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**The Blank at the Bottom:  
Risk and Repetition in Mountain Literature**

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## Abstract

The literature of rock climbing and mountaineering is rich, varied and extensive. In its particular combination of characteristics it is unique, yet it has received little in the way of systematic study. As a genre it is marked by the author's often unspoken acknowledgement that failure, injury or death are the possible outcomes of the climber's endeavour; risk is fundamental, both as the core motivation for the climber and as one of the underlying (if potentially morbid) reasons why its literature is so compelling. In this thesis I look at how the defining tropes of mountain literature are utilised in a variety of post-1945 non-fictional mountain narratives: Joe Simpson's *Touching the Void*, Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna*, Dougal Haston's *In High Places* and Jim Perrin's *The Climbing Essays*. The thesis considers, in particular, how repetition, a key component of these narratives, is deployed in the processing of trauma, and the implications this has for the ways in which we read certain autobiographical narratives; how the tropes we associate with mountain literature – such as the sublime, the figurative quest and the view of the mountaineer as exceptional, a superman – are pressed to serve a particular teleological purpose, once again bearing on our approach to reading these 'non-fictional' autobiographical texts; and finally, how the fundamental issue that is at the heart of the genre, the risk of death set against the joy derived from the activity, is rationalised and examined whilst at the same time being impossible to ever satisfactorily resolve.

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## Introduction

When Sir Jack Longland opened the Al Rouse Memorial Library in Sheffield on 14 May 1987, he warned the librarians, “These climbers, they write and they write and they write, far more than any other sport. They will demand ever more shelves and storage space, pushing all else aside and may even be a threat to Sheffield’s Town Hall itself.”<sup>1</sup>

The literature of rock climbing and mountaineering is rich, varied and extensive.<sup>2</sup> The first account of a rock climb in English is generally thought to be that given by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in a letter written in 1802 (presciently, given the nature and subsequent development of the activity of which he was one of the pioneers, he described it as a ‘sort of Gambling’).<sup>3</sup> With the formation of the Alpine Club in 1857, and the publication of its journal from 1858 onwards, the practice of documenting our activities in the mountains became established.<sup>4</sup> Initially the preserve of the wealthy English upper classes who were its earliest proponents, the literature of the sport quickly grew, but it remained limited in form and style – within the romantic tradition, consisting of essays in the *Alpine Journal* and book-length accounts of the escapades of its members in the Alps, or further afield. Open any of these at random and you are all but guaranteed to find descriptions of ‘the sublime scenery of snow-clad peak and glacier’;<sup>5</sup> the rapture of the summit (‘the delight and exultation experienced were not those of Reason or of Knowledge, but of BEING’);<sup>6</sup> the personification of the mountains (‘wrapt in his silver robe he reposes, calm and cold, in all the majesty of his adamant strength!’);<sup>7</sup> the fetishization of the mountaineer (‘because his frame of mind is properly trained to receive the natural beauty’).<sup>8</sup>

By the 1930s, in the north of England and Scotland in particular, the free time resulting from widespread unemployment, the proximity to landscape of outstanding beauty, and the availability of cheap public transport combined to make hiking ‘the mass sport of working-class youth’,<sup>9</sup> with several thousand heading into the Derbyshire Peak District from

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Gifford, *Reconnecting with John Muir* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), pp. 163 – 164.

<sup>2</sup> For ease of reference I henceforth use the description ‘mountain literature’.

<sup>3</sup> See David Craig, *Native Stones: A Book About Climbing* (London: Fontana, 1988), p. 131.

<sup>4</sup> Originally called *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers*, becoming the *Alpine Journal* in 1863.

<sup>5</sup> John Ball, ‘Preface’, *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers*, ed. by John Ball (London: Longman, 1859), pp. v – xii (p. v).

<sup>6</sup> John Tyndall, *Mountaineering in 1861* (London: Longman, 1862), p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Schwitzer, ‘The Breithorn’, *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers*, ed. by Edward Shirley Kennedy (London: Longman, 1862), pp. 343 – 358 (p. 353).

<sup>8</sup> Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe* (London: Longman, 1871; repr. Amsterdam: Fredonia Books, 2004), p. 326.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Harker, ‘The Manchester Rambler’, *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), 219 – 228 (p. 220).

the industrial conurbations of Manchester and Sheffield each weekend.<sup>10</sup> It was as a consequence of this that, for the first time, a new generation of working-class climbers began to venture onto the gritstone edges of Derbyshire and the crags to the north of Glasgow, and in the years immediately following the Second World War climbing as a phenomenon open to all began to take off.<sup>11</sup> This in turn led to a proliferation in the literature of the sport. New climbing clubs formed, producing their own journals and publications. Books on climbing technique and climbing guidebooks to specific locations appeared. Mountain literature expanded to include mass market climbing magazines; book length accounts of expeditions to the greater ranges; anthologies of essays and articles; (auto)biographies; fiction (novels and short stories); even poetry. As the literature grew, so its themes and style widened far beyond the romantic heritage of the early days of the Alpine Club, informed by the very different working and cultural backgrounds of the new breed of climbers.<sup>12</sup> Take this passage from the autobiography of Joe Brown, giving his assessment before attempting a climb on the Dinas Cromlech cliffs of North Wales, known as Cenotaph Corner, in the early 1950s:

A long thin crack ran up in the back of the corner. It looked about 100 feet high but this was an underestimate. Having calculated that I would need every piece of equipment we had brought with us I took stock of the gear: five assorted pegs, a variety of snap-links and numerous slings. With any luck the pegs could be driven into the crack at intervals of 20 feet. The snap-links could be used either attached to the eyelets of the pegs or to slings that might be hooked over rock spikes. Alternatively a sling could be passed round a stone jammed inside the crack, using a snap-link to join its loop-ends together.<sup>13</sup>

This assessment of the rock face is expressed in climbers' vernacular, a kind of technical, almost mathematical, demotic ('with any luck the pegs could be driven into the crack at intervals of 20 feet'). One can almost visualise Brown sizing up the rock face, weighing up his gear, and making the necessary mental calculations and adjustments before starting out

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. See also Benny Rothman, *The 1932 Kinder Trespass* (Altrincham: Willow, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Graham Wilson has produced two, wonderfully idiosyncratic, books assessing and reviewing British mountain literature: *A Rope of Writers: A Look at Mountaineering Literature in Britain* (Disley: Millrace, 2006) and, with Chris Harle, *Mountain Words: British Hill and Crag Literature – Into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Disley: Millrace, 2009). See also Dave Cook, 'Running on Empty: Climbing Literature in the '80s' in *Orogenic Zones: The First Five Years of The International Festival of Mountaineering Literature* (Wakefield: Bretton Hall, 1994), pp. 7 – 13; Harold Drasdo, 'On Writing Guidebooks', in *The Ordinary Route* (Glasgow: The Ernest Press, 1997), pp. 108 – 123; and Terry Gifford, 'Toward a Post-Pastoral Mountaineering Literature' in Gifford, *Reconnecting with John Muir*, pp. 155 -168.

<sup>13</sup> Joe Brown, *The Hard Years* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1967; repr. London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 51.

on the route. Most importantly, we see that Brown's whole climbing approach is as much a product of his training and weekday job as a plumber; his description almost reads as if he is pricing up a job. It is a world away from the purple prose of the Victorian *Alpine Journal*.

Graham Wilson suggests that, with the exception of cricket, there is no other sport with a similar literary canon.<sup>14</sup> Whilst Wilson has great fun finding the similarities between the two (he equates the role of an opening batsman facing a fast bowler to that of a climber leading on a dangerous cliff face), mountain literature is unique in its themes and in the issues it raises. As a genre it possesses certain defining characteristics. Like the activity being described – the attempt to climb a particular route or peak, with the attendant danger and potential for disaster that this entails – all mountain literature is a repetition, the same core story repeated over and over, a variant on the same theme. Soren Kierkegaard suggested that all repetition is a transcendence, the subject moving beyond, surmounting, the original act. In mountain literature his aphorism finds both its literal and figurative embodiment.<sup>15</sup> Whilst repetition may be the norm for any sporting activity, climbing is unusual in that there are few, if any, spectators – there is rarely an audience in the greater ranges. The nature of the endeavour means that it carries within it a compulsion to make known, to tell the story, even if that story is merely 'we reached the top'. Climbers record and grade new routes, take photographs to prove that the summit was reached; the desire to record and make known is integral. The climber and writer Jim Perrin gets to the heart of this: 'spots of time, peculiar to ourselves, yet catalogued, accessible to others' re-enactments. Climbs, stories, lies, aspirations, hallucinations, heroic acts'.<sup>16</sup>

Telling the story naturally acquires greater importance and deeper significance in the event of accident, injury or death. The climber's words then aspire to the condition of testimony, the attestative iteration of experience. This is an activity that is haunted by the spectre of death and disaster. 'Climb if you will' said the Victorian mountaineer Edward Whymper, but 'from the beginning think what may be the end'.<sup>17</sup> Mountain literature is marked by the author's often unspoken acknowledgement that failure, injury or death are the possible outcomes from the climber's endeavour. 'The time has come when the Alpine death-roll should be looked fairly in the face' wrote C. E. Matthews as long ago as 1882 in

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<sup>14</sup> Wilson, *Mountain Words*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 186.

<sup>16</sup> *The Climbing Essays* (Glasgow: The In Pinn, 2006), p. 281.

<sup>17</sup> *Scrambles Amongst the Alps in the Years 1860 – 1869* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2002), p. 380.

the *Alpine Journal*; and his injunction continues to be determinative of the genre to this day.<sup>18</sup> Risk is fundamental, both as the core motivation for the climber and as one of the underlying (if potentially morbid) reasons why its literature is so compelling. As Al Alvarez wryly observes, placing yourself in a situation where you may be risking your own life ‘clears the head wonderfully’.<sup>19</sup> Terse understatement and gallows humour, together with more direct appraisals of what is at stake, have all been employed in writers’ attempts to confront and rationalize the role of mortality and risk in their narratives.

The fact that the exposure to risk, trauma and death is here entirely voluntary distinguishes the genre from others to which it bears at least some apparent similarities, such as war literature. This is, of course, an activity undertaken for enjoyment and by design – not an ordeal imposed through coercion. In one of the many anthologies of climbing essays, articles and ephemera I came upon a piece written by Quintin Hogg, originally published in the *New Statesman* in 1965. Hogg had impeccable establishment credentials – son of a Viscount, Eton, Oxford, the bar, Conservative Party politician and, ultimately, Lord Chancellor in the governments of both Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher. He was also a keen mountaineer. In his article, entitled ‘Why I like climbing’, Hogg makes no claim to competence or skill: ‘I stand on the rope. I fumble with my gloves. My spectacles mist over and fall off. My balaclava helmet grows icicles like stalactites. Given half a chance I tie myself in a hangman’s noose instead of a bowline’.<sup>20</sup> His climbing achievements are ‘practically negligible’. But this is by the by. ‘The real thing’, he tells us, ‘is the mountains themselves’,

In wet or fine, whether the ice forms treacherously on the rocks, or the granite is sensuously warm to the fingers in the sun, whether you are crunching happily up in the early morning on the points of your crampons, or staggering horribly down in the afternoon slush of an August snowfield, whether you can see 100 miles or six inches, it is a sheer joy to be in them, a pleasure as satisfying in retrospect or anticipation as in the enjoyment.<sup>21</sup>

‘Sheer joy’: surely as good a reason as there can be for our sporting exploits in the mountains. What else? The French Alpinist Lionel Terray knew that if the pleasure he derived from the activity were absent there would be no good reason to pick up his ice axe; he made first ascents in all the worlds’ greater ranges before finally settling upon the title

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<sup>18</sup> ‘The Alpine Obituary’, *Alpine Journal*, 11 (1882 - 1884), 78 – 85 (p. 78).

<sup>19</sup> ‘Foreword’, in *The Games Climbers Play*, comp. by Ken Wilson (London: Diadem, 1978; repr. London: Baton Wicks, 2006), pp. 11-12 (p. 12).

<sup>20</sup> In *The Mountaineer’s Companion*, ed. by Michael Ward (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1966), pp. 23 – 26 (p. 24).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.

*Conquistadores of the Useless* for his autobiography. Yet things are, of course, more complicated than that. At the highest level in any sport (no pun intended) there inevitably comes a point where its rigours - whether turning up at 5am every morning at the swimming pool, facing repeated throw downs as a batsman in the nets, building up altitude mileage as a distance runner – put fun at a premium. Even so, top-level alpinism (again, no pun intended) takes things that bit further. Auden got it – ‘it is curious how often in steep places | You meet someone short who frowns’.<sup>22</sup> You can read quite a few of these narratives without finding a great deal to smile about. Many describe climbing or mountaineering projects that are right at the limits of what is currently humanly possible in the mountains – and serious mountaineering is plainly a serious business. But there are a number of other possible reasons for this lack of levity.

One relates to the very nature of what is being undertaken. If the risk of injury or death is one possible result of venturing into the mountains, then that risk is commensurately greater when the limits of what is being attempted are continually being pushed. Al Alvarez again: ‘if you stick your neck out far enough, a qualitative change takes place; the psychology of the game alters’.<sup>23</sup> And, consequently, so does its literature. When an accident occurs the potential for a further fundamental change in the nature of the narrative becomes greater still. The writer is then addressing the death of a friend, a serious injury, or their own narrow escape. The narrative in those circumstances becomes that of a survivor of trauma. In saying this I am conscious that these narratives are very far from being what most would understand to be ‘trauma narratives’ in the generally accepted sense (Holocaust survivors, the survivors of sexual assault); and that such trauma as is experienced in the mountains is always accidental, an unfortunate by-product of a conscious decision to enter that environment. These are not narratives where the traumatic wound is inflicted (at least ordinarily) by the actions of others. Nevertheless, on any definition many of these narratives describe traumatic events.<sup>24</sup> Joe Simpson, whose book *Touching the Void* is the focus of Chapter I of this thesis, ultimately received a clinical diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the harrowing events he describes.<sup>25</sup> It follows that when considering

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<sup>22</sup> W. H. Auden, ‘Bucolics: III Mountains (for Hedwig Petzold)’, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson, rev. edn (London: Faber, 2009), pp. 214 – 216 (p. 215).

<sup>23</sup> *The Games Climbers Play*, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> The American Psychiatric Association revised the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder in the fifth edition of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*. It identifies the trigger to potential PTSD as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation. It includes scenarios where the individual directly experiences the traumatic event, or witnesses it in person: (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 2003) in *Psychiatry Online*, <https://dsm-psychiatryonline-org.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/doi/book/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596> [accessed 13 August 2019].

<sup>25</sup> Joe Simpson, *Touching the Void* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988; repr. London: Vintage, 1997), p. 213.



many of these works it is appropriate to read them in light of the existing theoretical work on trauma and narrative.

The austerity of so much mountain literature can also be traced way back: to the stiff upper lipped understatement of the alpine golden age, through the utilitarian prose of the post war period (see the Joe Brown extract above) to the more recent movement towards troubled introspection. All are forms of myth-making, and in many cases they bring with them the implied 'truth' of the mountaineer's exceptionalism. 'The mountaineer has a great advantage over the non-mountaineer' wrote Arnold Lunn back in 1939; he has 'been initiated into the secret of the ascetic, and... found the happiness which is the by-product of pain and danger'.<sup>26</sup> This is the mountaineer as a being that is somehow beyond the mere human. We are left looking at something very close to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, the Superman. At the lecture commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature the writer Roger Hubank made precisely this point. Referring to the epitaph of the mountaineer Alex MacIntyre – 'it is better to live one day as a tiger than a hundred as a sheep' – Hubank explained his reservations:

That's not a separation of human beings that sits comfortably with me. And I will tell you why. Of course, Alex was a young man. And he died young. But I am old. Old enough to remember the sheep. They were herded into cattle trucks. And the tigers wore black uniforms.<sup>27</sup>

There is one more reason why so much mountain literature reads like this. The vast majority of these texts are written by, and about, men. Whilst women have climbed since the earliest years of alpinism,<sup>28</sup> it has been, and generally still is, a gender-biased sporting endeavour, with female participants in the minority.<sup>29</sup> Even now, when there has been a substantial recent increase in the number of women taking up climbing in the UK, they are still outnumbered by men by roughly three to one.<sup>30</sup> For this reason (as well the ideological, social and cultural factors that have historically served to restrict or silence the female voice more generally), mountain literature written by women represents a proportionately small

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<sup>26</sup> 'Alpine Mysticism and Cold Philosophy', *Alpine Journal*, 51 (London: Alpine Club, 1939), 290 – 291.

