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"Nearer My God to Thee"?: Theological Reflections on Mountaineering

Is mountaineering a sport, a game, or a lifestyle, and what might it have to tell us about the nature and meaning of sport? These are the questions discussed in the first part of these personal theological reflections. Central to the attraction of climbing is risk but that, the article argues, is only a simulacrum – albeit an instructive one – of the risks involved in Christian discipleship. The final section of the article argues that spiritual reflections on outdoor activities, including climbing, can be theologically and spiritually misleading both as to the nature of ‘nature’ and as to how the God who addresses us in Jesus Christ is known.

Introduction

‘There are only three sports, motor-racing, bull-fighting, and mountaineering; everything else is just a game’. ¹ Whether Ernest Hemingway actually said this is uncertain, but I think he was onto something insofar as sports can be distinguished from games in their attitude to risk. Motor-racing, bull-fighting and mountaineering share the direct risk of dying; in everything else there is no such intrinsic and unavoidable risk. In football, cricket, and rugby, in sailing and in skiing, steps are taken by the sports’ governing bodies to minimise if not eliminate danger. ² In each of Hemingway’s sports risk is calculated – tacitly at least – by those who participate in them; in games it is not: a rugby player does not calculate the risk of a broken neck before the scrum engages, a cricketer the risk of emasculation. In sport, wit, judgement, skill and guile are put in contest with that which threatens us mortally. The look in the eye of the beast, the limits of adhesion, the dawning blaze of sun on frost-shattered rock whose only glue is ice: these are the objects of aptitudes which if poorly exercised or absent, the game, to coin a phrase, is up.

In this article I argue that mountaineering has spiritual dimensions associated with risk which point to its being a simulacrum of Christian discipleship. These spiritual dimensions are also present in the responses the mountain environment evokes in us but they too can be theologically misleading. To prepare the ground for these arguments, we look first at cultural and aesthetic dimensions of climbing which, if climbing were to be seen as, or to become, a more conventional (Olympic) sport, would be to diminish it and what it is capable of eliciting from those whose lives it has gripped.

It may be helpful to clarify how I am using various terms. ‘Climbing’ is sometimes used to mean hill-walking, but most people who call themselves climbers mean by it an activity involving ropes and other specialist equipment in order to move as safely as possible over rock, snow or ice. By ‘mountaineering’ is meant specifically climbing on snow, ice, and/or rock in terrain that requires ice axe(s) and crampons. Despite the fact that my title refers to ‘mountaineering’, I shall use it, as climbers do, interchangeably with ‘climbing’ and allow the context to specify more precisely which particular activity is being referred to. Climbing by oneself – in the UK, usually without any safety equipment – is known as ‘soloing’. ‘Free’

climbing is done without artificial aids. There is also an important distinction between 'sport' and 'adventure' or 'traditional' climbing: the former involves very little risk – other than to one's ego.

Climbing: Olympic Sport or True Art?

I should like to begin by looking at the way in which climbing poses questions to our conception of what sport is, especially in the context of the Olympics. People sometimes ask me how I got involved in climbing. A substantial part of the answer lies in the fact that at school I didn't like team sports, was no good at them and was scared of balls. I was keen not to be involved in sport of any kind. Paradoxical? Perhaps. But there is a sense in which many climbers don't think of themselves as engaging in a sport (I am forgetting Hemingway and using the term in a general way), not least because many climbers resist rules and regulations. That was part of what got me into climbing as a rebellious teenager and I still like to think that sorting out issues of climbing ethics – of how and where to climb, in what style to do so, and how to minimize environmental impact – by reasoned mutual agreement offers a small taste of the kingdom of God, of what in a church context one might call Spirit-filled anarchy.

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Not only is climbing about freedom from rules and regulations, there is also quite a strong anti-establishment element to it in many parts of the world. In Soviet-era Poland, though climbing clubs were state funded and relatively prosperous, they also provided a home to political dissidents. In the 1970s it was said that Japanese people took up climbing in order to register a protest against the highly convention-bound nature of their country's culture and society. Perhaps this sense of defiance of the system arises because climbers tend to be individualists who value the opportunity that what is known as the 'freedom of the hills' gives them for a form of unfettered self-expression. Both these are, I suspect, reasons why many climbers are reluctant to identify what they do as a sport.

