collection of cabinet specimens, Davy argued that museum classifications were merely artificial “methods of memory”, insisting instead that geology should be studied in the field, among the grand arrangements of nature.

Drawing on Davy’s notebooks, punctuated by references to his scientific and philosophical writings, this paper explores his engagement with mineral landscapes and the forms of knowledge they make possible. For Davy, rocks are the “bones” of Nature: apparently stable, yet subject to perpetual chemical transmutation, they preserve traces of the processes to which they have been subjected. Rocks thus became objects of both scientific investigation and aesthetic wonder, inviting observers to read the material history of the earth through its landscapes.

Ultimately, this paper argues that Davy’s chemical approach to geology helped bridge physical experiment and Romantic aesthetics. The flow of time, preserved within the mineral realm, remains almost invisible to untrained eye; yet its imperceptibility reinforces the sublime dimension of these eternal rocks. His geological writings present the earth not as a static object of classification, but as a dynamic formation undergoing constant metamorphosis.

Bio: Jérôme Chemin is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Burgundy – Europe. He holds a PhD on Coleridge’s poetic works (FR: *La poésie de Coleridge : entre conversation poétique et dialogue*

philosophique/EN: The Poetry of Coleridge : Between poetical conversation and philosophical dialogue). He is a member of the French Society for Romantic Studies and sits on the board of the French Society for Higher Education in English (SAES). His current research focuses on Humphry Davy's notebooks, which he approaches as a dynamic medium that blends experimental methods, meteorological observations, philosophical insights, personal reflections and lines of poetry.

- *Tiberio Inguscio (University of Zurich): Romantic Headlands: Erosion and the Sublime in the Anti-Alps*

Since the very earliest developments in the discourse on the sublime, the inland mountain landscape has served as the benchmark against which the limits of the human subject are defined; the object to be grappled with and ultimately overcome in pursuit of transcendence. However, what happens when the solidity of the rock sustaining the sublime experience is undermined? The coastal headland, marked by the erosion of softer rock layers by violent hydraulic action, is a significant, if underexamined, setting in Romantic literature, one that offers a unique lens through which to examine this scenario. Thus, I argue that headlands represent the ideal stage for Romantic writers seeking to explore the sublime's potential for experiences that deconstruct subjectivity rather than reinforcing it. To do this, I will analyse three different modes of encountering erosion and the headland to show how it shapes approaches to the sublime. First, as a backdrop for my later analysis, I will discuss the imagined headland described by Wordsworth at Snowdon, where the poet, through mental faculties and distance, is able to present an artificial encounter between rock and sea that is free from erosion, and thus non-threatening to the integrity of the egotistical sublime as described by Thomas Weiskel. Secondly, I will focus on texts set on actual headlands and on how the physical reality of this environment and the threat of erosion shape the sublime moment. In Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head* (1806) and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), the headland becomes the unequivocally material setting in which the concepts of the individual and the nation are renegotiated. Finally, by way of a brief conclusion, I will analyse what happens when erosion has fully shaped a landscape and, as in Mary Tighe's *Written at Scarborough* (1799), the rock no longer offers any protection against the sublime forces of the sea.

Bio: Tiberio Inguscio is a PhD candidate in English literature at the University of Zurich, where he has been based since 2019. He completed a BA in English with a minor in Japanese Studies in 2022, followed by an MA in English with a minor in Social Anthropology in 2025, which included an exchange semester at the University of Sheffield in spring 2024. His MA thesis, "Transcending Humanism: Theorising the Posthumanist Sublime," was supervised by Prof. Isabel Karremann, who invited him to develop the project into a doctoral dissertation. He began his PhD in September 2025, and his dissertation, "Relational Romanticism: Sublime Encounters in a More-Than-Human World," continues under the supervision of Prof. Karremann and Prof. Barbara Straumann, engaging with the history of the sublime, Romantic studies, and ecocriticism.

Keynote Lecture

Sophie Musitelli (Université Paris Cité): Romantic Lithopoetry.

Bio: Sophie Laniel-Musitelli is a professor at the Université Paris Cité and currently chairs the French Society for the Study of British Romanticism (SERA). Her research focuses on the interactions among literature, the sciences and philosophy in the Romantic era. She has written books, articles and chapters on the works of Erasmus Darwin, Anna Letitia Barbauld, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Percy B. Shelley, John Clare and Thomas de Quincey. She has recently published a monograph entitled *The Sciences of the Senses in Romantic Literature: Sight, Touch and Vision* (Cambridge University Press, 2026) and is currently working on the WISE research program (Women Poets Investing the Sciences since the Romantic Era).