<sup>27</sup> 'Climbing Fiction and the Imagination', text of lecture given at Kendal Town Hall on 15 November 2012 (text supplied by the author).

<sup>28</sup> Marie Paradis of Chamonix became the first woman to climb Mont Blanc in 1808: Trevor Braham, *When the Alps Cast their Spell: Mountaineers of the Alpine Golden Age* (Glasgow: The In Pinn, 2004), p. 220.

<sup>29</sup> Martina Gugglberger, 'Climbing Beyond the Summits: Social and Global Aspects of Women's Expeditions in the Himalayas', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 32 (2015), 597–613 (p. 598).

<sup>30</sup> British Mountaineering Council Equity Survey Report (28 June 2006), at <https://www.thebmc.co.uk/bmc-equity-survey-results> (accessed 2 February 2020).

fraction of the whole.<sup>31</sup> This gender bias has implications for the nature of the narratives that are presented.<sup>32</sup> From its inception in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, climbing as a sport or leisure activity has been tightly bound up with the tropes of hyper-masculinity: the subjugation of the landscape to man's will, the imperial urge to conquer and possess, the desire for control. As the sports historian Paul Gilchrist suggests, 'the coupling of mountaineering and masculinity is pronounced both in the gendered ways of viewing mountain landscapes and also in the narratives that have accompanied the public acclaim of mountain conquest'.<sup>33</sup> I would suggest that the particular characteristics of mountain literature that I have referred to above – the centrality of repetition, the presence of extreme risk, the notion of the climber as heroic – flow directly from this version of masculinity.<sup>34</sup> In his exploration of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* the theorist Terry Eagleton uses a form of words that encapsulates what we are looking at here: referring to the aesthetic subject, he writes,

It is travelling to that higher location where it will find its true home, the phallic law of abstract reason which quite transcends the sensible. To attain full moral stature we must be wrenched from the maternal pleasures of Nature and experience in the majesty of the sublime the sense of an infinite totality to which our feeble imaginations will never be equal. Yet it is in the very moment of being thus subdued, sharply recalled to our true finitude, we know a new kind of exultant power.<sup>35</sup>

The repetition central to the activity of climbing – repeating the same routes, the repetition of the bodily act, recording the minutiae of every notable ascent, the necessary acceptance of risk every time a climb is contemplated – can be seen as an attempt to attain mastery, control, a form of transcendence of the sensible towards that fundamentally gendered sense

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<sup>31</sup> To give some recent context, of the thirty-nine winners of the Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature since it commenced in 1983, a total of eight were female. Of those, four were the authors of biographical works recounting the exploits of male climbers: see <http://www.boardmantasker.com/archive> (accessed 3 February 2020).

<sup>32</sup> The climbing narratives of women, and their points of similarity and divergence from male texts, represent a significant further area of and for research. On women climbers and climbing narratives see Shirley Angell, *Pinnacle Club: A History of Women Climbing* (Glasgow: Pinnacle Club, 1988); Carol A. Osborne, 'Gender and the Organisation of British Climbing c. 1857 – 1955' (PhD diss., University of Lancaster, 2004); *Sport in History* 33 (2013), a volume devoted to gender and British climbing histories; Clare A. Roche, *The Ascent of Women: How Female Mountaineers Explored the Alps 1850-1900* (PhD diss., Birkbeck College, University of London, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> 'Gender and British Climbing Histories: Introduction', *Sport in History*, 33 (2013), 223-235 (p. 226).

<sup>34</sup> There is, of course, more than one version of masculinity – even amongst climbers. See Victoria Robinson, *Everyday Masculinities and Extreme Sport: Male Identity and Rock Climbing* (Oxford: Berg, 2008). Robinson acknowledges, however, that in mountain literature at least these are the exceptions that prove the rule: here 'we find that male climbers, still, in the main, have difficulty in expressing emotion in the public sphere. Perhaps because... it is too much associated with being 'out of control'', (p. 111).

<sup>35</sup> *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 91.

of exultant power. It is a thread which runs through so much of the sport's literature; and it is upon these narratives that this thesis seeks to focus.<sup>36</sup>

Taking a broad reading of the literature as my starting point, in this thesis I examine how these defining themes and tropes are deployed in a selection of non-fictional primary mountain texts. Each has been chosen as being paradigmatic - up to a point at least - of the genre as a whole. Each was written post-1945, being the proximate moment when the expansion in the social composition of those heading for the mountains brought about a shift away from the strain of romanticism that had previously dominated mountain literature.<sup>37</sup> This allows a tighter focus upon more naturally complementary narratives - a comparison of like with (almost) like. The texts take different forms (two are accounts of single expeditions, one is an autobiography, one a collection of essays written over a period of years), the differences in focus and composition allowing a broader yet more nuanced exploration of the role of repetition and risk in the literature as a whole.

Joe Simpson's *Touching the Void* is the focus of Chapter I. Simpson's tale of his survival after an accident in the Peruvian Andes is now (in)famous. I look at Simpson's telling and repeated retelling of his story, both in *Touching the Void* and in associated and subsequent texts, and consider how his exposure to trauma on Siula Grande is there reviewed and revised, described and dismantled, in an ongoing attempt to make sense of the events that have come to define him. In Chapter II I look at two works in which the tropes found in mountain literature are used to advance a particular teleological position. The first, Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna*, is his account of the 1950 French expedition to the Nepalese

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<sup>36</sup> It would be reductive to claim that none of these tropes are to be found in the narratives of female climbers. Arlene Blum's account of the 1978 all female expedition to Annapurna, *A Woman's Place* (London: Granada, 1980), is as full of disagreements, climbers jockeying for position and indifference to extreme danger as any male-authored expedition book. Yet female writers do suggest many differences of approach. The US 'big wall' climber Lynn Hill describes her (highly successful) approach to 'climbing like a girl', one that is very different to a traditional male style founded on power and aggression - see Lynn Hill, *Climbing Free: My Life in the Vertical World* (New York: 2002, Norton) and Dianne Chisholm, 'Climbing like a Girl: An Exemplary Adventure in Feminist Phenomenology', *Hypatia*, 23 (2008), 9 - 40. The poet and climber Helen Mort gives a voice to the female climbing experience in verse, sometimes adopting the persona of otherwise voiceless female climbers from the alpine golden age - see poems such as 'An Easy Day for a Lady' and 'How to Dress', *No Map Could Show Them* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016), p. 2, 3. Maria Coffey, who was the partner of the British mountaineer Joe Tasker at the time of his death on Everest in 1982, has written extensively about both the differing factors motivating female climbers, and the 'taboo subject' of the toll taken by masculine climbing obsession upon the lives of partners, family and friends - see *Fragile Edge: Loss on Everest* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989) and *Where the Mountain Casts its Shadow* (London: Hutchinson, 2003). These are simply notable examples taken from a rapidly developing and expanding literature that is beyond the scope of this thesis. This is plainly an area for further research and exploration.

<sup>37</sup> Terry Gifford argues that the rejection of the pastoral idealization of mountain experience at this time led to the fundamental shift in the nature of much (mainly British) mountain writing, to what he describes as the 'anti-pastoral': *Reconnecting with John Muir*, p. 165.

Himalaya.<sup>38</sup> In common with Simpson's book, this is ostensibly an account of a single expedition. Annapurna became the first eight-thousand metre peak to be climbed, but at great personal cost, Herzog and other team members losing fingers and toes to frostbite. Here I examine how Herzog makes repeated use of the discourse of the sublime, in order to create a picture of himself, an identity, that allows him to justify, to himself and to others, the sacrifices that were made – and hence allow for the possibility of a subsequent life worth living. Whilst Simpson revisits and reconsiders the trauma he experienced in text after text, in Annapurna Herzog doggedly sticks to his figurative framework in order to set in stone the record in a single narrative. The second work is the autobiography of the Scottish mountaineer Dougal Haston, *In High Places*. Haston was the lead climber on virtually every major British expedition to the Himalayas in the late 1960s and 1970s, becoming the first to climb (with Don Whillans) the South Face of Annapurna in 1970, and (with Doug Scott) the South West Face of Everest in 1975; in the course of these expeditions Haston lost many close friends. Where Simpson and Herzog are defined by a single mountain event, Haston's narrative recounts a series: climb after climb, success after success, death after death. I analyse how Haston, as he compulsively recorded details of his climbs in diaries, hut log books, articles and books, seems to have gradually accepted and assimilated the notion of the mountaineer as exceptional, creating a simplified, superior, identity for himself that allowed him to transcend the tragedies in his personal life. Finally, in Chapter III, I look at the work of the climber and writer Jim Perrin and, in particular, his anthology *The Climbing Essays*. Published in 2006, it encompasses almost forty years' worth of Perrin's thoughts on and around the subject of climbing. Unlike the narratives of Simpson, Herzog and Haston, Perrin's book is more than the narrative of one ascent, or one (climbing) life. Presenting the British climbing scene almost as Bakhtinian carnival, Perrin's collection offers up a multiplicity of colourful characters - both in life and in death. The passage of time allows Perrin to return again and again to these key individuals, as well as to the issues that are central to the sport – why do we climb? why do we accept the risk? How do we rationalise the deaths that result from it? – repeatedly approaching each from a different angle, taking a fresh perspective, in an attempt to pin down an answer. Here I look at how Perrin has

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<sup>38</sup> The book is a work of French literature, and my reference to it in this thesis is to the English translation. *Annapurna* is the most widely read work of mountain literature in the canon, and has influenced countless climbers and mountaineers around the world since its publication – including, in its English translation, the other writers whose works form the primary focus of this thesis. Thus my (flimsy) justification for including it here.

taken these questions, weighed them up and, over time, gradually come to an accommodation with the impossibility of reaching solutions to the problems he poses.

## Sources

Given the nature of the works examined it will not be a surprise to learn that much of the primary research was undertaken outside the confines of a university library. Extensive use was made of the Alan Rouse Collection of Mountain Literature, held at the Sheffield Central Library. One of the UK's largest mountain literature collections, it holds (in particular) collections of all the major climbing and mountaineering journals, as well as being a repository for Mount Everest Foundation expedition reports (from which I was able to access the original report filed by Joe Simpson and Simon Yates upon their return from Siula Grande, amongst others). Research was also carried out at the library of the Alpine Club, held at the club's premises in the City of London. This proved particularly useful for locating old and out of print volumes, and single issues of particular journals and periodicals either missing or unavailable elsewhere. Reference was also made to the extensive collection of relevant press cuttings held by the library.

With the benefit of a Petrie Watson Exhibition grant I undertook archival research at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh, of particular relevance to my research into Dougal Haston. There I had access to:

- a large number of long out of print and difficult to obtain mountaineering books by Dougal Haston and his contemporaries, including Haston's book *Eiger Direct* (1966) and his own copy of Tom Patey's *One Man's Mountains* (1971). Both incorporated intriguing inscriptions in Haston's own hand.
- Items from the Graham Brown and Lloyd Mountaineering Collections; the Humble Collection of press-cuttings relating to Scottish Mountaineering; and the Scottish Mountaineering Club archive, held on deposit at the NLS. The latter was of particular interest, including a rare copy of the boys' comic the *Hornet* from August 1971, the front and back pages of which consisted of a comic strip biography of Haston's life story, as well as the original log books taken from the SMC's climbing refuges, in which Haston, Chris Bonington and their contemporaries in the 1950s and 1960s scribbled details of the routes they had just completed on Ben Nevis and in Glencoe,

providing an unusual source of contemporaneous, fragmentary, autobiographical material.

Whilst in Edinburgh I also visited the library of the Edinburgh University Mountaineering Club, where I was able to locate a copy of the *Edinburgh University Mountaineering Club Journal 1959/60* (missing from the NLS collection) containing Dougal Haston's earliest article (written at the beginning of his first year at University), together with an article in the club's journal written by Joe Simpson, dating back to his own time as a student at the University in 1980.

Finally, additional archival research was undertaken at the offices of the Mountain Heritage Trust in Penrith. There I had access to the original draft of Simon Yates' second book, *The Flame of Adventure*, as well as to material forming part of the extensive Chris Bonington archive that is held by the trust; this included correspondence, transcripts, diaries and journals kept by various members of the 1970 Annapurna South Face and 1972 and 1975 Everest South West Face expeditions.

## Chapter I

### Telling and Retelling the Void: Joe Simpson and *Touching the Void*

The first published account of the 1985 mountaineering expedition undertaken by Joe Simpson and Simon Yates, to the Cordillera Huayhuash in Peru, appeared later that year in the climbing magazine *High*. Simpson described it, incongruously, as ‘a successful and highly traumatic trip’, as if trauma was a constitutive part of their achievement. He offered the following summary of what had happened:

On Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> May, very fit and well acclimatised the pair snow-holed beneath the West Face of Siula Grande (6360m). They began their ascent of this, ‘one of the biggest unclimbed faces in Peru’ (Al Rouse, *Mountain* 90), at 7.30 the next morning. Six days later Simon staggered into Base Camp, exhausted, dehydrated and suffering from frostbitten fingers. He told Richard Hawkins, a non-climbing friend who we had met in Lima and invited along, that Joe was dead.

Three days later, badly injured, Joe crawled to within 20m of the tent. In the confusing darkness of a snow storm at half-past-midnight, Simon heard his shouts and dragged him to safety, food and medicine.<sup>1</sup>

The story of what happened during those nine days in 1985 was later retold by Simpson in his best-selling book *Touching the Void*, and it has been repeated and referenced by him on countless occasions subsequently, in books, articles, interviews, motivational public speaking and a documentary feature film. But here, in this very first, very brief introductory account of 100 words or so, we read only that Simpson ‘was dead’, and then came back to life - the story pared down to the barest of essentials. Here the actual narrative is absent, yet we sense its spectral presence, expanding to fill the abyssal break between the words ‘dead’ and ‘three days later’. It is a textual void containing a story which is unwritten, yet to be written, suggesting a need for repetition, for re-presentation (and Simpson begins the process in the very same article, which contains a diarised account of these events). The curious use of the third person anticipates this return, Simpson distancing himself from himself by referring to the ‘Joe’ of historical record rather than the autobiographical ‘I’ of all his subsequent retellings of the story; at the same time setting-up, framing and authenticating everything that is to come after with an array of objective, historically

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Simpson, ‘Out on a Limb’, *High*, 35 (October 1985), 35 – 41 (p. 35).

verifiable, detail ('On Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> May', '6360m', 'Mountain 90', '20m'). The one jarring slip from the third person to the first - 'we had met in Lima' – nevertheless hints at instabilities in the text, and evidences this as a point of transition for both writer and subject. Here Joe Simpson's tale - one of the most widely read adventure narratives of our time – has become emblematic. In this chapter, by reference to the telling and retelling of Simpson's experience in *Touching the Void* and its connected texts, I explore the nature and implications of this particular form of autobiographical repetition.

Early in *Touching the Void*, Simpson describes writing the entry for 19 May 1985 in his contemporaneous expedition diary, quoting it as follows:

"I'm still trying to adjust to being here. It feels menacingly remote and exhilarating at the same time; so much better than the Alps – no hordes of climbers, no helicopters, no rescue – just us and the mountains...Life seems far simpler and more real here. It's easy to let events and emotions flow past without stopping to look..."