Perhaps I should have said that *some* climbers are reluctant to identify what they do as a sport: those who know about climbing will be familiar with the artificial climbing walls to be found in sports centres up and down the country. Climbing on them is good training for rock climbing, but there is no freedom of the hills in a gym, and this activity's popularity has coincided with the rise of 'sport' climbing. And both indoor and outdoor sport climbing have been associated with climbing competitions which, unlike adventure climbing, do involve rules and regulations. On the whole, climbers are content to let these two versions of our activity co-exist and it could be that they will evolve into different activities, especially if, as some people would like it to be, sport climbing on indoor walls becomes an Olympic activity.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the idea that climbing should be an Olympic sport is not new. 4 The Baron de Coubertin (who initiated the Olympics) thought climbing a good manifestation of the Olympic ideal and medals were awarded 'for the finest performance' in the mountains in the preceding period in 1912, 1922 (to the British Mount Everest expedition), in 1932, and in 1936 for a climb made in 1934. These awards were always controversial but it was events in 1936 that highlighted the problems acutely. 'There was', writes the British mountaineer Doug Scott, 'general speculation that the ill-fated Austro-German team [*sic*; tellingly perhaps, others might prefer 'party'] that attempted the Eiger north face in 1936 were hoping for an

Olympic medal. The dramatic and very public death of the four-man team confirmed the suspicions of all conservative climbers, particularly in Switzerland and Britain, that attitudes to climbing prevalent in the eastern Alps were beyond reason'. 5 (It is worth pausing to comment on the phrase 'beyond reason' for it indicates a common attitude amongst climbers that some ascents are so objectively dangerous as to make them too serious to consider: on calculation, the risks involved are too high. However, perceptions of risk change for two often, but not always, related reasons: equipment improves and climbers develop longer necks. Mountaineers gain respect for 'giving the mountain its best' – for retreating in the face of unreasonable risk. But climbers also gain respect for extending our imagination as to what is possible, as those who in 1938 made the first successful ascent of the north face of the Eiger did, for pushing the limits of risk and danger.) Awards for 'Alpine Valour' were condemned. As one contemporary wrote:

An Olympic medal for mountaineering is to be deprecated at all costs. Mountaineering, as understood by Swiss and British climbers, is not an Olympic sport. Mountaineering contains some elements of sporting characteristics, but these are of a quite secondary nature in a form fostered by Eastern Alps' scrambling that smacks more of the Olympic stadium where publicity is not unwillingly sought. Swiss and British mountaineers will have no dealing with Olympic medals. 6

Not only is the stadium ethos deprecated by those who oppose climbing's being an Olympic sport, there is the more fundamental controversy surrounding the notion that climbing is competitive. Which is why, as Scott explains elsewhere in his article, the *Piolet d'Or* has been awarded to several different expeditions in the same year: doing so diminished the sense of competition, of there being winners and losers; making more than one award acknowledged inspiring climbs made in an inspiring style. Those whose infection with political correctness has also brought about the loss of their human instincts sometimes condemn school sports for promoting a competitive 'winners and losers' ethos amongst children. Climbing can educate us here, for it is not success or failure – at least, not in conventional terms – that matters in adventure climbing.

Climbing *is* competitive but winning and losing, succeeding and failing are calibrated on unconventional scales. The expeditioner's ordering of priorities is accurate: 'Come back; come back having summited; come back friends.' 'Heroic failure' is (or at least, was) a category of accomplishment that may be included in the mountaineering CV of a person applying for election to membership of the world's oldest climbing club. And even – perhaps especially – amongst the heroic succeeders of the climbing world, it is not just success that is important but the style in which success is achieved. Anyone (just about) can ascend a blank piece of rock on a remote, unclimbed peak by using expansion bolts and a power drill – but to him only the wooden spoon. One of the most admired and respected climbers of his generation, Voytek Kurtyka put it this way when he was invited to be a judge on the panel awarding the *Piolet d'Or*: 'the world is suspended on a monstrous structure of wild competition and consequently of award and distinction ... this structure is an enemy of true art ... where award and distinction rules the true art ends'. 7 Is such an art a fitting candidate for recognition as an Olympic sport? I am not sure who would be flattered.

Dark mutterings about sport climbing's heading in this direction ensued after a recent meeting of climbers and politicians at 10 Downing Street. The British Mountaineering

Council has formally acknowledged the Olympic ideals, so the way now lies open for sport climbing to be an exhibition activity at the 2012 Olympics. And after that? – who knows. But a particularly saddening outcome of climbing's receiving official recognition in this kind of way is that it would be likely to lose one of its defining characteristics. Royal Robbins is a leading member of the senior generation of living climbers, he pioneered many famous and beautiful new routes in North America, and he is a devoted, eloquent, and exceptionally accomplished exponent of the cause of good style in climbing – of climbing as 'true art'. He put it this way: 'Climbing isn't just a sport; it's a way of life – much more than tennis or downhill ski racing, for example'. 8