Panel 2: Rocks and post-Romantic literature:

- *Judith Trouilleux-Leca* (Université Clermont-Auvergne): Entering the rock: George Sand's perception of the inside of minerals

In the nineteenth century, rocks were a much-loved subject of observation and study, reflecting the rise of geology among both professional and amateur scientists at that time. This interest is reflected in many works of art, ranging from a fondness for the mountain aesthetics to the depiction of geologists. French writer George Sand shares this interest in the natural sciences, particularly geology and mineralogy. Her work is filled with accurate descriptions of the rocks she observed in the landscapes she visited. Her novel *Jean de la Roche* (1859) depicts a family of geologists, including a learned female character. But George Sand also chose to depict the inside of the rock. In *Jean de la Roche*, the hero's castle appears to be carved into the rock of the mountain. In *Consuelo* (1844), the eponymous character enters underground passages hewn out of the rock. In *Laura* (1864), the very subtitle of the novel refers to a journey into the heart of a crystal. We would like to explore George Sand's interest in the inside of rocks, both from the perspective of representation and in terms of the connection between the rock and the characters, and the effect the rock has on them. Whereas the study of nature and the environment often focuses on living things, in Sand's work minerals can appear as objects, places, or even almost living elements. This presentation aims to examine how George Sand inscribes herself within a Romantic tradition and a vision of nature that is notably influenced by German Romanticism.

Bio: Judith Trouilleux-Leca holds a master's degree in German literature and is working on a doctoral thesis in comparative literature at the Clermont Auvergne University (France). This dissertation, titled "Aux sources du sentiment écologique: la moyenne montagne dans la littérature allemande et française entre 1795 et 1860" ("At the roots of the ecological feeling: the mid-range mountain in French and German literature between 1795 and 1860"), is being conducted at the CELIS research laboratory under the supervision of Dr. Pascale Auraix-Jonchière and Dr. Fanny Platelle.

- *Meg Duell* (Université de Lausanne): 'The eternal rocks beneath': Metaphysical Materiality in *Wuthering Heights*

This essay maps how elemental and meteorological metaphysics function in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), arguing that the novel's complex recursive structure is facilitated through an alchemical process by which the collision of air and materiality—the transcendent elements embodied by Catherine and Heathcliff—activates psychic, spatial, mortal and temporal 'wandering'. These points of elemental friction, defined here as 'portals of enchantment', connect their subjects with past and future iterations of themselves and others. Throughout the novel, enchanted portals appear in rocks, earthen materials, and geological structures that work together to construct its metaphysical thread. This paper explores a number of these critical stones, including the engraved rock demarcating the boundary between Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights, a place where Nelly encounters an apparition of a child Hindley; Catherine Earnshaw's hallucinatory evocation of elf-arrows, small stones believed to be shot at cattle by fairies; and Catherine and Heathcliff's iconic haunt, Penistone Crag, a setting likely inspired by Ponden Kirk, a folklore-rich, massive rock column a few miles from the Brontë Parsonage—references to which appear in the author's poetry. Along with these touchstones, the essay will also consider the novel's avian imagery, particularly feathers and birds, which are similarly infused with folkloric subtext. By meticulously layering and mediating her otherworldly phenomena through ecology and her nesting-doll narrators, Brontë creates a novel that both resists definitive interpretation and situates transcendence in its brutal landscape.

Bio: Meg Duell is a lecturer and PhD candidate at the Université de Lausanne, where she is researching elemental enchantment in early modern belief, Shakespeare's plays, and their film adaptations. Her most recent seminar explored the 'rough magic' of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and its literary and cinematic adaptations. Her article, 'No Atom Rendered Void: The Aerial and Alchemical Enchantment of *Wuthering Heights*', was published in *Brontë Studies* (51:2, 100-117) and awarded their 2025 Early Career Essay Prize. She holds an MA in English Language and Literature from the Université de Genève and a BA in English from Indiana University, Bloomington.

Panel 3: Rocks and Romantic / post-Romantic visual culture:

- *Violaine Gourbet (UPHF Valenciennes):* 'Cut through the rocks': Alpine rocks and human intervention in William Brockedon's Illustrations of the Passes of the Alps (1828-1829)

The Romantic conception of the Alpine sublime focused on the motifs of rocks that are massive and unstable. From the eighteenth century onwards, travel narratives have conveyed the « delightful horror » experienced by travellers confronted with these accumulations of raw matter. Yet they also testified to another perception of the Alpine landscape, which tended to lose some of its wildness.

Such is the case in *Illustrations of the Passes of the Alps, by which Italy communicates with France, Germany and Switzerland* (1828–1829), written and illustrated by British artist William Brockedon. Focusing on passes, Brockedon naturally presented the mountains as a connected space in which rocks, while contributing to the expected aesthetics of the sublime, also appeared as a malleable form shaped by human intervention. This paper seeks to highlight the tension between the rocky chaos of the mountains and its ordering by human agency. It argues that the *Illustrations of the Passes*, while representing the metamorphosis of rocky matter into useful material, narrated the progressive conquest of Alpine territory.

The discussion will focus on two motifs: The first is that of the road. Its geometric lines of perspective, which contrast with the surrounding rocky disorder, enter into dialogue with other lines: that of the torrents, whose flows likewise reshape and subdue the rocks. By outlining the interactions between these three concurrent forces, natural and human, this paper will explore Brockedon's dynamic conception of the Alpine landscape. The second motif is architecture. Rocks, transformed into promontories, become stable foundations for human constructions that both extend and transform them, thereby counterbalancing their original instability. Examining the transition from rock to architecture also provides an opportunity to explore the historical stratification of the Alpine landscape and its defensive functions.