I wondered how much of this I really believed, and how it related to what we were doing in the Andes.<sup>2</sup>

The quoted script appears a familiar one, grounded in, yet presented as an advance upon ('so much better than'), the alpine summits of the European Romantic tradition. A fragmentary quest narrative, it offers a statement of individualist intent ('no rescue – just us and the mountains'), seeking a 'simpler and more real' life-in-nature, dominated by a classically sublime landscape ('menacingly remote and exhilarating'). This is a scenario with which Simpson is well acquainted. He writes elsewhere of reading, at the age of fourteen, two of the classics of mountaineering literature, *The White Spider* by Heinrich Harrer and *Annapurna* by Maurice Herzog. One does not have to look far or very closely in these to find a textual predecessor to the Andes of Simpson's diary entry. Here, for example, we see that Maurice Herzog's emotions when confronted by the Himalaya follow a similar ontological template - the sense of exhilaration, the fearsome thrill of isolation that comes with being in a sublime mountain environment:

An astonishing happiness welled up in me, but I could not define it. Everything was so new, so utterly unprecedented. It was not in the least like anything I had known in the Alps, where one feels buoyed up by the

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<sup>2</sup> Simpson, *Touching the Void*, p.18. Further references are given after quotations in the main text.



presence of others [...] This was a different universe – withered, desert, lifeless; a fantastic universe where the presence of man was not foreseen.<sup>3</sup>

Simpson is quite aware that a proximity to violent death or injury key is invariably one of the constitutive themes of this cultural narrative. Here is his description of his reaction as a teenager to reading (in *The White Spider*) the story of Adolf Mayr's doomed attempt to make the first solo ascent of the Eiger's north face:

The lone climber (Adi to his friends) was a tiny point of life, of sheer nerve and courage, in this cold, snowy vastness. To me he was a symbol of the incredible power that lies within every human life, a power that challenges the unknown, confronts the greatest of fears in the confident belief that it will overcome anything. [...] For me the significance lay not in the fact that he died but in what he had dared to attempt.<sup>4</sup>

Again the solitary human figure pitched into, and against, the sublime, a tale of heroism in which the empathetically friendly protagonist, 'Adi', had 'dared to attempt' the unknown. But at the same time we are aware that this description of reading *The White Spider* was written in 1993/1994, after the events described in *Touching the Void*, when Simpson would have had every reason to appreciate the limits of overly romanticised notions of self-reliance. Note how Simpson's description of the effect on him of Mayr's story is given in the past tense. Its significance to him, at age 14, was as a stirring tale of unfaltering courage; but by the time Simpson writes the account it is significant because of the fact of Mayr's death.

We can now return to the diary extract - the only such extract in the entire book - and to that startling sentence that immediately follows it: 'I wondered how much of this I really believed, and how it related to what we were doing in the Andes'. Here the writer of *Touching the Void* is reflecting upon an earlier autobiographical fragment, which in turn (by intertextual implication) reflects upon previous (auto/biographical) texts. The questioning rhetoric is directed temporally backwards, to the narrated subject, but also (more importantly) forwards to the writer who, having 'died' and come back, now holds a different perspective. Questioning the basic truth of the diary in this way ('how much of this I really believed') naturally has implications for our reading of Simpson's story as a whole. At the same time the sentence betrays an awareness of repetition, the cultural narrative(s), the stories of Herzog and Mayr, condensed and repeated in the diary extract, repeated in 'what we were doing in the Andes', repeated in the text. In this sentence, situated only four pages into the

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice Herzog, *Annapurna: The First Conquest of an 8000-Metre Peak* Herzog, trans. by Nea Morin and Janet Adam Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952; repr. London: Pimlico, 1997), p. 158.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Simpson, *This Game of Ghosts* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 59.

narrative, Simpson pointedly distances himself from the quintessentially romantic script he has extracted from his diary and, through the play of repetition, implicitly calls into question the very notion of the ineffable, pre-linguistic self. I want to suggest that this repetition – before the text, surrounding the text, within the text, after the text – becomes the dominant trope of Simpson’s story.

Adopting a classical psychoanalytical approach, we might characterize the act of writing *Touching the Void* as a manifestation of Freudian *fort/da* - an attempt to gain mastery over previously uncontrollable events by repetition - operating in the context of traumatic neuroses similar to those of the First World War soldiers investigated by Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.<sup>5</sup> Yet Simpson’s experiences ought to be distinguished from those described in other, more generally established and accepted, forms of trauma narrative, where the traumatic experience is imposed by others; for mountaineers such as Simpson, it is a possible consequence of an activity undertaken wholly voluntarily. This difference is compounded: the sociologist Stephen Lyng has described how voluntary risk-takers, “edgeworkers” such as mountaineers, are generally characterized by an unshakeable belief in their ability to maintain control amidst the uncontrollable.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, this is what Pat Hunt and Brian Daines (perhaps over-pathologizing) describe as “a way of life [...] underpinned by an omnipotent denial of mortality”.<sup>7</sup> Simpson himself flags an additional point of departure, describing how the experience of mountaineering, particularly at its most extreme and technical, has “a coldly savage addictive quality”.<sup>8</sup> It is not simply repetitive, but compulsively so.

These are material differences, to be kept in mind when applying existing (psycho-) analytical models to texts such as *Touching the Void*. This means, for example, that in approaching the traumatic experiences of mountaineers as Freudian *fort/da* we encounter a new paradigm: the mountaineer’s conviction that control can be maintained subtly alters the theoretical dynamic, the experience now akin to a *re-gaining* of mastery over events, transmuting into a process of explanation and rationalization – and something which, in its turn, justifies a further repetition, a return to the mountains. We find here something that perhaps more closely approximates that “very profoundly autobiographical” process that

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<sup>5</sup> It is striking that Simpson himself later makes a connection between climbing and the First World War, his second book of autobiographical writing (*This Game of Ghosts*) taking its title from a Siegfried Sassoon poem.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Lyng, ‘Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 95 (1990), 851–886.

<sup>7</sup> Pat Hunt and Brian Daines, ‘Defensive Processes Enacted Through Mountaineering and their Impact on Climbers’, *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 20 (2004), 441–452 (p.452).

<sup>8</sup> Joe Simpson, ‘Introduction’, in Herzog, p. xvi.

Jacques Derrida describes Freud himself undertaking in his efforts to interpret *fort/da*. For Simpson's story, Derrida's analysis is apposite:

Freud ... always ends up finding his interpretations insufficient. One by one, he throws them away and moves on to another. He always has to take one more step: he moves on to another which he also throws away until finally he retains no single interpretation. He himself is doing *fort/da* with his own interpretations, and it never stops.<sup>9</sup>

This is repetition with a *différance*, where every new interpretation is distinct and yet carries a trace of the other. "I wondered how much of this I really believed": the doubts expressed by Simpson then, as he wrote his diary in Peru, are repeated now in *Touching the Void*, but the action of *fort/da*, here a process of compulsive differentiation, demands a fresh interpretation. What was originally a reflection upon the limitations of romantic individualism becomes more closely aligned with the autobiographical imperative to explain and understand. To again quote Derrida, here is "the play of the *fort/da* infinitely exceeding the limits of the text".<sup>10</sup> The essence of Joe Simpson's story – to die, and come back – is itself a *fort/da* of colossal proportions, the foundational *fort/da* of Western/Christian culture. But the whole process of writing the story, the telling and retelling of the story, the entire *Touching the Void* enterprise, is also a process of *fort/da*; like Freud, Simpson is doing *fort/da* with his own interpretations, and it never stops.

Even in that first published account of the expedition in *High* magazine, the story is 'told' on at least three occasions. The first telling is found on the front cover: a photograph of Joe Simpson snapped on the summit, coupled with the headline 'Joe Simpson's Epic in the Andes'. The story is given in the third person (and presumably the headline was not written by Simpson himself), that one word, 'epic', both locating the story firmly within a masculine heroic/mythic narrative yet at the same time indicating, in the humorously understated vernacular of climbing, that this is the proverbial tale of 'the climb that went wrong'. The article itself tells us the story twice: initially in the third person Introduction quoted at the beginning of this chapter, and then in a first-person account given in a diary format, spread over seven pages. This is introduced as follows:

Below is a transcript of Joe's diary covering these events. It was written in hospital and it is hoped that this detailed account will not only interest readers, but most importantly pay just tribute to Simon's efforts and explain

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 71.

why he was forced into one of the worst decisions a mountaineer could ever be faced with – to cut the rope. Ironically, by being forced to be the apparent cause of his friend’s death he paradoxically saved the man’s life!<sup>11</sup>

The story is introduced as a peer-directed ‘climber’s epic’, something which will ‘interest readers’, not as a heroic narrative of survival (note the incongruous gallows-bravado of the final exclamation mark). The primary concern here is authenticity. We are offered a ‘detailed account’, introduced in the distancing third person. The diary format then gives the semblance of contemporaneity, of access to an unmediated text (yet, as we are told, the ‘diary’ was written after the event by Simpson, whilst in hospital in Peru). And, ‘most importantly’, the story is explicitly testimonial in function, paying ‘just tribute’ - tribute as justice - to Simon Yates and his actions on the mountain. Bear in mind that, on the pair’s return from Peru, Yates’ actions were subject to some criticism. In an article published in the *Mail on Sunday* in July 1985, it was reported that he had ‘tried and sentenced his best friend to death. Then with one swift cut of his knife, carried out the execution’.<sup>12</sup> Simpson’s apparent motive, then, in publishing the article was primarily to set the record straight. In these circumstances the switch from third person narrative to the reassuringly candid first person of the diary extracts makes perfect sense, the autobiographical ‘I’ a presumptive guarantor of authenticity.

Rather than look here at the account published in *High* magazine, I instead want to turn to the next telling of the story, Simpson’s *Touching the Void*, first published almost 3 years later, in 1988. As with the *High* article, Simpson has stated that his initial motivation for writing the book was to stop the ostracism of Yates: ‘something had to be done to correct this injustice’.<sup>13</sup> That ‘something’ is given prominence by a dedication, inscribed on a page alone, immediately before the table of contents:

To

SIMON YATES

for a debt I can never repay

And to those friends who have gone to the mountains

and have not returned

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<sup>11</sup> Joe Simpson, ‘Out on a Limb’, p. 35

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Simon Yates, ‘Re-touching the Void’, *Alpine Journal*, 109 (2004), 211 – 214 (p. 214).

<sup>13</sup> Simpson, *This Game of Ghosts*, p. 213.

Laid out in a manner reminiscent of a funerary inscription, the dedication reads like a testamentary bequest. It is post-structuralist orthodoxy that autobiographical discourse is 'the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave',<sup>14</sup> and here we are presented with Simpson's 'last will and testament' inscribed upon the simulacra tombstone of Yates and (unnamed) missing friends, a peculiar contiguity that continues in the text. For in *Touching the Void* not only do we find the first person narrative of Joe Simpson, but also the occasional, spectrally italicised, 'voice' of Simon Yates, albeit that (as Simpson's editor made clear shortly after publication) Yates did not write a word of the book.<sup>15</sup> His voice is taken from conversations with Simpson, and then rendered by Simpson in his own words.<sup>16</sup> This, again, is a play for authenticity, consistent with the testimonial function of the text. If, as Linda Anderson has suggested, to testify is to give 'one's story as part of a larger verdict to be made', then Simpson's voice alone is insufficient to address the overall 'crisis of truth'.<sup>17</sup> Rather Yates' testimony is seen as necessary precisely because the truth is contestable. And yet, at the same time – keeping in mind here Paul de Man's famous argument that the trope of all autobiographical writing is prosopopoeia<sup>18</sup> - this strategy also serves to highlight the divergence of the text from its testimonial aspirations. For by giving his text two 'faces' in this way, one of which is explicitly his creation, Simpson paradoxically concentrates our attention upon the possibility of fiction in the text as a whole. We more readily comprehend that we have, in fact, been deprived of the actual testimonial voice.

The first occasion we come upon the parallel voices of Simpson and Yates immediately follows Simpson's accident whilst descending the North Ridge of Siula Grande. This is, in so many ways, the crux moment, the break in the text - the instant that control is lost. The climb to the summit has been briefly dealt with, in twenty pages or so; the vast bulk of the remainder (some 128 pages) is now given over to the events that follow the accident. Whilst in the original *High* article the entire (diarised) account is given in Simpson's first person, at this point in *Touching the Void* the narrating 'I' is now very deliberately fractured. The words that immediately precede the first intervention of the Yates' voice are quite clear: 'in an instant an uncrossable gap had come between us and we were no longer a team

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<sup>14</sup> Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp.67 - 81 (p. 77).

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Colwell, letter published in *Mountain*, 128 (July/August 1989), p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> On the 'Acknowledgements' page Simpson thanks Yates 'for allowing me to write these sensitive emotions in my own words': *Touching the Void*, p. 216.

<sup>17</sup> Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 127.

<sup>18</sup> Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', p. 76.

working together' (75). The three corresponding passages below describe the moments immediately following the accident, when Simpson informs Yates that he has broken his leg. The first and second are from *Touching the Void*, the italicised passage the one spoken in the voice of Yates; the third extract is taken from the *High* article:

*He told me very calmly that he had broken his leg. He looked pathetic, and my immediate thought came without any emotion, You're fucked, matey. You're dead...no two ways about it! I think he knew it too. I could see it in his face. It was all totally rational. I knew where we were, I took in everything around me instantly, and knew he was dead. (76)*

'I've broken my leg.'

His expression changed instantly...

He stared at me. It seemed that he looked harder and longer than he should have done because he turned away sharply. Not sharply enough though. I had seen the look come across his face briefly, but in that instant I knew his thoughts. (74)

Simon joined me, sized up the situation, and set off for the ridge.<sup>19</sup>

'Sized up the situation': Yates' reaction, as described in the *High* article, is the same as, yet so much more than, the *Touching the Void* accounts. The detached, 'rational' assessment made by the Yates' voice is of a piece with the earlier workmanlike sizing up. But here the instant is repeated, replayed over in the text: '*my immediate thought*'; '*I took in everything around me instantly*'; 'his expression changed instantly'; 'in that instant I knew his thoughts'. The significance of this instant is spelt out - it is the moment of Simpson's death: '*I took in everything around me instantly, and knew he was dead*' - not '*had died*', but rather the matter-of-fact immediacy of '*was dead*'. That this verdict should be offered by Yates is striking, the play of *fort/da* so painfully exceeding the limits of the text. Here repetition operates at several levels: in the return to the instant of the original *High* article; in the parallel interpretations of the instant offered by the Simpson and Yates narrative voices; in the repeated writing of the instant at the (textual) instant itself; and, in what makes Simpson's narrative all the more astonishing, the fact that there is not merely a singular instant of death, to be eternally repeated in and by the text, but a multiplicity. From the moment he breaks his leg, until the moment of rescue, and even after, we are repeatedly confronted with this

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<sup>19</sup> Simpson, 'Out on a Limb', p. 38.

instant of death - repeated death, repeated. As John Porter put it in *Mountain*, Simpson 'is a man who dies a thousand deaths'.<sup>20</sup>

Cathy Caruth's work on Freud and Trauma suggests an interpretative point of entry here. She argues that repetition of traumatic experience is not so much an attempt at mastery over what happened, but rather over what did not, 'what was never fully grasped in the first place...the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one's own life'.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, she points out that part of Freud's traumatic 'fright' is attributed to waking from the nightmare and coming to the bewildering realisation of one's continued existence. Repetition becomes 'not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to claim one's survival'.<sup>22</sup> Simpson's narrative is strongly suggestive of this. After the accident, in an attempt at rescue, Yates begins to lower Simpson down the western flank of the mountain. Towards the bottom of the face, in darkness and atrocious weather, he inadvertently lowers Simpson over an ice cliff, leaving him dangling in space, slowly freezing to death, Simpson's weight on the rope gradually pulling Yates off the mountain at the same time. Simpson finds himself thinking of Toni Kurz, a climber who died whilst hanging frozen from a rope on the Eiger's north face:

Toni Kurz had fought and fought when he was dying on the Eiger. He had never once stopped fighting, and he had dropped suddenly dead on the rope still fighting to live. Rescuers had watched him die. It seemed strange to be in the same situation and not be bothered...maybe it's the cold? Won't be long now. I'll not last till morning... (99)

There is a peculiar dialectical logic being employed here. With an implicitly self-critical emphasis on that loaded pronoun, 'he', Simpson observes that Kurz 'never once stopped fighting, had done everything he could – yet still 'he' died. Simpson, having been 'in the same situation', now writing this account, asks: what did I do that meant, unlike Kurz, I survived? It is incomprehensible that I survived; I *cannot* have survived.<sup>23</sup> This reasoning pervades the entire text: 'I accepted that I was to die. There was no alternative' (107). It

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<sup>20</sup> John Porter, Review of *Touching the Void*, *Mountain* 123 (September/October 1988), p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 62.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 64.