And this is where the counter-cultural element of climbing requires fresh recognition. For a good number of people who participate in it nowadays, climbing *is* just like downhill skiing or tennis: not so much a way of life as an expression of a life-style choice. For some, it is a way of fulfilling personal ambitions to tick boxes on the list of the thousand things to do before you die – climb Mont Blanc or, if you are more ambitious, Everest; ambitions whose fulfilment requires no deep experience or wisdom, and that demand as commitment not a very great deal more than possessing a sufficiently large bank account on which to draw in order to pay someone else to minimize risk and to lead you to the summit of your ambition – and thereby promote the commercialization of climbing and fuel the market for so-called 'extreme sports'. But probably this is just a rather less subtle way of playing that most competitive of all games, keeping up with the Joneses.

Contingency, Risk, and Discipleship

Sport climbing is safe. I do not have figures but it seems highly likely that fewer injuries are incurred than in rugby playing, yet a substantial part of the spice of adventure climbing is to be found in that which unites it with motor-racing and bull-fighting: risk. In his contribution to this collection of articles, Lincoln Harvey argues that sport is 'the ritual celebration of contingency'. Nowhere is contingency more fully experienced than when we undertake activities involving intrinsic risk and, as I suggested in my introduction, climbing is unusual in that the stakes could barely be higher. Often enough in mountaineering it is the weather and hill conditions that are one's fiercest, most brutal and unrelenting competitors; these are major factors in mountaineering's being a thrilling adventure, a battle to survive rather than to vanquish an opponent. Weather is a contingency and, like those other killer contingencies, falling ice and rock, and poor snow and bad rock, with experienced observation and good judgement one can reduce the objective danger. But the one ineliminable and certain contingency is gravity. 9.8 m/sec^2 . Yet despite the awful consequences of getting it wrong and despite one's seeking to manage risk, most climbers will admit that risk is part of the attraction of climbing. 9

Why is risk attractive? Well, partly for the reason that it provides a zest that can be missing in other parts of life. Psychologists tell us that undertaking stressful activities in leisure time enables some people better to handle stress at work, but in climbing the risk seems disproportionate to the outcome for it to be explained simply by its making other stresses more bearable. Despite popular misunderstandings which see climbers as adrenaline junkies, risk is not actively sought as an end in itself; indeed, climbers are quick to dismiss as foolish

those who do. But it is true that taking on risks in climbing actually has the effect of making one feel more alive. 10

Something of this is captured in a memorable piece of climbing prose. The writer has been struggling to make a hard move around a corner:

I had to move before gravity could wreak its vengeance... My whole future could now be counted in seconds. With strength gone and fingers unzipping from what poor holds they had, I gathered up the little skill and courage left and began the blind moves around that awful corner.

I turned the corner and the rest seemed easy. We laughed at the top as we coiled the ropes and we went to the pub and we were very happy and a few weeks later [my climbing partner] Rob was dead and I went on to climb sometimes harder and sometimes easier things.

What for? To experience the very things I felt as I turned that corner: to escape the potted, computerized, cellophane existence that is ours in the twentieth century; to play at life's brinkmanship, find freedom and the right to accept a challenge, test oneself to the limit, plumb the extremes of emotion and exhilaration, brain, heart, eyes, strength and balance united in a single purpose – to live like a searchlight of survival searing through the total darkness of failure; to taste the stinging wine of danger, but to sweeten it with the total joy of existence.

That's what life is all about.

That's what dreams are made of. 11

Usually it is British climbing writers who eschew purple prose and the French who cultivate it, but Neil Allinson (whom I have just quoted) and Lionel Terray reverse this. Here's Terray reflecting on having made the second ascent of the North Face of the Eiger:

However good he may be, and however favourable the conditions of his ascent, anyone who returns from the Eigerwand cannot but realise that he has done something more than a virtuoso climb: he has lived through a human experience to which he had committed not only all his skill, intelligence and strength, but his very existence. 12

To reduce climbing to a safe, regulated competition sport would be to remove from it a major component in its attractiveness. Climbing *is* a way of life but writers like Allinson and Terray invite us to take that simple phrase with more nuancing (a nuancing with which Robbins wouldn't quibble). Climbing is a way of *life* because it is a way of living to the full. Doug Scott says that an essential characteristic of a climber is 'curiosity to see around the next corner, to discover all the secrets of the mountain, to keep pressing on.' And he adds that climbers 'probably all found out early on that when they're back in the mountains they feel more at home than they do in the city, and that by risking their lives they actually do come alive ... You're slightly reborn.' 13