The book's intermediality will serve as a guiding thread throughout the analysis. It will discuss how the complexity of the issues surrounding the rocky landscape of the Alps and the forms of control exerted over it is rendered through the various interactions between text and images.

Bio: Violaine Gourbet is an assistant professor in contemporary art history at UPHF Valenciennes. Her academic interests include artistic transfer, history of art criticism, landscape representations and ecological meanings of art, as well as print studies and issues of intermediality. She is currently at work on the publication of her PhD thesis, which focused on the German reception of English art, and has recently published "Die Verdunkelung des Pittoresken: Fabrikschornsteine in der britischen Landschaftsgraphik des 19. Jahrhunderts" ["Darkening Picturesque: Factory Chimneys and Landscapes in Nineteenth Century British Engravings"] (S. Förtschler, A. Schönhagen (hrsg.), *Kunsttexte* 04/2025: Natur im Wandel). She is also a member of the research group "Studio Ecocritique XIX", which was awarded the 2026 research residency INHALab (Paris) for its project "Aux origines du regard écologique : les imaginaires du XIXe siècle" ["At the origins of the ecological eye. Nineteenth Century Imaginary"]

- *Harriet McKinley-Smith (Trier University): Elizabeth Le Blond and the Afterlives of Romantic Alpine Aesthetics*

This paper examines the legacy of Romanticism in Elizabeth Le Blond's (1860–1934) Alpine writing and photography, focusing on her representations of rock in works produced between 1880 and 1900. It argues that Le Blond's engagement with mountain environments inherits Romantic ways of seeing the Alps, particularly their association with sublimity, elevation, and perceptual transformation, but that this inheritance is consistently reworked through the material and technological conditions of late nineteenth-century mountaineering.

In Romantic writing of the early nineteenth century, rock is frequently constructed as distant, monumental, and stable, functioning as a figure of permanence and transcendence. In Le Blond's accounts, by contrast, rock is encountered at close range, through ascent and bodily effort, and repeatedly appears as fractured, unstable, and resistant to visual mastery. Cliff faces, scree slopes, and ice formations interrupt panoramic vision and unsettle inherited aesthetic frameworks derived from Romantic landscape description.

The paper suggests that this shift is not simply a rejection of Romanticism, but a transformation of it. Romantic sublimity persists, but it is displaced into conditions of exposure, fatigue, and physical constraint, where perception is shaped by movement rather than distance. Rock becomes a material force that structures experience rather than a stable object available for contemplation. Photography plays a central role in this reconfiguration. Le Blond's images stabilise transient alpine encounters while simultaneously revealing the limits of representation, producing a tension between Romantic spontaneity and modern reproducibility. Rock is both the subject of visual capture and that which resists it, remaining excessive to framing and documentation.

The paper concludes that Le Blond's work extends Romantic lithic imagination into a later form in which rock functions as an active material presence shaping perception, narrative form, and the conditions of visual knowledge.

Bio: Dr Harriet McKinley-Smith is a Postdoctoral Researcher at Universität Wuppertal, where she is working on her Habilitation project, provisionally titled 'Nineteenth-Century Irish Women's Travel Writing and the Aesthetics of Weather'. Previously, she held a postdoctoral position at Universität Trier. She completed her doctorate at the University of Oxford, where her thesis examined suffering in the poetry of Mary Robinson. More broadly, her research interests include eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's writing, with a particular focus on the environmental humanities, the history of emotions, and narratology.

Roundtable: Geology, Literature, Culture

- *Sophie Musitelli (Université Paris Cité)*

Bio: see above

- *Peter Schnyder (Université de Neuchâtel)*

Bio: Peter Schnyder is Professor of Modern German Literature at the University of Neuchâtel. He studied in Zurich, Göttingen, Berlin and Cambridge. Extended research stays took him to Giessen, Berkeley and Vienna. Main areas of research: 18th- and 19th-century German literature in a European context; aesthetics and rhetoric around 1800; literature-and-science studies; the relationship between literature and geology. Publications (among many others): *Alea. Zählen und Erzählen im Zeichen des Glücksspiels*. Göttingen: Wallstein 2009; *Erdgeschichten. Literatur und Geologie im langen 19. Jahrhundert*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2020 (Ed.); «Felsen[-]Spekulationen». *Mineralogie, Geognosie und Geologie [bei Goethe]*. In: «Bewegliche Ordnung».

Goethes Naturforschung. Ed. by Helmut Hühn and Margrit Wyder. Göttingen: Wallstein 2026, p. 73–96.

- *Maia Whomsley-Walker (University of Bern)*

Bio: Maia Whomsley-Walker is a structural geologist currently studying at Bern University, specialising in fault and fracture systems as well as geothermal exploration. She is also a director of GeoMôn UNESCO Global Geopark in north Wales, and spends her spare time collaborating with artists, scientists and the public to explore and share the geology, history and heritage of the geopark.