<sup>23</sup> Reviewing *Touching the Void* for *High* magazine in November 1988, David Tonks contextualized Simpson's tale in just these terms: 'by all rights, this ought to be an obituary not a book review. The book should not exist, like the author': *High* 72 (November 1988), p. 62.

even leaks into the voice of Yates who - the rope cut, Simpson falling to no doubt certain death deep in a glacial crevasse - now contemplates completing the descent alone:

*With the coming of day I thought of what I must do. I knew I wouldn't succeed. It wasn't right for me to succeed. I had thought it all through. This was what must happen to me now. I was no longer afraid, and the dread in the night had gone with the dawn. I knew I would attempt it, and I knew it would kill me. (105)*

The words seem odd – we know that Yates has already, incredibly, made it most of the way down, during a storm whilst battling against being pulled from the face by Simpson's weight. Are we still to read this as testimonial authentication? Victoria Stewart, writing about the use by Charlotte Delbo of different first person voices in the third volume of her autobiography, suggests that Delbo is not simply thereby 'authorising' these stories, but is also making use of them 'as a means of elaborating or exploring her own experience'.<sup>24</sup> Certainly we see this in *Touching the Void* – for example, in the corresponding accounts of Yates' reaction on learning that Simpson had broken his leg – but at other times, such as here, the voices merge, Simpson's experience repeated and refracted to emerge as that of the Other. In another play of *fort/da* we come again to prosopopoeia, Simpson bearing the face of, defaced by, 'Yates'. Testimonial authentication is subverted by the return, the compulsive reinterpretation of traumatic experience. In the following sequence, the voices are indistinguishable as Simpson reverts to the autobiographical 'I', putting his face (back) on: the same fatalistic certainty in predestination, the same coldly detached acceptance of imminent death. It is the same instant of death, repeated. 'I wasn't meant to get out of here' Simpson tells us, having found that he has fallen deep into a glacial crevasse after the cutting of the rope:

I felt calm. It was going to end in the crevasse. Perhaps I had always known it would end this way. I felt pleased to be able to accept it calmly. All that sobbing and shouting had been too much. Acceptance seemed better. There was no trauma this way. (114)

Joseph G Kronick, has argued that 'autobiography does not consist in making known what is true...but it promises to make truth, which means that, as an autobiographer, I testify at this moment, to my secret, what has been reserved for me and I alone am in a position

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<sup>24</sup> Victoria Stewart, *Women's Autobiography: War and Trauma* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 136.



to tell'.<sup>25</sup> The cumulative layering of voices found in *Touching the Void*, the intra-textual process of construction and reinforcement by repetition, are, I think, paradigmatic of this. At the same time, Simpson's repeated telling of his experiences takes us further, from truth's making to its re-making. Comparing the account of Simpson's time in the crevasse found in *Touching the Void* with that presented in *High* magazine 3 years earlier, we find slight, but definite, differences. Thus in the article Simpson's thoughts before falling asleep are 'pull your finger out, fight it, take it in stages, stages, see what the morning brings'; but in the book he is simply overwhelmed, sobbing himself to sleep in 'childlike' bursts. In the article he does not pull down (and thus discover) the cut rope until the following morning (this then prompting his decision to lower himself further into the crevasse), yet in the book he pulls in the rope during the night, leading to the realization that 'I'll die here after all'. Whilst the article describes him attempting to climb out during the night using the 'tied-off' rope as a belay, failing, and later, the next day, 'almost' laughing at the impossibility of what he had attempted, in the book he does not attempt the climb until after waking the next morning.<sup>26</sup> These are relatively minor discrepancies, mostly simply of chronology, but the apparent irreconcilability of the texts does, on the face of it, create a problematic, particularly in our reading of Simpson's book as a testimonial account.

Here we should acknowledge the nature of the memories that are being related. Caruth has described the difficulty of relocating a traumatic event in narrative memory: known only through traumatic return/repetition, translation to a communicable narrative may mean a reduction in both the accuracy and sense of immediacy that are normally its characteristic.<sup>27</sup> Simpson touches on something like this in the following account of his writing *Touching the Void*:

I threw the first 40,000 words away. I can't do this. But I was trying to impress, trying to structure it all, lying to myself. I'll tell it as it was, just what happened, what honestly happened to us. And it all flowed out. Seven weeks later it was done, and so was I. Drained and unhappy, disturbed by the memories of it all, frightened by how vivid it still was, and cold at the thought of how close I really had come to the void. Perhaps only then had it sunk in; only then had the drug blurred memory of Lima slowly taken shape.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Joseph G. Kronick, 'Philosophy as Autobiography: The Confessions of Jacques Derrida', *MLN*, 115 (2000), 997 – 1018 (p. 1003).

<sup>26</sup> Simpson, 'Out on a Limb', p. 40 and Simpson, *Touching the Void*, pp. 113 – 115.

<sup>27</sup> Cathy Caruth, 'Recapturing the Past: Introduction', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp.151 – 157 (p. 153).

<sup>28</sup> Joe Simpson, 'Touching the Void: After the epic was over', *High* 69 (August 1988), 30 – 31 (p. 31).

The first attempt is discarded, Simpson believing that he is 'lying' to himself. The account written whilst on morphine, in a Peruvian hospital (which formed the basis of the 1985 *High* article, and thus the differences highlighted above) is now merely a 'drug blurred memory', to be focussed, made precise, brought into 'shape'. Simpson finds both of these interpretations insufficient, the implication being that they were somehow inaccurate, not accurate enough. Yet in the return there can be no possibility of going back, of reconstituting completely those days in Peru. Rather, two or three years after the event, Simpson must now re-make his truth, elucidate the past from the perspective of the present by recounting 'what honestly happened' - a conflation of historical fact with ethics. That the 'burden of truth' in autobiographical narrative is indeed 'partly cognitive and partly ethical', as Mark Freeman has suggested, is evident from, for example, Simpson's thoughts in the crevasse: 'perhaps I had always known it would end this way' (114).<sup>29</sup> Simpson's words impliedly concede this to be a considered, specular reading of experience ('perhaps'), and simultaneously allow a further gloss: that this is the truth made, but *unknown*.

Simpson somehow manages to escape the crevasse, only to realize that the moment of death has not been evaded, merely temporarily postponed. We find iteration, the voice and situation quite familiar:

As I gazed at the distant moraines I knew that I must at least try. I would probably die out there amid those boulders. The thought didn't alarm me. It seemed reasonable, matter-of-fact. That was how it was. (140)

Like Toni Kurz, Simpson must 'try' to survive, even though he will almost certainly die in the process – 'that was how it was'. Staggering and crawling over miles of glacier and moraine, we again, and again, find Simpson at or approaching the moment of death: 'I fell, cried and swore, and felt sure that these were my last spastic efforts before I lay still for good' (175); 'I felt destroyed. For the first time in many days I accepted that I had finally come to the end of my strength' (187). From the moment that Simpson breaks his leg there is a relentless, quasi-mystical circularity to the story: Simpson faces the prospect of death, experiences the moment of death, survives that death – only for the cycle to begin again. This process of repetition creates a distinct metonymic relation, whereby the cycle – died and came back - comes to represent the story as a whole. Near the end of the story, however, Simpson

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<sup>29</sup> Mark Freeman, 'Rethinking the Fictive, Reclaiming the Real: Autobiography, Narrative Time and the Burden of Truth', in Gary D. Fireman, Ted E. McVay, Jr. and Owen J. Flanagan (eds.), *Narrative and Consciousness: Literature, Psychology, and the Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.115 – 128 (p.127).

having miraculously hopped and crawled back to camp, we find the following passage, in which the cycle is reversed:

For a moment nothing was said. With a start, I recognised the last time I had seen Simon look at me in this way. He had stood at the top of the ice cliff and stared at me for that moment too long. That instant moment when I knew he had accepted I would die. Then the spell was broken, and we burst into a torrent of questions. (189)

Here Simpson comes back - and 'dies'. He finds himself again at 'that instant moment', the point at which control was lost now located with a surfeit of precision, a paring down of the infinitesimal, the instant of death repeated. It is in this instant moment that we are told: *I knew he had accepted I would die*. There is a very deliberate division of the subject, the 'he' aggressively surrounded by the 'I', an accusatory flanking of that curious, drawn out, word, 'accepted', the word connoting agreement, concurrence – death becoming almost sacrificial (indeed, Simpson has subsequently written of how, at that moment, Yates looked as if he were the 'witness to an execution').<sup>30</sup> But, poised at that instant moment, Simpson draws back: 'then the spell was broken'. It is as if Simpson picks up and plays with a different interpretation – the cycle reversed, Yates' position recast – and then abruptly puts it down. Yates now tells Simpson of 'how he knew I was dead. He looked at me then as if he couldn't grasp that I had come back' (189). We are again at the precisely realised moment – 'he looked at me *then*' (my emphasis) – the instant repeated. But this time the cycle has been restored ('I was dead...I *had* come back'). It is both salvation and resurrection. Jacques Derrida observed how testimony requires the other to take you at your word, 'as if it were a matter of miracle'; here we are left grappling with the incomprehensible miracle of Simpson's survival.<sup>31</sup>

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At around the time of *Touching the Void*'s publication in 1988, Simpson wrote a further short piece for *High Magazine*, describing what had happened to him since the events in Peru in 1985. Sub-titled 'After the epic was over', the article describes his recovery from injury and subsequent return to climbing, the process of writing the book, and its aftermath. Simpson refers to the moment he crawled back to camp: 'from that moment I was forever changed'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Simpson, *This Game of Ghosts*, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 75.

<sup>32</sup> Joe Simpson, 'After the epic', p. 30.

Later in the piece Simpson repeats the phrase, only slightly altered. Now describing how the publication of the book has affected him materially, he writes: 'so, I'm an author, houseowner, car owner, self-employed business-man, with an accountant and a financial portfolio, life assurance and a will – I am forever changed'.<sup>33</sup> 'I was forever changed' / 'I am forever changed': identical yet distinct, the first formulation anchors that singular, shattering experience in Peru firmly to the past, whilst the latter connects Simpson to the telling of that experience both now and in the future, to a continuing process which approaches the condition of ontology. Indeed, 'forever changed' suggests rebirth, resurrection, Simpson's story itself, such that a definite contiguity begins to develop between author and narrative – Simpson substituting his story for himself.

Since the publication of *Touching the Void* Simpson has written a further seven books, as well as book introductions, numerous magazine articles, and additional epilogues for later editions of *Touching the Void*. He has given countless interviews, motivational presentations, appeared in a feature film; he has his own website.<sup>34</sup> Almost without exception, each involves a retelling of, or at least a reference to, the *Touching the Void* story: 'I had returned to Peru nine years after Siula Grande, full of superstitious worries about what might happen';<sup>35</sup> 'I cannot deny that it was ambitions and ego that very nearly killed me eleven years ago on Siula Grande in Peru';<sup>36</sup> 'I can only guess at how close I came to dying in Peru in 1985 when my climbing partner Simon Yates was forced to cut our rope'.<sup>37</sup> There is a very precise counting back here ('nine years after'; 'eleven years ago', 'in 1985'), Siula Grande becoming a kind of textual year zero, around which all other events, including the (then current) present, must be oriented. Simpson's introduction to an edition of Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna* offers another example. Describing the night spent by Herzog and his three companions sheltering in a crevasse on their descent from the mountain, frostbitten and snow-blind, Simpson continues as follows:

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>34</sup> It can be found at [www.touchingthevoid.com](http://www.touchingthevoid.com).

<sup>35</sup> Joe Simpson, 'Meteorite Ridge: Ishinca Valley, Cordillera Blanca, Peru 1994', *Climbers Club Journal*, 22 (1995), 60 – 66 (p. 62).

<sup>36</sup> Joe Simpson, *Dark Shadows Falling* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 204.

<sup>37</sup> Joe Simpson, 'Dead Man Walking', *Alpine Journal*, 103 (1998), 201 – 210 (p. 209). One could argue that this repeated return to Siula Grande is merely a reflection of commercial reality – the *Touching the Void* story demonstrably sells – and up to a point this is undoubtedly true. But, in Simpson's subsequent books and articles, looking beyond the 'By the author of *Touching the Void*' headlines on the dust jackets, it is difficult to see how the repetition *within* these texts necessarily improves their marketability, or coherence; indeed, the very opposite could be suggested, such that the repetition begins to resemble nothing so much as the proverbial elephant in the room.

I understand just how desperate they must have felt. I know the loneliness of being left for dead. High in the Peruvian Andes, I once endured an endless, bleak night in the depths of an icy crevasse from which there seemed to be no escape, and like Herzog, I too was convinced that it was my turn to die in the mountains. I now have an abundant sense of the despair and the ecstasy that such intense experiences create.<sup>38</sup>

Simpson tells us: I understand, *now*, in the present, because of what happened to me *then*, in the past. But what happened *then*? 'High in the Peruvian Andes, I once endured an endless, bleak night in the depths of an icy crevasse'. This is, yet is not, what happened to Simpson. It is an approximation, drawing upon, appropriating, the experience of Herzog. Yates has characterised what happened as 'like a fairy story', and here Simpson's prose certainly has the adjectival, once-upon-a-time character of fable.<sup>39</sup> He tells the story of the crevasse again in his second book of autobiographical writing, *This Game of Ghosts*: 'I had lost touch with life, with any sense of it, for a few terrible hours in that crevasse. Now there is just a void in my mind, a place where some memories have been locked away so that I can never recall them fully'.<sup>40</sup> This time there is an acceptance of the gaps and fissures of traumatic memory, of the fact that he can only recall so much. Nevertheless, the tale in both books is the same: I died, and came back. Look again at Simpson's description of 'the despair and ecstasy' found in intense experience. Herzog, on the summit of Annapurna, writes 'never had I felt happiness like this – so intense and so pure'.<sup>41</sup> We find no sense of this romantic ecstasy in Simpson's account of the 'terrible hours' spent in the crevasse or, indeed, in *Touching the Void* itself. Yet Simpson can still claim the experience of 'despair and ecstasy', because it is also death and rebirth, because it is his story.

And Simpson finds his story everywhere. In the course of one night in May 1996 eight climbers died on Mount Everest. Stories subsequently circulated about how certain climbers, on their way to and from the summit, had passed and ignored others dying nearby, offering no help or comfort. This incident, and others, causes Simpson to look again at the events in Peru, resulting in another change in perspective. 'Looking back rationally', Simpson returns to the point of his accident on the descent of Siula Grande:

When the testing moment came, I looked into the eyes of a friend and wondered what he was thinking, what he was going to do, whether he would

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<sup>38</sup> Joe Simpson, 'Introduction', in Herzog, *Annapurna*, p. xv.

<sup>39</sup> Simon Yates, quoted in Nerys Lloyd-Pierce, 'How we met: Joe Simpson and Simon Yates', *Independent on Sunday*, 23 February 1997, *Etcetera* supplement, p. 58.

<sup>40</sup> Simpson, *This Game of Ghosts*, p. 192.

<sup>41</sup> Herzog, *Annapurna*, p. 160.

leave me to die or help me. It seemed to take a very long time while my life hung in the balance of another man's thoughts.<sup>42</sup>

In 'the testing moment' Simpson looks 'into the eyes of a friend' and puts him to the test, puts him to proof, tries him, and awaits the result, a judgment on a friendship. It is a process that seems 'to take a very long time', but that word, 'friend', anticipates the outcome. It is not, now, in doubt. Yet we know, from *Touching the Void*, that this is also that 'instant moment when I knew he had accepted I would die', when Simpson 'knew' Yates' thoughts instantaneously. Then Yates' eyes had not been those of a friend, but of one giving distance 'to a wounded animal which could not be helped' (74). Both interpretations are correct but, for Simpson, neither is sufficient.

A further example can be found in Simpson's sixth book, *The Beckoning Silence*, which centres on his attempts to climb the north face of the Eiger. The book includes a brief summary of previous attempts; again, Simpson finds himself contemplating the struggles of Toni Kurz:

Eleven years after reading Heinrich Harrer's *The White Spider* I was to find myself hanging helplessly on a single strand of rope in a storming, freezing Andean night waiting to die. It had eerie and disturbing parallels with the death of Toni Kurz on the Eiger in 1937. That experience convinced me that I would never climb the north face of the Eiger.<sup>43</sup>

'Experience convinced me': *but* that experience was revelatory - to come back from the dead, to die and come back. Unlike Kurz, Simpson survived.<sup>44</sup> And so he continues:

Yet, as I watched the videos that Ray had sent me I found myself studying the terrain, judging the technical difficulty of the climb. With mounting excitement I began to realise that his idea was not quite as half-witted as I had first thought.

I was now vastly more experienced as a mountaineer. I was no longer the driven, ambitious and obsessed climber of my youth.

Now that very same experience convinces Simpson that the Eiger's north face is feasible after all – a sequence that exemplifies the relationship between Simpson and his story. Writing on the relational nature of autobiographical writing, Paul John Eakin considers texts

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<sup>42</sup> Simpson, 'Dead Man Walking', p. 210.

<sup>43</sup> Joe Simpson, *The Beckoning Silence* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 142.