'By risking their lives they actually do come alive ... You're slightly reborn'. Notice the inadvertent echo of Jesus: 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. What will it profit a person if he gains the whole world only

to lose his soul'. The echo is even clearer in Leo Dickinson's account of Eric Jones's first British solo ascent of the North Face of the Eiger. (It's a sign of just how calculated are the risks climbers take that Jones waited 15 years for the route to come into suitable condition for his solo.) Dickinson had been in the unenviable role of filming Jones's ascent and he writes of its second day as follows:

Throughout the climb, [Eric] was reminded again and again of previous disasters. Here, high on the Ramp, at the place known as the Silver Trench, the very first climber to attempt to solo the Eiger – Adolf Meyr – had fallen nearly 5,000 feet to his death. It was a notoriously difficult section and there were stones falling. Eric, without any protection at all, his crampons failing to find any secure purchase, felt himself go right through the 'fear barrier'. He knew he could fall, but was able to remain unruffled at the prospect. Afterwards he said, 'Fear was an emotion I didn't need. It got in the way. Once it was under control, I felt calmer than I've ever felt in my whole life. I knew that at any second I was likely to slip and fall to my death. Anything I could do to avoid this was a bonus. I'd lost everything – so now I could only gain.' ¹⁴

It might be tempting to build a sermon illustration out of these inadvertent allusions, perhaps even a kind of natural theology. But that would be a mistake. Climbing is principally a pastime and is largely pointless. ¹⁵ The more a copy approximates to its original the more desirable it appears – to those, that is, without a clear sense of the surpassing worth of the original.

I wish to propose that the mountaineer's embracing of risk can amount to the unwitting acceptance of the thrall of a simulacrum of discipleship. ¹⁶ In losing our life for Jesus' sake we could not make our lives less secure – in 'fleshly' terms, at least. In his company there is a realization, a celebration (even) of contingency and risk that impresses on us our sheer creatureliness – that we have been created to an end known only to our creator. But without knowledge of our saving creator, we cannot know that we are creatures (in the full, theological sense of the term) who inhabit a created world whose meaning and purpose are veiled from the unbelieving heart. ¹⁷ The curiosity to see around the next corner, to keep pressing on, to discover all the benefits of being alive – this is the condition to which all humans naturally aspire, falteringly: this, the disciple of Jesus knows, is the condition of being a fallen and redeemed creature and most obviously not of the mountaineer only. But to know the creator to whose glory Christ suffered for us that we may walk the path of life: that is God's gracious gift. Only on pain of confusing temporal and eternal ends may we think that discovery of the (possible) benefits of turning life's next corner are the blessings of turning life's last corner and beholding the celestial city.

I do not know whether Lionel Terray was a Christian believer – the topic is not addressed in his book; reading between the lines one could guess that he was – but he is far more down-to-earth than many climbers and less prone to set too much spiritual store by the singular experiences climbing brings. Writing of reaching the summit of the Eiger after his epic second ascent of the Nordwand with Louis Lachenal, he records: 'We had vanquished the Eigerwand. I felt no violent emotions, neither pride nor joy. Up in the cloud on this lonely ridge I was just a tired and hungry animal, and my only satisfaction was the animal one of having saved my skin. I badly wanted to rest, but Lachenal would not allow it'. ¹⁸ Here is a man undeceived by the risks of climbing and not prone to glamorize them, a man neither too

proud nor too given to romanticize mountains and mountaineering to admit that he has learnt what Lear learned in the howling storm: that 'unaccommodated man is ... but ... a poor, bare, forked animal'.

Mountaineering is merely an extravagant way to discover that as creature, the cosmos 'can speak here only as it is silent; it can declare itself only in a mystery'. 19 In a fallen world, some things don't fit and can't be made to; like sin, they are inexplicable. If climbing has a meaning or a value, it is either one that (as I shall discuss in the next section) we create, or it is one that we discover, and then only in worship and discipleship – and that discloses that mountaineering is surd. The pleasure we take in it – and why else undertake such a risky activity? – is a sign of our fallenness; I do not think we can make *rational* sense of it other than as a means to a scientific end – as John Tyndall, FRS did in developing the science of glaciology. 20 At best, its value is that of worthless play: it is not necessary to undertake such risks to stay fit, or to enjoy beauty and the companionship of friends. But for many climbers the point of climbing is that it endows life with such meaning as they think it may be given. (Which, perhaps, is why it becomes a way of life.) The more we glamorize climbing and its attendant risks – even by seeking to find in it a 'type' of Christian discipleship – the more we conceal from ourselves the fact that it points to the surd in the human condition and to the inscrutability of the cosmos: neither climbing nor creation can of themselves speak of any stable meaning or value.