<sup>44</sup> A comparison Simpson acknowledges when discussing his own attempts to climb the Eiger's north face: see Peter Stanford, 'Joe Simpson: My journey back into the void', *Telegraph*, 22 October 2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/features/3634463/Joe-Simpson-My-journey-back-into-the-void> [accessed 12 June 2012].

in which the autobiographical narrative concerns the gathering and telling of the story of another. He gives as an example Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, in which Spiegelman tells the story of his father's survival in Auschwitz at the same time as he elicits that story from his father.<sup>45</sup> This latter element is what Eakin terms 'the story of the story'. Autobiographical space is thus 'occupied' by the autobiography of the other, yet at the same time the telling of the other's story allows a degree of control over it, the other's life 'possessed – indeed, created – by the recording self'.<sup>46</sup> On this view, the story 'always functions as a metaphor for the story of that story, the story of the autobiographical act unfolding in the present'.<sup>47</sup> In the case of Joe Simpson the story here is not that of the other, but of Simpson himself, of Simpson in Peru in 1985. The analogy is justified, because Simpson is still, in a modified way, telling both the story, and the story of that story. The present of the text is occupied by the other, where that other is *Touching the Void*. Yet, by the very act of retelling that story, by re-making it, Simpson repossesses it – he, figuratively, dies and comes back. Control has been reasserted and so, at the same time as he dismisses the idea of climbing the Eiger, he is able to welcome it.

We can take this a step further. Simon Yates has commented that Simpson's life 'has been defined by what happened and by retelling it again and again'.<sup>48</sup> As I suggested above, this telling and retelling, 'again and again', creates a contiguity, a metonymic relation between Simpson and his story, Simpson and *Touching the Void*, whereby one is, stands for, the other. In an interview he gave to *The Times* in 2001 Simpson seems to suggest something similar: "Peru didn't change me," he insists. "Writing the book did. That's what changed my view of the world, my insights and my way of life. But in a way, because of the book, I'm trapped inside what happened".<sup>49</sup> The key here is not the story – 'Peru' - but the story of the story – 'writing the book'. It is because of the book that Simpson is now 'trapped inside what happened', ensnared in repetition, in a continuous cycle of recollection, revision and retelling. For Simpson, 'what happened' is no longer the so much the story, but rather the endlessly repeated, infinitely variable, story of that story.

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<sup>45</sup> It is fascinating is that, quite recently, Simpson found himself doing something almost identical, retracing his deceased father's service during World War II in the Burmese jungle – and again, Simpson discovers his own story: "It's striking that Joe is so gripped by soldiers being left for dead because perhaps the most famous thing about Joe Simpson is that he was once left for dead himself": John-Paul Flintoff, 'How I found my father in the Burmese jungle', *Guardian*, 7 May 2016, Family section, pp. 1 - 2.

<sup>46</sup> Paul John Eakin, 'Relational Selves, Relational Lives: The Story of the Story', in *True Relations: Essays on Autobiography and the Postmodern*, ed. by G. Thomas Couser and Joseph Fichtelberg (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), pp. 63 – 81 (pp. 70 – 72).

<sup>47</sup> Paul John Eakin, 'Living Autobiographically', *Biography*, 28 (2005), pp. 1 – 14 (p. 5).

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Ed Douglas, 'Friends in High Places', *Observer*, 30 November 2003, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Rosie Thomas, 'No Ordinary Joe', *The Times*, 29 December 2001.

The two epilogues added to *Touching the Void* by Simpson after its initial publication help to elucidate the point. The first, entitled 'Ten Years On...' and dated August 1997, is essentially a post mortem on the 'cutting of the rope' incident, and the mistakes the pair made which led up to it. Again Simpson returns to the story, takes it to pieces, reconstructs it and produces another interpretation (having quoted from a recent account of the accident published by Simon Yates, Simpson continues: 'I can see *now* that Simon is right' – my emphasis). The second epilogue, 'Bad Memories', dated July 2003, details Simpson's experiences on returning to Siula Grande for the first time since the events of 1985, for the filming of *Touching the Void*. The visceral impact of the return leaves Simpson with post-traumatic stress disorder; but he discovers that the symptoms had been ameliorated because, on a psychotherapeutic view, 'telling and retelling the 'Void' story had inadvertently proved to be a good treatment for the condition...with each telling of [the] real story it gradually becomes a fiction, becomes someone else's experience' (213). Here Simpson captures something of the essence of the autobiographical act. The following extracts are taken from the two epilogues; the first is the final paragraph of the 1997 piece, the second appears towards the end of that from 2003:

I can add only that however painful readers may think our experiences were, for me this book still falls short of articulating just how dreadful were some of those lonely days. I simply could not find the words to express the utter desolation of the experience.

Joe Simpson  
August 1997 (206)

The real experience, of which I had been so powerfully reminded, would always distance Simon and me from any written or celluloid representation.  
(214)

Looking back, 'ten years on', Simpson finds that the book 'still falls short': it fell short then and, after its retelling in the epilogue, it still does now. The chasm between lived experience and autobiographical writing is unbridgeable, yet Simpson is compelled to repeat his attempt. In this latest interpretation Simpson suddenly, surprisingly, suggests that only 'some' of his days alone on Siula Grande were truly 'dreadful'. It is as if, ten years on, he is seeking to contain and confine the trauma at the same time as he rhetorically limits the extent to which the book 'falls short'. 'I simply could not find the words' – not then, or since, or now. These very last words are visibly and directly inscribed with the name, bound as tightly as the text



will allow, a tangible demonstration of the contiguity between Simpson and the text, the story, and the story of the story.

The sentence from the second epilogue, written six years later and, again, concluding with the inscription of Simpson's name, finds him in the same place. Repetition reinforces the 'distance' between 'real experience' and 'written or celluloid representation', a temporal and spatial gap that will 'always' exist. If the 'void' in the title of Simpson's story is, was originally, a metaphor for death, we find that now, by repetition, the play of *fort/da*, it has become something quite different. Simpson's 'successful and highly traumatic trip', together with its aftermath, provide an allegory for the doomed, endlessly repeating quest to recover and take control of the self that is the very nature of the autobiographical enterprise.

Simpson's narrative is grounded in, grows out of, a European Romantic tradition, where ideas about the sublime, the mountain landscape and the solitary heroic figure became inextricably linked. Caspar David Friedrich's 1818 painting, *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*, might by now have become borderline kitsch, but what it symbolises – the distinction conferred upon the mountaineer by achieving the summit – continues to have, as Robert Macfarlane has observed, tremendous residual power.<sup>50</sup> In the next chapter I examine how these tropes are deployed in two canonical works of mountain literature.

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<sup>50</sup> *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (London: Granta, 2003), p. 157.

## Chapter II

### Other Annapurnas, Other Eigers:

#### Maurice Herzog and Dougal Haston

Candace Lang has written how, in the European Romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the 'authentic self' of each individual was seen as a unique pre-cultural and pre-linguistic subject, a natural essence which could only find its true expression through the elevated discourse of poetry and art.<sup>1</sup> Conditioned by notions of the sublime, for romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and their contemporaries it was only natural that this authentic self should find its earthly abode in the mountains. It was in these hyper-natural landscapes that one came closest to the ineffable, essential self. This conjunction of self and summit can be found in Coleridge's account of his descent of Broad Stand in the English Lake District. Having reached a point where he felt himself unable to continue or reverse his descent, his limbs 'all in a tremble', Coleridge lay on his back to rest, whereupon

The sight of the Craggs above me on each side, and the impetuous Clouds just over them, posting so luridly and rapidly northward, overawed me. I lay in a state of almost prophetic Trance and Delight – and blessed God aloud, for the powers of Reason and the Will, which remaining no Danger can overpower us!<sup>2</sup>

Finding himself in very real danger, Coleridge calls upon metaphysical powers of 'Reason and the Will' in order to find a way down the cliff. The use of capitalisation, the implied divine providence, suggests that these 'powers' somehow precede, exist outside of Coleridge himself. They represent a self-evident knowledge and truth, a truth that is revealed in a sublime high mountain landscape; mountains become a way to make sense of the self. These tropes have often appeared in mountain literature, the writer striving not only to explore but also to produce identity, a teleological enterprise where the 'authentic self' of the autobiographical subject is in fact a creation, just as the sublime mountain landscape is itself simply something that (in Robert Macfarlane's words) 'we have romanticized into being'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Candace Lang, 'Autobiography in the Aftermath of Romanticism', *Diacritics* 12 (1982), 2 – 16 (p. 4).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, quoted in Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind*, p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

In this chapter I look at aspects of two such accounts: Maurice Herzog's expedition memoir *Annapurna*, and Dougal Haston's autobiography *In High Places*. In these we see how Herzog and Haston, through the use of tropes regularly found in mountain literature, press life narrative into the service of their specific teleological ends.

### **Maurice Herzog and *Annapurna***

The whole of this book has been dictated at the American Hospital at Neuilly where I am still having rather a bad time.<sup>4</sup>

The *Foreword* which prefaces Maurice Herzog's account of the 1950 French expedition to the Nepalese Himalaya is dated June 1951, almost exactly a year after he and Louis Lachenal reached the summit of Annapurna - the first people to reach the summit of an eight-thousand metre peak. Since then he has been hospitalised, receiving intensive treatment for the severe frostbite injuries he suffered on the descent. He has lost all his fingers and toes; his days as a climber and mountaineer are effectively over. He suffers the 'worst moments of anguish' (xviii), knowing that the course of his future life is irrevocably altered: 'a new kind of life, perhaps even a new conception of existence' (193). Contracted to write an account of the expedition - all royalties from which will go to the Club Alpin Français to fund subsequent expeditions - Herzog dictates *Annapurna* as if - because - his life depends upon it. Ostensibly a traditional 'expedition book', Herzog's opening words instead explicitly introduce a text that is wholly and necessarily teleological: Edward Whymper's famous old words of caution subverted to the text (from *this* beginning think what may be the end). Reflecting upon the incomprehensible *how* and *why* of his plight, Herzog's situation demands a narrative that offers a coherent linear path from past to present, that in turn brings into focus the possibility of a tolerable future. As with Joe Simpson, the construction of narrative has for Herzog a therapeutic function, offering both a sense of control over traumatic events and a way of locating them within a life that possesses both a before and an after.

Towards the end of the *Foreword* Herzog anticipates what is to come after with these words: 'events that seem to make no sense may sometimes have a deep significance of their own' (xviii). Suggesting a purposive movement beyond sense, beyond comprehension, towards a 'deeper' apprehension, Herzog employs a figuration that is of a piece with an

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Herzog, *Annapurna: Conquest of the First 8000-Metre Peak*, trans. By Nea Morin and Janet Adam Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952; repr. London: Pimlico, 1997), p. xvii. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

overall metaphorical framework that draws heavily upon the discourse of the sublime. Borne of alpine terror, the sublime functions as a kind of 'house' metaphor in the literatures of mountains and mountaineering, mediating between a natural landscape that most often finds its description, and an activity that most regularly finds its rationalization, in an appeal to the supersensible.<sup>5</sup> In *Annapurna* Herzog's engagement with the sublime is an integral part of his narrative undertaking. Having no points of comparison for where he finds himself, his text becomes a sustained attempt to bring reason to bear over the limitations of imagination, a sublime operation that endures through the text. There is no other work of post-war mountaineering writing that mines this vein so relentlessly.

These tropes, which are systematically repeated and reinterpreted throughout the text, are deployed to fit Herzog's overall teleological purpose. When Herzog tells us in the *Foreword* that in his darkest moments he 'seemed to discover the deep significance of existence' (xviii), he implies that his account is a figurative representation of an irreducible identity: a metaphor of the self, a textual 'I am'. What I would suggest instead is that *Annapurna*, driven by a specific *telos*, functions not as a statement – 'this is what I am' – but rather as a question – 'what is it I need to be?' – to which the repetition and opposition of sublime metaphor gradually builds an answer by contiguity.

*Annapurna* has a central place in the canon, an 'undying classic of mountain literature' that has been translated into various languages and which has sold several million copies, inspiring a generation of climbers in the post-war era.<sup>6</sup> Whilst the focus of the book is, naturally, the ascent, it is Herzog's account of the traumatic descent and harrowing return that really sticks in the reader's mind.<sup>7</sup> In his Introduction to the Pimlico edition of *Annapurna* Joe Simpson suggests that the suffering of Herzog and the others after reaching the summit 'seems to add to the heroic scale of their triumph' (xv). Herzog's reassertion of subjectivity in the face of trauma and suffering, the sublime turn, has subsequently become one of the defining tropes of the genre, his narrative the template for many later mountaineering

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<sup>5</sup> On the development of the mountain landscape sublime, see Marjorie Hope Nicolson's landmark 1959 study, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959; repr. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997); more recently, see Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana Press, 1996), pp. 385-513. Robert H. Bates' *Mystery, Beauty, Danger: The Literature of Mountains and Mountain Climbing Published in English before 1946* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Peter H. Randall Publisher, 2000) and Robert Macfarlane's *Mountains of the Mind*, pp. 66-102, both provide accounts of the engagement of mountain literature with the sublime.

<sup>6</sup> 'Strength Through Adversity', *Climber*, 36 No. 4 (1997), p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> *Time* magazine described the retreat as 'a harrowing ordeal-by-nature calculated to shiver the spirit of the toughest armchair explorer': quoted in Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver, *Fallen Giants: A History of Himalayan Mountaineering from the Age of Empire to the Age of Extremes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 253.

memoirs; his concluding words, 'there are other Annapurnas in the lives of men' are (almost) the most celebrated in mountain literature (246).<sup>8</sup>

Early in the narrative, having reached their headquarters in Nepal, Herzog describes catching his first sight of Dhaulagiri, one of the two 8000 metre peaks that form the objective of the expedition:

An immense ice pyramid, glittering in the sun like a crystal, rose up more than 23,000 feet above us. The south face, shining blue through the morning mists, was unbelievably lofty, not of this world. We were speechless in the face of this tremendous mountain; its name was familiar to us from all our talk about it, but the reality so moved us that we couldn't utter a word. Then slowly the reasons for our being here at all took precedence over our own emotions and aesthetic response, and we began to examine the gigantic outline from a practical point of view. (15)

Herzog's description here, his appropriation of sublime metaphor, offers a paradigm for the text as a whole. The representation of the mountain as a thing of numinous grandeur is a familiar one, something we can trace in French literature back to the Alps of Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, or Senancour's *Oberman*. But Herzog's account of his response takes us a step beyond this, offering a formulation that reads more like a version of the mathematical sublime from Kant's third *Critique* - the imagination's inadequacy in comprehending magnitude, the absolutely large, surpassed by the transcendental power of reason to apprehend a totality beyond the standards of sense.<sup>9</sup> Herzog's mountain is 'unbelievably lofty' - like the infinite, it rises to a height that is 'more than' any aesthetic estimation; it is 'not of this world'. It leaves the senses overwhelmed, Herzog is 'speechless', yet reason is gradually reasserted over the 'emotions and aesthetic response': the mind 'induced to abandon sensibility and occupy itself with ideas containing a higher purposiveness'.<sup>10</sup> The assimilation of the sublime into how we think and write about mountains causes Herzog to describe, to give life to, his experience in this very particular way, whilst at the same time his figuration reflects the teleological structure of the entire narrative; Herzog is doing what he is describing. As with Savary and the Egyptian pyramids, the example cited by Kant, Herzog's experience of the sublime arises only at a precise point of alignment with the 'ice pyramid' of Dhaulagiri - neither so far away as to be too obscure nor so close up as to render impossible an adequate apprehension of the mountain's totality from base to summit. The

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<sup>8</sup> After, of course, Mallory's annoyed and off-the cuff response to reporters: 'Because it's there!'.  
<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'Analytic of the Sublime', in *Critique of Judgment*, trans. By Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 103-117.

<sup>10</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 99.

sublime is thus an effect of reason rather than nature itself: 'what is to be called sublime is not the object, but the attunement that the intellect [gets] through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgment'.<sup>11</sup> Finding himself at the perfect topographical median point, Herzog describes his experience of the sublime upon first sight of Dhaulagiri. Similarly, one year on spatial and temporal distance places Herzog at another median point, neither too far away nor too close, to allow the unimaginable totality of his experience, that 'gigantic outline', to be framed and presented via the teleological construction of narrative: the 'practical point of view' of Dhaulagiri transposed to the narrative moment.

Herzog's description of Dhaulagiri is part of a masculine discourse of domination: here overwhelmed by raw nature, yet striving for 'precedence' over it. This is the currency of the sublime in all its conceptual variations, from the sheer force of Longinian rhetoric, through Burke's sublime terror, to the transcendent natural sublime of the English Romantic poets. Yet the impetus for mountaineering itself is to be found on the flip side of the same coin. It is an activity in which the desire for control and mastery has repeatedly been shown to be psychologically central,<sup>12</sup> and which in turn offers us a literary tradition in which the foundational tropes are martial metaphors of victory and ascendancy.<sup>13</sup> These allied themes combine within Herzog's narrative – where precedence is sought over nature, dominance established over others, control demonstrated over the self - and the compound underwrites his teleological approach. Thus, for example, he invokes with ostensible humility the names and exploits of other climbers in the Himalaya, his 'predecessors on these heights'. They include the British mountaineer H. W. Tilman, who at the time of the French expedition had (with Noel Odell) reached the summit of the highest peak then climbed, Nanda Devi in India. Compare Herzog's text with Tilman's account of his ascent of Nanda Devi in 1936:

It was difficult to realise that we were actually standing on top of the same peak which we had viewed two months ago from Ranikhet, and which had then appeared incredibly remote and inaccessible, and it gave us a curious feeling of exaltation to know we were above every peak within hundreds of miles on either hand. Dhaulagiri, 1000ft. higher, and two hundred miles

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 106.

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Lyng, 851 - 886; Elissa Slanger and Kjell Erik Rudestam, 'Motivation and Disinhibition in High Risk Sports: Sensation Seeking and Self-Efficacy', *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31 (1997), 355 - 374; Jackie Kiewa, 'Control over Self and Space in Rockclimbing', *Journal of Leisure Research*, 33 (2001), 363 — 382; Hunt and Daines, 441 - 452.

<sup>13</sup> Reuben Ellis, *Vertical Margins: Mountaineering and the Landscapes of Neoimperialism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), p. 36. The subtitle of Herzog's book is *Conquest of the First 8000-Metre Peak*.

away in Nepal, was our nearest rival. I believe we so far forgot ourselves as to shake hands on it.<sup>14</sup>

The extract follows a similar narrative template for describing sublime mountain experience to that utilised by Herzog: the imagination's inadequacy ('difficult to realise'), Tilman finding it hard to comprehend that he was 'actually' standing on top of what had been a 'incredibly remote and inaccessible' peak, reason gradually asserting itself to give a 'curious feeling of exaltation' as he realises he is above every other peak for at least two hundred miles. The final sentence, however, provides the key to what is one of the most celebrated accounts of our exploits in the entire mountaineering canon. 'We so far forgot ourselves': at a stroke Tilman's humility and bone-dry wit turn the sublime moment, the senses overwhelmed, into little more than a self-deprecatory joke at the sublime's expense, the notion of transcendental experience curtly despatched.

You will find nothing of this sort in Herzog's narrative. He is deadly serious. Note that Tilman is still 1000 feet below, and 200 miles from, the summit of Dhaulagiri, his 'nearest rival' – the same mountain that Herzog, in his narrative, contemplates objectively with a view to its first ascent. We know that neither Tilman nor any other of Herzog's predecessors ever reached the summit of an 8000m peak. In these mountains Herzog prevails. Above all, his repeated recourse to descriptions of the sublime suggests that Herzog is set on embodying something along the lines of Longinus' dictum: 'the sublime is an echo from greatness of mind'.<sup>15</sup> The sublime reveals itself to Herzog because he is a great man, a man apart. Yet again Herzog prevails over the more jocular Tilman, locating himself within, at the head of, a discourse of domination, a sublime manipulation of sublime metaphor that allows Herzog to conquer his *telos*, replacing one interpretation with another.

Kant touches upon the subtle dynamic that exists between the related discourses at work here in his third *Critique* - a work that was published in 1790, only four years after the first ascent of Mont Blanc. Suggesting that what is called the sublime is available only to the cultured, being simply repellent to the uncultured, he relates by way of example how the geologist (and early mountaineer) Horace Bénédict de Saussure discovered that those who ventured into the mountains were considered by the Savoyard peasants to be fools. Kant observes that they 'might even have had a point, if Saussure had acted merely from fancy,

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<sup>14</sup> H. W. Tilman, *The Ascent of Nanda Devi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), collected in *Nanda Devi: Exploration and Ascent*, by Eric Shipton and H. W. Tilman (London: Baton Wicks, 1999), pp. 152 - 267 (p. 248). A French translation of Tilman's book was published in Paris in 1938, by the French publisher Payot.

<sup>15</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. by Thomas Roscoe Rede Stebbing (Oxford: T. & G. Shrimpton, 1867), p. 26.

as most travellers tend to...In fact, however, his intention was to instruct mankind, and that excellent man got, in addition, the soul-stirring sensation and gave it into the bargain to the readers of his travels'.<sup>16</sup> This is a precise encapsulation of the teleological fix in which Herzog finds himself some 160 years later. It is not difficult to characterise the risks taken by the French expedition, and of Herzog's fateful summit push in particular, as foolish in the extreme, a 'fancy' of lunatic proportions. Herzog's tactics have been publicly questioned since, at least, the time of the publication of *Annapurna*;<sup>17</sup> he has even been lampooned in comic verse.<sup>18</sup> Whilst there is no sense of this in *Annapurna* itself, it is hard to believe that Herzog did not have in mind the criticisms that could be levelled at him; and his response was to assume Saussure's mantle. In the *Foreword* Herzog makes his intentions plain: 'in this narrative we do more than record our adventure, we bear witness' (xviii). This, then, is no fancy - it is nothing less than an addition to the historical record, Herzog 'instructing mankind'. At the same time Herzog (educated, cultured, Kant's 'excellent man' incarnate) ensures that his text transmits 'into the bargain' that sublime, soul-stirring sensation: 'in overstepping our limitations, in touching the extreme boundaries of man's world, we have come to know something of its true splendour' (xviii). If one here substitutes 'my' for 'our' and 'I' for 'we', we come to understand something of the bargain, the give and take, the compact that Herzog is offering: accept my interpretation and experience the sublime. For many of his millions of readers, it works. Joe Simpson describes feeling 'mentally and emotionally drained' after reading *Annapurna* as a fourteen-year-old. He knows that Herzog's 'truly exceptional' experience 'is something that words could never even begin to describe'; the intensity of Herzog's experience is 'almost inconceivable'.<sup>19</sup>

The passages in which Herzog describes the final push for the summit take this to its logical conclusion. Still some way below the top and losing the feeling in his feet as frostbite takes hold, Lachenal suggests that they consider turning back. Herzog's response is uncompromising:

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<sup>16</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, pp. 124-125.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see the review of *Annapurna* contained in the *Geographical Journal*, 119 (1953), pp. 348 - 349. *Annapurna* is described as a 'disturbing book', and asks whether Herzog's tactics were 'entirely justifiable'.

<sup>18</sup> The first verse of Tom Patey's 'Annapurna' reads as follows: 'Twenty frozen fingers, twenty frozen toes / Two blistered faces, frostbite on the nose / One looked like Herzog, who dropped his gloves on top / And Lachenal tripped and fell, thought he'd never stop. / Bop bop bop bop bop bop bop bop'. It continues in similar vein for two more verses. Tom Patey, *One Man's Mountains* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1971; repr. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005), p. 265.

<sup>19</sup> Joe Simpson, 'Introduction', in Herzog, *Annapurna*, p. xiii.



Must we give up? No, that would be impossible. My whole life revolted against the idea. I had made up my mind irrevocably. Today we were consecrating an ideal, and no sacrifice was too great. (157)

Herzog answers his own question in the most uncompromising terms – to stop would be to venture beyond comprehension, Herzog's 'whole life' in rebellion against the very notion. Instead his response is to render the ascent sacred, offering himself (and Lachenal) as propitiatory victims. A few paragraphs later Herzog is put in mind of Saint Theresa of Avila, whose ladder of holy perfection leads to God, a spiritual mountain ascended to rapture: as Herzog says, 'something clutched at my heart'.<sup>20</sup> And then, standing on the summit, he even seems to imply that he straddles the boundary between life and death, the events of his life flashing before him: 'pictures passed through my mind – the Chamonix valley, where I had spent the most marvellous moments of my childhood, Mont Blanc, which so tremendously impressed me!' (161).

After reaching the summit Herzog stumbles back down to their highest camp, and finds Gaston Rebuffat and Lionel Terray anxiously awaiting him. Herzog recalls how Terray assured him that his ascent of Annapurna represented a victory for the expedition as a whole. Herzog's response is telling:

I nearly burst with happiness. How could I tell him all that his answer meant to me? The rapture I had felt on the summit, which might have seemed a purely personal, egotistical emotion, had been transformed by his words into a complete and perfect joy with no shadow upon it. His answer proved that this victory was not just one man's achievement, a matter for personal pride; no – and Terray was the first to understand this – it was a victory for us all, a victory for mankind itself. (164)

Again sublime tropes are employed to fit Herzog's purpose: Herzog, Kant's excellent man, achieves 'a victory for mankind itself', at the same time as transmitting the 'complete and perfect' rapture of the summit, 'with no shadow upon it'. At this Herzog's relief is palpable: 'how could I tell him what his answer meant to me?'. There is a sense of guilt hanging over the exchange, notwithstanding that Terray's words apparently remove the stain of ego and self-interest. Despite not being 'just one-man's achievement', we note also that no mention is made of Herzog's partner on the summit, Louis Lachenal – who, at the time that Herzog is experiencing his 'complete and perfect happiness', remains missing at high altitude in the

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<sup>20</sup> p. 158. In his account of the expedition submitted to the *Himalayan Journal*, prior to the publication of *Annapurna*, Herzog ascribes to the summit the status of the Blessed Trinity: 'the summit which represents our joy, our glory, and our consolation' – Maurice Herzog, 'Annapurna', *Himalayan Journal*, 16 (1951), 9–24 (p. 20).

thick mist that by this time has descended (162). Lachenal is absent, Herzog dominant.<sup>21</sup> Here note also that ambiguous word, 'rapture'. Yes, it means both ecstatic joy and the transport of the believer to Heaven – but its etymology also allows of the seizure by force, of rape, the masculine discourse of domination taken to extremes.

Gaston Rebuffat later sought to distil Herzog's summit experience: 'After the sequence of the flags, this jingoistic and supremely pragmatic moment, Maurice organised his ecstasy'.<sup>22</sup> Rebuffat recognises the intrinsically teleological nature of Herzog's enterprise, the need to rationalise and justify his post-expedition existence. As Reinhold Messner concluded, Herzog's 'precise memory of the real situation quickly took flight'; his summit euphoria, unknown in Messner's experience (he having reached the summits of all fourteen 8000 metre peaks), must have been 'discovered' by Herzog later.<sup>23</sup> Rather, bearing his frostbite amputations like stigmata, Herzog makes a move from the sublime to the divine, becoming in the process his own messiah. It is here that Herzog's exercise in sublime figuration becomes problematic. For Kant, the sublime exists in the triumph of reason over sensibility. But the Herzog of *Annapurna* ultimately crosses this boundary to the supersensible, to a rapture beyond the realms of reason. Wordsworth, in *The Prelude*, famously describes his encounter with the sublime whilst crossing the Alps: instead of Herzog's ecstasy Wordsworth experiences a 'dull and heavy slackening' upon discovering that he had reached and crossed his summit – the Simplon Pass – without even realizing it. But this triggers in Wordsworth the realization that the sublime resides in his own powers of reason – 'something evermore about to be'. Such a mind 'thinks not of spoils or trophies, nor of aught | That may attest its prowess'.<sup>24</sup> Rather than this Herzog seeks to give us a feeling of the sublimity of his own nature.<sup>25</sup> The 'spoils and trophies' described by Wordsworth, both metaphysical and actual, very much figure in Herzog's thinking. In taking his narrative beyond the limits of reason Herzog ultimately risks, to use Philip Shaw's characterisation, 'a descent into the vale of non-sense'.<sup>26</sup>

The metonymic relationship Herzog establishes with his summit is sufficient to ensure his future joy and consolation: the ascent is 'above all, the victory of its leader', as Lucien

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<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Lachenal was virtually written out of the popular record at the time – see David Roberts, *True Summit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 137.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Roberts, *True Summit*, p. 221.

<sup>23</sup> *Annapurna: 50 Years of Expeditions in the Death Zone*, trans. by Tim Carruthers (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2000), p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 100.

<sup>25</sup> The very opposite of the 'mental attunement' that Kant argues should be felt: Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 106.

Devies, the President of the French Himalayan Committee, writes in the preface to Herzog's book (xxi). In the next section I look at how Dougal Haston theorizes his own, very different, version of mountaineering exceptionalism

### **Dougal Haston and *In High Places***

In August 1971, a few months before the publication of his autobiography, *In High Places*, Dougal Haston was featured as the subject of a cartoon strip in the popular boys' comic, the *Hornet*.<sup>27</sup> Filling the front and back pages, the 'Hornet Gallery of Sport No. 32' offers its readers an illustrated biography of Haston's life. Over just fourteen frames the strip ranges from childhood to adulthood, sketching out Haston's friendships and rivalries, his successes and failures; each aspect of Haston's life included wholly by reference, and only in so far as relevant, to his exploits as a mountaineer. For the avid readership of the *Hornet* this is a life that only has meaning through, and because of, climbing.

That Haston's autobiography should offer a similar interpretation of his life ought to surprise no one: the paying public's interest was, after all, in Dougal Haston the mountaineer. The chapter headings alone, listed together on the contents page, leave one in little doubt as to the nature of the exercise: starting at 'Rock Bottom', climbing through 'The Dolomites' and 'Eiger', up to 'Annapurna' and 'Everest', an ever-ascending progression to the top of the world's great mountains. Yet the clunking metaphor belies the possibility that Haston actually approached his life in something like these terms. He tells us that as a boy *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage*, the autobiography of the legendary Austrian mountaineer Hermann Buhl, became his sacred text (it 'was studied much more than the Bible').<sup>28</sup> Buhl's narrative blazes the same trail that was to be subsequently followed by Haston, through the Dolomites to the Eiger North Face, and on to the Himalayas. It is, however, far more than merely a mountaineer's checklist, instead conferring upon climbing a significance that approaches the ontological. From its very first sentence ('I was born in Innsbruck; the hills looked down into my cradle') *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage* offers the story of a life lived through mountaineering. Buhl is utterly unambiguous: 'Me not belong in the Mountains? Why, I couldn't go on living without them! My thoughts, my dreams, my whole life were nothing but the Mountains!'<sup>29</sup> But it goes far further than this. Buhl made the solitary, first ascent of the

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<sup>27</sup> *Hornet*, 14 August 1971, p.1 and p. 32.

<sup>28</sup> Dougal Haston, *In High Places* (London: Cassell & Co., 1972; repr. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), p. 5. Further references to this edition are given in brackets after quotations in the text.

<sup>29</sup> Hermann Buhl, *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage: The Lonely Challenge*, trans. by Hugh Merrick (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1956; repr. London: Bâton Wicks, 1998), p. 12 and p. 23.

world's ninth highest mountain, Nanga Parbat, in 1953. This is Buhl on the summit: 'I felt as if I were floating high above everything, out of all relationship with the Earth, severed from the world and all humanity. It was like being on a tiny island in an enormous ocean'.<sup>30</sup> One can only guess at the effect Buhl's metaphysical gymnastics had upon the youthful Dougal Haston. Certainly, there is a connection being made between climbing, mountains and the imagination that was seized upon by Haston ('a glimmering aesthetic appreciation began to show in the mind of a working-class fourteen-year-old'(3)), picked up, and developed.

By the time Haston comes to write *In High Places* Buhl's outlook, or something very like it, has been appropriated as his own. The introductory section of *In High Places*, 'A View from Camp VI', purports to be a distillation of Haston's thoughts on approaching the summit of Annapurna. In it Haston draws a distinction between himself and his companion, Don Whillans: 'We have the same objective. But in the mind, what a difference: the practical and the philosophical! He has a job to do and is doing it. I have a way of life to live and am living it' (2). For Whillans, a pragmatic, no-nonsense ex-plumber, mountaineering is simply the day job, an adjunct to existence. For Haston, however, it is *modus operandi*.