It is to the disciple that the possibility of beholding the face of the love that made the mountains is extended. But as anyone who has struggled to discern in a trying situation what obedience requires, the decision making process has its own distinctive kind of risk – not just of 'doing the right deed for the wrong reason' but of mishearing the command and thereby dishonouring the one who laid down his life for her. Fear of falling is not a substitute for the fear of God. But the Lord's faithfulness is the condition by which all contingencies exist, and trusting in that, the disciple may face what contingency throws in her way. Climbing is a leisure time pursuit of real life; it can never offer us reality. Risk taking in discipleship can be as spiritually glamorous as climbing is physically, just as vacuous, and, unlike climbing, reprehensibly morally dangerous. 21 But if we have ears to hear, we shall find the reality of the word of life in the testimony of bold disciples who have won through to obedience precisely by risking all. Such a person was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who saw it as his calling to take part in the plot to assassinate Hitler and who, shortly before walking to the gallows, is recorded as saying, 'This is the end – for me the beginning of life'. Vain would be the climber who allowed such a thought to cross his mind as he reached terminal velocity. 22

'Nearer my God to Thee'?

My argument about risk could be construed as a demythologization of climbing, and I'd like to take that a bit further now by taking up directly the title of this article. 'Nearer my God to thee?' Well, that depends on who or what your God is and where you think you are likely to encounter him, or her, or it. So I turn now to address the opinion that the mountain environment gets us closer to God. 23

This theme is neatly encapsulated by a publisher's catalogue that I received recently. It included publicity for a book called *Religious and Spiritual Experiences* whose cover showed

a blue sheet of paper, burst through from behind to reveal a view of an alpine pasture with a towering, snow covered peak behind. That is a common enough visual cliché but its semiotics have a theological pedigree that would seem well-justified if one took the walls of St Peter's (Anglican) Church in Zermatt – the Alpine Club's unofficial chapel – as one's guide. For in that building many of the memorial plaques to climbers are inscribed with words taken from the Book of Common Prayer's psalter: 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help.' Nearer my God to thee? Psalm 121 would seem to answer in the affirmative but I want to argue that the correct answer is 'No, no nearer than anywhere else'. And possibly further. If more recent translations are correct, the psalmist is asking a question: 'I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come?'

It is true that God loves mountains. Think of Moses, Mt Sinai and Mt Nebo; of Elijah and Mt Carmel, of Mt Zion; of the Sermon on the Mount; of Olivet. And it was because of his recourse to the mountains that Anthony of Egypt inadvertently founded monasticism. His pattern of life expressed a movement many Christians experience – that between solitude and engagement with others. ²⁴ We retreat to the hills in order that the work of God may advance. Jesus was familiar with this and the Transfiguration narrative captures it most clearly for, having come down from the mountain where he received his commission for the next stage of his work, Jesus is immediately importuned by the father of an epileptic boy. This reinforces my point that risk in mountaineering is a simulacrum of discipleship: if we really wish to see God at work, it will be in everyday life. There is nothing singular about mountains that marks them out as special points of contact with God: the whole earth is the Lord's and at the day of his coming, the hills will be laid low and the valleys raised up.

When I was an undergraduate one of the student workers at the church I attended told me that if ever he were to write his autobiography he would entitle it 'The Hills My Church'. I have always been puzzled by that choice and never more so than one winter's day a couple of years ago when I was going through a trying time in my working life. I took to the mountains of North Wales one Sunday and soloed a couple of snow and ice climbs. When I got to the top of the second I sat on the edge of the cliff, my feet dangling over the abyss. The air had a stunning clarity and snow covered all that I could see, from Anglesey to the Berwyns, from fringe of radiantly dappled sea to cloudless cobalt sky. It was a day as satisfying for its climbing as many I had had and greater in its beauty than most.

I gazed into the depths of Cwm Cneifion – the so-called Nameless Cwm – from which I had made my ascent, and then levelled my eyes across the Nant Ffrancon towards Bangor and recalled the words of a student of mine: 'I know the one who made all that.' True, I thought, but isn't the greater knowledge that I am *loved* by the one who made all that? And as I dwelt on that, so it came to me that the hills were not providing what I needed, not even as I sat in prayerful meditation; what I really needed was to hear the Word of God. My day had begun before dawn and it occurred to me that I might just have time to get down to the car and drive back to Oxford for Evensong at the Cathedral. In my reverie I had wildly miscalculated but as I got into the car, I turned on Radio 3 for Choral Evensong and heard the first lesson. It was Job 1: 'Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped. He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."' That was not what I wanted to hear, nor was it something that the hills themselves alone could have taught me – but it was what I needed to hear.