'A View from Camp VI' ends on Annapurna's summit, with a question: 'It's all over. But where did it all begin?' (2). Chapter one, which immediately follows, begins by repeating the same words: 'Where did it all begin?' (3). This may simply be a rhetorical flourish but, nevertheless, as one reads *In High Places* it becomes evident that there are at least two different questions being worked through in the text. On the one hand we must try to isolate the chain of events, the progression of climbs, which led Haston to the summit of Annapurna; on the other we can look to determine quite where, or when, he began to conceive of his life solely in terms of the ascent of mountains. Haston begins to devise an answer to both these questions by pointing, like Buhl, to the influence of the local geography: 'being born in the country...gave a child an interest in the hills' (3). Framing the response in terms that echo the beginning of *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage* suggests that, if the answer to the first question lies in the Pentland Hills, then the answer to the second is just as likely to be found in written narrative, in the comic strips and adventure stories of Haston's youth, in the pages of Buhl's book. Crucially, however, we are here not simply referring to the intertextual accumulation of third-party narrative. From the age of at least sixteen Haston compulsively recorded details of his climbs, in diaries, climbing hut log books, articles, books.<sup>31</sup> In doing so he not only documented his climbs and progress as a mountaineer; he also created a unique textual

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 332.

<sup>31</sup> See Jeff Connor, *Dougal Haston: The Philosophy of Risk* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002), p. 14.

space in which to work and rework his (autobiographical) identity, a selfhood wrought solely from the chronicling of climbs and routes. The same plot is repeated over and over – struggle, ascent, descent, sometimes injury, sometimes death – with Haston often revisiting, retelling, re-contextualising, previously published accounts.

Looking now at the *Hornet* cartoon strip it is difficult not to see it as a trailer for what was to be the main feature, Haston's autobiography. The timing seems far more than coincidental; look at the way in which the individual frames of the cartoon rigidly follow the chapters of Haston's book. It stands, effectively, as a primary-coloured, supremely condensed, metaphor for *In High Places*. What I examine here, by reference to Haston's autobiography and his other published material, is quite how the life gradually but inexorably appears to have become transmuted to the level of the *Hornet*, as Haston, increasingly, packaged his life into discrete spatial and temporal boxes that functioned like the frames and gutters of the comic strip.

### ***He'll break his neck if he's not careful!*<sup>32</sup>**

The first piece of writing Haston produced for publication – other than his scrawled route descriptions in climbing hut log books – was a short article that appeared in the Edinburgh University Mountaineering Club Journal. The article, 'Up and Down on the Su Alto', describes his ascent, with his school friend Eley Moriarty, of the Cima Su Alto during their 'Dolomite holiday' in the summer of 1959. Aged 19, Haston's artless prose is reminiscent of the adventure stories of his childhood, a self-contained boys-own climbing epic loaded with martial metaphors, in which each stage of the narrative contributes to the general sense of drama: assessing the climb (the peak is 'a worthy adversary', waiting to be 'attacked'); the ascent ('there were signs of desperate battles in the near vicinity'); the cold wet bivouac on the summit ('I have never experienced such a hopeless feeling'); the descent ('the rope refused to budge. This, we knew, was serious'); ultimate deliverance ('our luck changed at last').<sup>33</sup> But behind the lack of guile there is a basic figurative depth to Haston's writing. Produced as he began his first year at Edinburgh University, the account is as much about Haston the student as it is the climber. Announcing his arrival, it confirms and publicizes the fact of what was, in that context, a notable ascent, whilst at the same time recognising his status as the novice: with the 'innocent eyes' of a nineteen year old Haston ruefully acknowledges the limits of his knowledge, confessing in the very last sentence to the route

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<sup>32</sup> *Hornet*, p. 1. All further sub-headings taken from the same source.

<sup>33</sup> *Edinburgh University Mountaineering Club Journal* (1959/60), 18-21.

finding error that resulted in their tricky descent ('we learned there is an easy way down from the summit which does not involve abseiling').<sup>34</sup>

By the time the story of the climb is repeated, in *In High Places*, the value and meaning of the episode have moved on significantly. The story is now of consequence only as an incremental stage in the development of the mountaineer. Haston carefully positions the ascent within the programmatic upward curve, in chapter three, 'Dolomites', between the chapters on Scotland and the Eiger; strict chronology eschewed in favour of a narrative ordered by reference to altitude. Starting with his first rock climb, aged fourteen, 'the most significant event' (4), *In High Places* comprises a succession of these defining moments, each uniquely dramatic and sequential. The trip to the Dolomites is no longer just a 'holiday', a temporary recreation, but a momentous statement of intent ('we were going to try at last to make our presence felt in the Alps' (37)). Unlike the 1959 account, the ascent itself is described in just one short paragraph, Haston noting the ease of its accomplishment (the face 'flowed past: roofs, bulges, cracks, no problem' (41)). Instead, what is important here is the bare fact that Haston was there, and that he made the climb. There is no need to also offer details of a climb that is insignificant in the context of Haston's subsequent ascents. Rather, Haston focuses upon the descent, which becomes the scene of epic struggle. Here the differences between the two accounts are not merely stylistic; the later version is quite simply at odds with the (almost contemporaneous) article from 1959. If the earlier version tries to tell us what actually happened, albeit in a particular way, the later account appears to subordinate accuracy to the requirements of the meta-narrative that is being adhered to. So, in the earlier version, 'the first two abseils were straightforward'; now the first abseil takes them straight over an overhang ('twenty feet...then space' (41)); where previously the final abseil leaves them safely on the ground, now it leaves Haston hanging sensationally in space: 'very quickly the ropes end. I look down. A vague blur beneath – thirty feet or sixty? Who knows? I jump. Violent shock. Then the adrenalin boils over. I'm OK' (42). This later (melo)dramatization implies an incipient devil-may-careism on the part of Haston, a stock feature of the comic-book formula that he is following; getting the youthful recklessness out of the way before the more serious challenges to come. But where the earlier account plainly set itself within a wider context, the competing aspects of the teenage Haston's life coming together in a 1000-word article, the version found in *In High Places* exists in a tropological void. There is no longer any mention of the route-finding error, the easy way down missed.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 19 and p. 21.

There is instead simply 'a total climbing experience' (42), set within a narrative in which the only experience is that to be had through climbing.

That Haston should narrate his life in these terms is hardly surprising. The martial discourse of imperialism and Empire that informed the exploration and ascent of the world's mountain ranges, from the formation of the Alpine Club in 1857 through to the ascent of Everest in 1953, gave us a stereotype of the mountaineer, craggily stoical and insouciant in the face of mortal danger, that persists to this day. Those early copies of the *Alpine Journal* bequeathed an ironically understated manner of communicating the experience of mountain adventure – what Reuben Ellis terms 'the tribal lexicon of climbers'<sup>35</sup> – that, in turn, from the 1920/30s onwards found its way into the adventure yarns that had begun to predominate in the burgeoning boys' story papers and comics market.<sup>36</sup> George Orwell, in his 1939 essay, 'Boys' Weeklies', observed how the hero of these tales was invariably 'a superman', whose adventures only ever occurred 'at the ends of the earth'. He actually quotes an example taken from *The Wizard* which relates how 'Lionheart Logan of the Mounties' evades the villains by climbing an ice cliff in a blizzard, 'hacking out handholds in the smooth ice every step of the way up'.<sup>37</sup> Orwell well understood the lasting importance of these tales: 'many people who would consider themselves extremely sophisticated and 'advanced' are actually carrying through life an imaginative background which they acquired in childhood from (for instance) Sapper and Ian Hay'.<sup>38</sup>

Haston himself tells us that, as a fourteen-year-old, his mind was 'full of comic and adventure book stories where the hero clammers up a thousand-foot overhang and wipes out the enemy garrison at the top' (4). He recognisably draws upon precisely this type of 'imaginative background' in both of his accounts of the Cima Su Alto ascent. But whilst this is immediately apparent on the face of the 1959 version, by the time Haston tells the tale for the second time his style is no longer so gauche; the idiom of the comic strip has now been assimilated and fed back into the climbing lexicon, Lionheart Logan's derring-do colliding with the 'because it's there' laconicism of George Leigh Mallory. The climber and academic, Terry Gifford, has written of how this latter quality has tended to function in mountain literature as 'a distracting curtain drawn across the full expression of the emotions'.<sup>39</sup> In

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<sup>35</sup> *Vertical Margins*, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> See Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996)

<sup>37</sup> *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1962), pp. 175-203, p. 193, 196 and 191 respectively.

<sup>38</sup> Orwell, *Inside the Whale*, p. 200.

<sup>39</sup> *Reconnecting with John Muir*, p. 159.

Haston's second telling of the ascent we can go even further, the worldly 'been there, done that' pose offering a degree of opacity to a narrative and characterization which, in truth, can be reduced to a two-dimensional simplicity. Haston's staccato sentences and the jocular dialogue ("Come on, Eley. It's only about a ten-foot jump" (42)) only partially disguise the fact that this is a narrative which, in its way, is as rigidly programmatic and structured as anything found in Orwell's boys' weeklies.

For Gifford, commenting upon mountain literature generally, 'the key concept here is "control"'.<sup>40</sup> In *In High Places* this goes beyond merely the desire to avoid embarrassing overstatement, but is rather the central idea, dominating thematically and structurally from the very start and in a way that goes far beyond the exigencies of the actual climbing. It is there in the prescriptiveness of the book's title, in the ill-fitting sequencing of its chapters; it is there in the very first paragraph ('self-doubt along with fear is necessary. But can you control them both?' (1)). Just over half of Chapter one is given over to a summary of the rules and techniques of rock and ice climbing - a master class in maintaining control ('It's very important to keep the rope running smoothly and easily', 'Climbing should be a balanced set of movements', and so on (7)). Towards the end of the tutorial Haston, addressing the fear of heights, summarises the position thus:

One has to conquer many inhibitions in climbing. In fact a little fear is a healthy thing – it keeps a sense of perspective. If it develops into panic, that's something else; but that involves a loss of control, which is something that should never happen to a climber. (13)

Climbing as the subjugation of self; Haston could almost be reading from an infantryman's manual on warfare (re-read the last two sentences in the extract, changing the last word to 'soldier'). But I don't think that Haston is simply – even - falling back upon war as a metaphor for climbing mountains in the familiar way. Unlike many of the most significant figures in British mountaineering in the first fifty or so years of the twentieth century, Haston was not a military man. For those that were, military service and training provided a point of reference, a figurative hinterland that they drew upon in order to plan, approach and describe the climbing of mountains. It was natural, for example, for Brigadier Sir John Hunt to frame the 'problem' of Mount Everest by enquiring as to the 'weapons' with which it had 'so long succeeded in holding at bay so many resolute men'.<sup>41</sup> For Hunt, Everest was a logistical problem which his military training enabled him to solve. As a decorated Second World War

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 160.

<sup>41</sup> John Hunt, *The Ascent of Everest* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1953), p. 9.



veteran, however, he was never crass enough to claim an equivalence between warfare and mountaineering. In so far as it goes, of course, neither does Haston. But for Haston, whose knowledge of the military came second hand, the metaphor is almost not a metaphor at all. Rather, for him climbing is not seen as analogous to, but actually *is*, a form of warfare. He describes the appearance of a fully equipped climber as 'like something out of a medieval torture chamber'; crampons are 'wicked spikes', ice axes and hammers are 'hand weapons' (11). This is Haston, writing later in *In High Places*, in connection with the perils of rock fall on the Eiger North Face:

I suppose being in a stonefall area is the nearest thing we war babies and non-combatants can come to experiencing shell-fire. It is the feeling of utter hopelessness that prevails. There were no safer alternative routes: the stones could come at any time – anywhere. There was no point in even being afraid. There had to be a straight, unemotional acceptance, with the mind continuously alert for evasive action if that is possible. (56)

It is easy to forget that Haston is describing his participation in a sport. In the circumstances that he describes the need for absolute control – for 'unemotional acceptance', to be 'continuously alert' – could hardly be more apparent. A strategy is required to achieve this, and it emerges early on *In High Places*. It involves the fetishization of both the mountain environment and those who climb in it; and within this it demands the utter idealization of Haston.

***It was in winter, often in raging blizzards on Ben Nevis and the Cairngorms, that he came into his own***

Haston stakes out his territory in the first few pages of *In High Places*. The romantic inheritance is clear: the rock face, on his first climb in Glencoe, is 'almost magical', 'awesome' (4); the Glen itself a place where 'we wandered, and found new dimensions' (17). Mountains are 'grim and inaccessible, dwelling-places of gods and spirits', possessing 'an aura of the unknown and the mysterious'; they constitute 'another world' (5). This is sublime mountain landscape, beyond comprehension, overwhelming the senses. It is an environment that exists beyond common experience, offering its meaning to only a chosen few. The 'average cliff' becomes, to the climber, 'a whole complex little world', a discrete miniaturised and simplified sphere of existence (6). You get a sense of how this might work when reading the early route descriptions inked by Haston into the log books kept by the Scottish

Mountaineering Club at its huts at Ben Nevis and Glencoe. The following entry comes from the Nevis book, dated 15 September 1959:

New route between Sassenach & Centurion THE BAT – 800–1000ft Very Severe. Climb 1<sup>st</sup> pitch Centurion then traverse right for 200ft. Climb small corner then follow large corner – following cracks to the top of the buttress – R. SMITH & D. HASTON (Through leads).<sup>42</sup>

The Highland topography is shifted to an exotic parallel universe of buttresses, cracks and corners, described by reference to its own arcane nomenclature. It is a realm that is regulated in the minutest detail: by distance, by standard, by precise position, landscape parcelled and parameterized to a quite exceptional degree. A 'new route', it is a unique configuration of geographical features created and defined by the climber, understood only on his terms. The description is signed off by the climbers – here Haston and Robin Smith – in a way which is distinctly proprietary.

Like this mountain landscape, Haston's climbers are Other, a breed apart. They are subject to their own particular 'rules, systems and ethical codes' (6). Haston's fetishizing of climbers works its way out from the personal, differentiating them from the place of his childhood ('no one in Currie had ever gone climbing') and his class ('rock climbing was dismissed as eccentric and mad – the normal working man's interpretation of the foibles of one who doesn't toil for a living')(4). There is an important passage early in *In High Places* - in which Haston relates his experience of working in an Edinburgh insurance office in the months prior to University - where this process of differentiation reaches its high-water mark:

I would find myself looking at the people around me. A room with maybe ten rows of clerks. The chief had started at the lowest end: forty years later he was at the top. I don't criticize. That had been his mountain. I tried to imagine myself climbing it. No way. (23)

If climbing the mountain is a metaphor for the clerk's (working) life, for the climber the figuration is turned on its head – the ordinary course of life becomes a metaphor for climbing. Between the two there is only mutual incomprehension; to attempt to transpose the progression of the clerk's life to his own is something that is simply beyond Haston's imaginative powers. Here the solitary climber, finding himself amongst 'ten rows of clerks', is plainly the exception amongst the unexceptional, that transparently critical 'I don't criticize'

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<sup>42</sup> Scottish Mountaineering Club, *Charles Inglis-Clark Memorial Hut (Ben Nevis) Climbing Book, July 1949 - November 1961*, National Library of Scotland, SMC Archive Acc. 11538/18. The full story of the ascent, which was accomplished after several attempts over a number of days, is told in considerably more detail in *In High Places* (pp. 29-33).

directed at the multitudes that choose the office rather than the mountain top. The climber is singular, superior. And, importantly, even amongst his climbing peers Haston draws a firm distinction between ‘about ten to fifteen people really active’ at the time (himself included) on the one hand and ‘the many who love climbing on odd days and easy things’ on the other (18). Haston explains as follows:

We were just a little more committed. By pushing our standards we pushed ourselves and learnt more about both. This demands a hard, often ruthless state of mind. Often we didn’t succeed on projects, but head-shaking we’d come back for more. The despised people were the ones who criticized through envy and because they were afraid to try the same things. There are always people who want a balanced mediocrity. (18)

Haston, relentlessly pursuing his harrowing quest for both climbing excellence and personal revelation, looks down upon – despises – the rest of the climbing community. He seems to imply a vocation that takes him to the edge of insanity: he is ‘committed’, the mediocrities ‘balanced’. The echoes of Friedrich Nietzsche are unmistakable. Zarathustra’s words to the rope dancer – ‘you have made danger your calling: there is nothing in that to despise’ – encapsulate Haston’s credo here.<sup>43</sup> Haston studied Philosophy at Edinburgh University (although he never graduated), and his biographer observes that Haston was much taken by the writings of Nietzsche and his concept of the *Übermensch* (he even took to signing off his diary entries ‘Thus spake DH’).<sup>44</sup>

It is significant that, after his first experience of climbing as a fourteen-year-old, Haston tells us he came to the realisation that ‘these people must be superhuman’ (4). Those early handwritten route descriptions are again illuminating here. An entry relating to an ascent of Comb Gully on Ben Nevis by Haston and Andy Wightman, dated 10 January 1960, has the words ‘HERO AWARD (SHARED)’ scrawled next to it, in someone else’s hand.<sup>45</sup> The fact that the words are no doubt intended humorously hardly matters; what does is that they reflect long-set terms of reference - the climber as hero.