Since the Romantics it has been intuitively appealing to Westerners to associate mountains with what psychologists call 'peak experiences', experiences that might give us a glimpse of the divine. But before the Romantics appeared on the scene, mountains and their environs were repellent – and little wonder, it is there that one would have encountered contingency more dramatically than in any other of life's experiences, except perhaps sudden illness. The sublime was not just that which was beautiful, it also filled one with dread. But the arrival of the English in the Alps in the nineteenth century tamed the sublime and we were taught by such Christian entrepreneurs of early tourism as Thomas Cook to view the mountains as beautiful, as sources of inspiration and even of divine aid.

In 1907 a young assistant pastor at the Reformed church in the Bernese Oberland valley town of Meiringen took Psalm 121 as his text for his first sermon there. It included this passage: 'When the tones of the organ resound through God's house and the streams rush down, as always, from above, and the high snows give their greeting with eternal purity, who would not feel that "The prospect gives the angels strength"...?' ²⁵ I asked a specialist in twentieth century German theology who he thought might have said this and he replied, 'Must be Brunner.' It wasn't; it was a youthful and still theologically liberal Karl Barth.

I don't know how the sermon continues but if he had, Barth wouldn't have been the first to argue from nature to God. Schleiermacher was no exponent of natural theology, but where better than the mountains to be instilled with the feeling of absolute dependence – contingency again – and hence how easy to exploit that for theological purposes. But those who are tempted to make easy logical moves from the hills to the existence of their Maker might ponder the words of Joe Simpson of *Touching the Void* fame. The film version of that remarkable book blends dramatic reconstruction with interviews to tell the true story of Simpson's extraordinary physical toughness and psychological resilience in surviving a sequence of accidents on an exceptionally bold and risky mountaineering expedition in the Andes. Simpson says that he was brought up a Catholic but is now an atheist. Nevertheless, speaking of his solitude, pain and suffering as he fought to survive, he acknowledges, 'You do begin to wonder whether there is some malign force out to get you.'

Simpson had endured an extremity of human experience, even by mountaineers' standards of reckoning. For a good while after the credits had rolled, aphasia gripped me. Mountaineers have by an effort of will to veil contingency from their imagination: the simple trip over one's own crampons and the tumbling slide down hard ice to infinity; the lightning strike from clear blue; the hold that breaks; the boulder no helmet can withstand; the sudden storm from nowhere; the broken or dropped ice axe. If we didn't do this, only the psychotic could climb. All mountaineers get nervous before a testing climb and if one is to accomplish it safely it is necessary to tread a fine line between banishing contingency from our minds and living in constant mindfulness of it. But the film of *Touching the Void* breaks wave after engulfing wave of contingency upon the climber's head. 'I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come?' The psalmist knew the answer, as does any believing heart, but to unbelief, nature is mute.

It would be hard to blame Simpson for mistaking the identity and character of the Maker of the hills. The greater error lies with those – believers and non-believers – who, over the last century, have served to raise up in us a spirit of something approaching nature worship - and therefore also to discredit the gospel and open up the crevasse of spiritual hunger that is

materialism. We inhabit a different world from that of the nineteenth century pioneers of alpinism who are commemorated on the walls of St Peter's Church, Zermatt. For many of us nowadays, Ed Douglas writes,

mountains feed our souls ... We are excited by how people in the Himalaya venerate their mountains, and yet scratch hard enough and you'll find our instinct is to do the same. That connection to landscape, which inspired Britain's first religions, is still there in all of us ... it's prompted new spiritual perspectives even in the modern era. 26

One of the most widely read exponents of the sacralization of nature is rock climber, naturalist and eloquent lover of the hills of North Wales, Jim Perrin. He has a keen eye, an unusually well-stocked mind, and an open heart. Through his books and his columns in the *Guardian* and *The Great Outdoors* magazine he has added greatly to my love of the hills and the wild places, but where I part company with him is in the way he is always searching for, and sometimes seemingly finding, something *more* from the landscape, 'transient and momentary' though the visions granted might be. 27

Perrin writes of '[t]he mind's puzzling away at the dynamic fabric of the natural scene', of the 'entrancing mental play and speculation and personal discovery [that] is one of the prime gifts of hill-going to our consciousness'. He doesn't just mean puzzling away as a geologist or geomorphologist does; he is thinking of how nature can disclose to us "the thin places" where boundaries between worlds dissolve'. 28 As he puts it in another of his more explicitly spiritual meditations: 'I ... believe that there are indefinable dimensions of response between the human psyche and landscape which produce at times the most powerful effects, and for which I'm happy to let the term "sentient landscape" stand'. 29 Thus, of a journey from the sea to the source of the Dee, he writes: '[M]y own feelings were objectified in the landscapes through which I passed'. 30 The philosophical idealism, and the paganism to which it leads him, are evident. Wandering one day, his attention is drawn to a pool and he is granted sudden sight of a trout, 'shamanistic and magical ... instructing me in the transformational grammars of light. And in the enduring unity of this place'. Evocative words, but do they mean anything? I am not sure they do. He rounds off this meditation by saying that 'The image is fixed in my memory until my consciousness too slips away, as it inevitably will, into an obscure place beyond all recognition and perception'. 31 Again, I am not sure that this means anything, but the general effect of this essay, as of much of Perrin's writing, is to envelop the hills and their flora and fauna in a fog of pantheistic mysticism.

In his acclaimed book *The Wild Places*, Robert Macfarlane writes that modern societies have sequestered themselves in a 'retreat from the real'. 32 He is of course right. But what *is* 'the real' and what is retreat from it? Is it to be curved inward or opened outward? It is not only modern societies that have retreated from the real: God has always been *too* real, too ready to reveal himself not 'in secret, in a land of darkness' 33 but on the surface of things, in the ordinariness of life, our ordinary decision making, and our ordinary struggles and desires. Sufficient, isn't it, for the human heart to find nature attesting God and glorifying him in the appearances of things – for it to be exalted in praise and thanksgiving for the gathering swirl and whip of ice crystals blown in a low winter light; or even simply to be enraptured in letting nature be itself, as when light glints off a trout – without projecting onto things, or finding concealed within them, unseen elemental spirits?

Yet Perrin cannot rid his spirituality of the apparently clapped-out Christianity he rejects; the problem is, it cancels itself out. He describes himself as being unable to see his relationship with nature as anything but 'the most crucial, fulfilling and redemptive of my life' – this from a man of many loves, recently diagnosed with terminal cancer, and having in the space of nine months known the death of his wife and the suicide of his son. ³⁴ The 'redemption' found by Perrin seems to lie in forgetfulness of nature in its appearances.

Having gazed on a family of red-throated divers fishing a stretch of water in evening light, his mind turns back in recollection of having once found a dead diver 'shot by a "sportsman"'. 'Somehow,' he continues, 'the imprinting beauty of the present moment redeemed all that. Bless all creatures, even of the human kind, and keep them safe from every variety of harm'. ³⁵ *Bless?* Who is the priest of this invocation – the elemental spirits? Keep *them* safe from every variety of harm? Keep *whom*? The dab who, clenched and killed by it, fed the diver in this parodic sacrament of redemption? And what personal redemption from an impersonal nature? Only if the idealist's gaze conveniently overlooks the dead dab, the earthquake that destroys the mountain village, or the falling rock that bludgeons one's friend may redemption be found in nature. Is this the religion of the pantheistic vagabond's sentimentally amoral universe?

It is: 'Contemplate, study, intuit and understand and this interplay between landscape and the human attempt at its expression can draw you into a mystical dimension where *genius loci* holds up the mirror to human existence, and thus answers many quandaries in our human condition, bringing peace (though such a moral mirror equally, tragically, can incite hatred and rage)'. ³⁶ The bathos of Perrin's parenthesis is entirely, if entirely inadvertently, fitting. Is it by holding a mirror to human existence that many quandaries in our human condition find their answer? The cracks in Perrin's prose offer up an answer, but not the one he thinks to find. The psalmist knew this: I lift up my eyes to the hills but all they offer is another question – from whence will come my help? Nature brings peace, it incites hatred and rage, and, we might add, fear, desolation and death. Nature brings no redemption. Nearer, my God, to thee? The author of the hymn knew: 'Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee! / E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me.'

Few writers on mountains have done more to challenge the view of nature that leads to Perrin's paganism than the Catholic apologist Arnold Lunn. He lays the blame for idolatrous attitudes to mountains at the door of Jean-Jacques Rousseau who was born and subsequently lived in Geneva for many years and yet who never mentions Mont Blanc – a fact which, Lunn thinks, 'casts some doubt on his sincerity as the high-priest of Nature worship'. ³⁷ In Lunn's view, the principal and founding exponent of sincere nature worship was the erstwhile Anglican evangelical minister Sir Leslie Stephen. Stephen was no high Romantic, but it was only half-ironically that, having forsaken his faith, he spoke of founding 'a new idolatry' of the mountains. Climbers rightly celebrate the father of Virginia Woolf for his mountaineering classic *The Playground of Europe*, but Lunn derides his apostate religiosity as 'alpine mysticism'. ³⁸

The great Anglican climber, poet, essayist and educationalist Michael Roberts presents a less ontologically austere view than my own but he is right: 'Mountains ... may be symbols or images of some other reality, but the worship of symbols as if they were something more than images is a form of superstition.'. ³⁹ 'Are mountains cathedrals among which we worship or

idols which we worship?', Lunn asks. 'That is the basic question, and until a man has the honesty to ask and answer this question, he had better confine himself to recording the physical aspects of a climb'. ⁴⁰ Lunn is correct. Climbing, like mortality, is nothing if it is not physical. Only in forgetfulness of the gross physicality of nature and of its sometimes cruel contingencies may the climber imagine that he is treading holy ground and forget also that he is dust and that to dust he will return.

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Endnotes

1 I am grateful to Philippa James for drawing my attention to both the statement and to the fact that its provenance is uncertain. Thanks also are owing to Frances Whistler for advice on an earlier draft, and to Tim Pidsley, Adam Roberts, and John Roe – friends and reliable partners in many memorable climbing adventures

2 It is said that proportionately more people die fishing than rock climbing

3 I use the term ‘anarchy’ in a politically nuanced sense; I do not mean destructive violence against the state

4 In this paragraph I am dependent on Scott 2011: 75-82

5 Scott 2011: 77

6 Dr Oscar Zug, quoted by Scott 2011: 77

7 Quoted by Scott 2011: 80

8 ‘Royal Robins’, interview in O’Connell 1993: 97

9 Like other activities that involve risk – investing in the stock market, for example – climbing rewards good judgement with intellectual pleasure. In climbing, it is found in working out how best to move over a section of mountain or rock. Climbing can be a hybrid of chess and ballet: first there’s the problem of working out the right sequence of moves to overcome a problematic piece of rock, then there is their elegant execution. Add to these good company, a beautiful setting and the physical pleasure of stylish movement, and you have a satisfactory account of why people climb.

10 Climbers are sometimes criticized for putting others at risk – notably their rescuers when things go wrong. But in the UK, mountain rescue teams are staffed by volunteer mountaineers and only exceptionally rarely do they criticize those whom they rescue: they understand why people climb and they appreciate contingency. See Allen 2009: 49-64

11 Allinson 1975: 91

12 Terray 1963: 180

13 Doug Scott, interview in O’Connell 1993: 157

14 Dickinson 1982: 218-219

15 I say ‘largely’ because climbing is one of the few recreational activities whose skills are an indispensable condition of the acquisition of scientific data; see, for example, Tyndall: 1896. Some people make a living out of climbing, but this may serve only to increase the risks undertaken when one also has a family to support, sponsors to satisfy, and a market of armchair mountaineers eager for the next, even more extreme, vicarious thrills: see Andy Kirkpatrick’s outstanding autobiography *Psychovertical* (Kirkpatrick 2008)

16 Surprisingly, Barth takes a different view: Barth 1961a: 402

17 See Barth 1961b: 149-150; see also Bonhoeffer 2001: 96

18 Terray 1963: 175

19 Barth 1961b: p150. See also Bonhoeffer 2001: 96

20 See note 15 above

21 On the perils of the exploratory spirit in theology, see Donald MacKinnon's discussion of Paul Tillich in his collection of essays entitled (ironically enough) *Explorations in Theology*; MacKinnon 1976: 135f

22 A collection of essays on philosophical issues around climbing was published recently and in the contributors' biographies, one states with a glorious lack of perspective that '[i]n both philosophy and climbing, he finds himself awed by those who have risked much to challenge and satisfy their curiosity' Schmid 2010: 241

23 For a survey, see Bartlett 1993: chapter 6

24 See Athanasius: 84-85

25 Quoted in Busch 1976: 42

26 *The Great Outdoors* (hereinafter, *TGO*), October 2010: 34

27 *TGO* July 2009: 56

28 *TGO* July 2010: 58-59

29 *TGO*, March 2011: 65

30 *TGO*, February 2011: 53

31 *TGO* July 2009: 56

32 Macfarlane 2007

33 Isaiah 45:19

34 *TGO* September 2010: 21

35 *TGO*, November 2010: 53

36 *TGO* April 2011: 63

37 Lunn 1943: 70

38 The phrase 'new idolatry' is quoted from Stephens's *An Agnostic's Apology* in Lunn 1943: 73

39 Quoted in Lunn 1943: 75

40 Lunn 1943: 75