The superhuman here is, of course, very much Haston himself. In the year before *In High Places* was published, one of the other members of the successful Annapurna South Face expedition, Tom Frost, had used that very word to describe Haston’s performance, in an article in the *American Alpine Journal*.<sup>46</sup> In the first two chapters of *In High Places* Haston

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<sup>43</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. By Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> Connor, *The Philosophy of Risk*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>45</sup> Scottish Mountaineering Club, *Charles Inglis-Clark Memorial Hut (Ben Nevis) Climbing Book*.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Annapurna South Face’, *American Alpine Journal* (1971), 229 - 233 (p. 232).

misses few opportunities to establish his credentials. He knows little fear ('I rarely notice the space around me – 'exposure', as it is known – as I climb. Or, if I do, it's to savour it, enjoying the freedom' (13)); he relishes hardship ('this hut must be my favourite in Scotland. It is very isolated...through bog, river, snow, rain, lightning, sleet or even sunshine. We usually did it at night' (24)); he climbs that bit *harder* ('we were just a little more committed. By pushing our standards we pushed ourselves and learnt more about both' (18)); He has extraordinary powers of recovery (coming back after injury, 'I was climbing as well as ever. Probably better' (20)); he does the unthinkable ('night climbing is something that people should try more often' (29)). There is even evidence of indestructibility: after surviving a teenage motorcycling accident, Haston reflects that 'not many people jump sixty feet at 65 m.p.h. and walk away' (20).

That Haston should look to shrug off his own mortality is consistent with the meta-narrative being followed - the (super) hero never dies. Haston had, however, every reason to want to believe in the myth. By the time he came to write *In High Places* three of his friends had been killed, one after the other, in climbing accidents. In 1962 his early partner, Robin Smith, had fallen to his death in the Soviet Pamirs; in 1966 the leader of their three-man team, John Harlin, had died when a rope broke as they climbed the Eiger North Face; and in 1970 a climbing partner of many years' standing, Ian Clough, had been killed by a falling tower of ice at the end of the Annapurna South Face expedition. Their deaths all figure in *In High Places*, but what is noticeable is how *little* is said. For Harlin and Clough in particular, both of whom had been part of the same team as Haston at the time of their deaths, the concision is remarkable. This regarding Harlin: 'I never saw him again. A broken rope ended the life of one who belonged to the finest of men' (77); and Clough: "It's Ian. He's dead, killed in an ice avalanche below Camp II." It took a few minutes before there was any reaction, everyone was so numb and shocked. There it was' (37). These were tragic accidents, the results of simple bad luck rather than technical deficiencies. Yet Haston omits to state what is painfully obvious: it could just as easily have been him. There is no predicting when a falling stone will nick a rope; there is no way to foresee an ice avalanche. The notion of control becomes a fantasy. In such circumstances one response is to look to take on the status of myth yourself. Whilst Smith, Harlin and Clough had all died, Haston had, after all, survived.

### ***Some day I'm going to climb that Face***

There is another death that is at least as significant to any reading of Haston's life as those of Smith, Harlin and Clough. In April 1965, after an all-day drinking session, Haston accidentally drove into a group of three young walkers at night in Glencoe; one, James Orr, later died in hospital of his injuries. Haston was sentenced to sixty days in Glasgow's Barlinnie Prison, which he served in July and August that year. Jeff Connor, in his biography of Haston, tells how friends of the dead man would later confront Haston at his public lectures, suggesting that he was far from the heroic adventurer his public persona suggested.<sup>47</sup> Yet there is not a whisper of any of this in *In High Places*; it is presumably not part of the story Haston wishes to tell. One can only guess at the impact of the incident and its consequences. Haston appears never to have publicly commented upon it, and the opinions of those who knew Haston vary considerably: in his research for his biography of Haston, Jeff Connor found that there was a more or less even split between those who believed the accident had changed Haston's personality and those that did not.<sup>48</sup> It seems more than coincidental, however, that in the aftermath of the accident Haston should immediately be plunged into the climb that he was to claim as the pivotal event in his life – the ascent of the Eiger North Face in winter, by an audacious new 'direct' route. This connection was not lost on Doug Scott, Haston's partner on Changabang, Everest and Mount McKinley. In Haston's obituary he proffered the opinion that, whilst Haston gave 'the impression' that the Eiger Direct was a turning point, it seemed to him more likely that it was the accident that was the determining event.<sup>49</sup>

What is striking is that, in the immediate aftermath of the climb, Haston provided not just one, but three contemporaneous accounts, all varying in style and emphasis: a book, *Eiger Direct*, which he co-authored with the journalist Peter Gillman; a piece in the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*, 'Direkt'; and a report, 'Reflections on the Eiger Direct', for *Mountain World* (which would subsequently be transferred verbatim to provide the account that appears in *In High Places*). And Haston's fascination with the ascent didn't end there. He had already published an article about the Eiger in the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*, concerning his earlier (1963) ascent of the North Face by its original route; and he was to come back to the mountain subsequently, in an article in *Mountain* magazine in 1970, and in his book, *The Eiger*, published in 1974. The sheer volume of words alone

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<sup>47</sup> Connor, *The Philosophy of Risk*, p. 85.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 82

<sup>49</sup> Jimmy Marshall, Chris Bonington and Doug Scott, 'Dougal Haston – a Tribute', *Alpine Journal* (1978), 132 - 139 (p. 138).

demonstrates the extent of the hold the Eiger North Face had over Haston. Taken together, these texts offer a valuable insight into Haston's response to, and his efforts to assert control over, the tumultuous events of 1965 and 1966.

Haston's obsession with the Eiger North Face can be placed in context. During his formative years - the middle of the twentieth century – this was the most widely-known and feared mountain wall in the world. It was finally climbed in 1938, the last of the great alpine faces to fall, after eight deaths spread over four previous unsuccessful attempts. The story of the ascent, and the tragedies and epics that had taken place on the face, were a staple of Haston's teenage reading.<sup>50</sup> Hermann Buhl tells us – in a chapter sub-titled 'The Mountain Crucible' – that 'ever since I was a boy it had drawn me to it'.<sup>51</sup> Haston would certainly have it that he was no different. He refers (no doubt apocryphally) to spending time calculating the rate of stone fall on the North Face, when he should have been doing his mathematics homework (5). There is a tremendous amount of baggage being carried here, a whole mythology that far transcends the mountain itself. 'The seminal mountain, a metaphorical mountain' is how Joe Simpson describes it, a peak symbolising everything that defines mountaineering.<sup>52</sup> What the metaphor represents, however, is likely to vary depending upon whether you are – for instance – reading about it in your bedroom in the 1950s, viewing those climbing the face through the telescopes at Kleine Scheidegg, or actually standing at the foot of the face contemplating the climb. It is likely to be quite something else again if, like Haston, you have done all of those things. The Austrian mountaineer Heinrich Harrer (one of the party of four who made the first ascent in 1938) understood that the Eiger, by becoming 'the epitome of everything tragically sensational that mountaineering had to offer the reader', could thus 'hardly help being a caricature'.<sup>53</sup> The Eiger - the Ogre, in one translation - is the cartoon mountain, the pantomime villain of the Alps. As such, in the comic-strip narrative of Haston's life, it was always going to be of central importance.

Haston reaches the Eiger in chapter four of *In High Places*, in which he describes his first two attempts on the Face, and his successful ascent in 1963 by the original 1938 route. The account given of the latter is familiar, being essentially a repeat – save for some relatively minor stylistic changes - of an article that Haston had published in 1964 in the

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<sup>50</sup> Haston certainly read *The White Spider*, Heinrich Harrer's classic history of the Eiger North Face and *Starlight and Storm* by the French mountain guide Gaston Rebuffat, as well as Buhl's *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage*. All give accounts of the authors' (dramatic) ascents of the North Face. See *In High Places*, p. 4, and Connor, *The Philosophy of Risk*, p. 12 and p. 73.

<sup>51</sup> Buhl, *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage*, p. 268.

<sup>52</sup> *The Beckoning Silence*, p. 130.

<sup>53</sup> *The White Spider: The Story of the North Face of the Eiger*, trans. by Hugh Merrick (London: Rupert-Hart Davis Ltd, 1959; repr. Flamingo, 1995), p. 20.

*Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*. What is different between the two is the way in which Haston introduces us to the mountain. This is the beginning of the 1964 piece, which is omitted from the version later published in *In High Places*:

Now there's a wall in the Alps which some of you may have heard of. It's big and black and gobs stones at wanderers on its flanks. When not doing this it's usually pulling in all the storms that float around trying to improve its appearance with a white covering. Once in a while it's quiet. This is when you want to climb it.<sup>54</sup>

Semi-humorous in tone, Haston adopts a studiedly casual air ('you may', 'it's usually', 'once in a while') whilst playfully anthropomorphizing the mountain. In its way this is just a 1960s updating of the mountaineer's ironic understatement of old, here bringing inanimate rock and ice to heel by analogy with human nature. But compare this to the introductory words from chapter four of *In High Places*:

From my early readings the Eiger always had a strong appeal. I have always felt the need for real tests in climbing; basically lazy, I have sometimes turned back on easier routes because I felt they were not testing my capabilities. When I turned to the Alps, the existing route on the North Face seemed to offer a total test of my abilities. At the time there were technically harder routes around but the Eiger seemed to be the most serious of them all. (49)

The contextualization is now vastly different. The irony and humour have gone. Instead there is an uncompromising intensity, a puritanical putting to proof of Haston's climbing credentials. Haston may be describing a sporting apprenticeship, but the absolutist language ('always had', 'always felt') and the grimly masculine choice of adjectives ('strong', 'real', 'harder', 'total') give it more of the feel of a hair shirt. Between the two extracts there has been an attitudinal volte-face. Where Haston had once advised us to approach the Eiger when it was at its least testing ('once in a while it's quiet. This is when you want to climb it'), now the aim is to maximize the difficulty and hardship, to find the 'total test', the 'most serious of them all'.

A clue to when this change of heart occurred is found a few lines later in *In High Places*, as Haston seeks to explain the motivation behind his progression as a mountaineer. He tells us that 'from early days, I found that climbing was the only thing in life that gave me more than momentary satisfaction' (49). This is an unusual form of words, but it had

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<sup>54</sup> 'Eigerwandering', *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*, 28 (1964-1967), 8-12 (p. 8).

appeared before – for the first time in *Eiger Direct*, the book Haston co-authored with Peter Gillman in 1966,<sup>55</sup> and again in a 'Newsmaker' piece that featured in the weekend magazine of the *Scotsman* a year later.<sup>56</sup> The sentence reads in a way that seems to suggest that the value of climbing to Haston is in its capacity to bring relief, rather than enjoyment. That odd word, 'satisfaction', connoting debt settlement, atonement; Haston as Coleridge's Mariner, condemned to endlessly repeat his endeavour. That this formulation should have been hit upon at this particular time is scarcely likely to be coincidental.

If Haston is now only interested in 'the real tests in climbing' (49), then the corollary is that these climbs are also the most dangerous: 'accidents happened because the North Face was a very difficult proposition' (50). Giving as an example the death of Toni Kurz and the other members of his party on the face in 1936, Haston comments 'there had been many fatalities, often over-ambitious parties caught out before they ready to tackle the wall', and then refers the reader to Heinrich Harrer's *The White Spider*, which 'is required reading for anyone interested in the Eiger' (51). Haston's own story becomes part of, and incorporates, Harrer's 'tragically sensational' story of the North Face. Quite literally: not only does Haston refer to reading *The White Spider* prior to his attempts on the face (51), but by the time of the *Eiger Direct* climb his 1963 ascent has been incorporated into the revised edition of the book published in 1965; in turn, details of the *Eiger Direct* are included in the list of attempts on the face found in the second revised edition, published in 1976. The Eiger's story, *The White Spider*, becomes part of what Haston *is*. We see this when comparing his account of his first ascent (1964) with his subsequent account, again published in the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal* (1967), of the heavily publicised *Direct* ascent. The former, entitled 'Eigerwandering', is semi-comic, light-hearted, as if Haston having absorbed the myth of the North Face realises he is not yet quite part of it, sheepishly following in the footsteps of the legendary climbers who went before him: he tells us he is one of the 'idiots', struggling to stay calm, experiencing 'a great release of nervous tension' and 'the feeling of being really small'. But by the time of the 1967 account, 'Direkt', the myth-making has begun in earnest. He tells us 'into the spirits of ancient Nordwanderers came men with eyes lined straight not devious';<sup>57</sup> describing the end of his bivouac on the face with John Harlin, they were 'centuries old in survival when we emerged';<sup>58</sup> the team ultimately establishing the

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<sup>55</sup> (London: Collins, 1966), p. 30.

<sup>56</sup> 'A Promise Kept', *Scotsman* weekend magazine, 18 February 1967, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> 'Direkt', *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*, 28 (1964-1967), 276-278 (p. 276).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p. 277.



route, 'five fighting with all their wintered years'.<sup>59</sup> Heavily stylised for sure, a faux Nordic saga, but Haston is clearly describing himself and the ascent in terms which suggest the heroic and the epic.

Part of the North Face story, it is only appropriate that Haston should describe, in *In High Places*, his reaction on first seeing the face in traditional fashion:

The train arrived at Grindelwald. As it slowed into the station I was still recovering from the biggest shock of my climbing life. I'd read everything that had been written about the North Face of the Eiger, but I was still unprepared for the sheer size of the face that dominated the Grindelwald valley. We didn't speak but I could see Eley was feeling the same. What were we in for? (51)

If it does not precisely ascribe the quality of the sublime to the North Face, Haston's language places it squarely within the same literary tradition: Haston's 'shock', 'unprepared for the sheer size', leaving him feeling 'dominated', 'speechless'. This is something like the version of the sublime we saw in Herzog's *Annapurna*, a teleological Kantian sublime of self-aggrandisement, where we know that ultimately Haston climbs the face and triumphs. For Haston, however, climbing the North Face is not enough. In chapter 6, 'Eiger Direct', he observes that most people who climb the North Face say 'never again'. But Haston cannot accept this: whilst other climbers 'seemed to experience a great sense of relief when finishing the North Face', for Haston, 'accepting danger and trying to minimise it with one's experience is an essential part of climbing' (71). We can again hear the words of Zarathustra: Haston has 'made danger his calling'.<sup>60</sup>

Haston begins his account of the Direct ascent from a bivouac high up on the North Face, assessing the events of the previous few weeks:

The conflict is fierce. Two separate parts of time and space are fighting their respective battles. I, a free being, am existing, but the fact of my existence has long ceased to give me trouble. It is where I am at present that is causing mental turmoil. The time late March 1966; the place, the Eiger Nordwand. (75)

Haston frames this as a climactic, elemental confrontation, with time and space, no less, in 'fierce' conflict. He describes himself as a 'free being', a choice of words that places him as existing in the widest sense, hinting at something beyond the mere human. There is a curious

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 278.

<sup>60</sup> Although this should be qualified: Zarathustra's aphorism is addressed not to a superman, but to the broken and dying body of the fallen rope dancer.

ambiguity – the who, when and where of Haston’s ‘separate parts of time and space’ are far from clear – yet we note his ‘mental turmoil’; the suggestion that he is merely ‘existing’ whilst the conflict is played out. Haston then briefly describes the climb continuing in siege fashion through February and March, with him at one stage spending six days with John Harlin in a snow cave on the face itself: ‘there were immense problems in just staying alive’ (76). Then, on 22 March, as they begin their final push for the summit, Harlin falls to his death. The subsequent decision to continue with the climb is summarised as follows: ‘The whole climb had lain in the balance, but the thought of establishing the direct route as a memorial to John had overcome our urge to flee as we were rocking in the throes of bitter defeat’ (77). The choice of that last word, ‘defeat’ – surely Haston means grief? Or are we to understand that what really matters is being forced to abandon the ascent, to thus be defeated? Haston makes his feelings more explicit in his article, ‘Direkt’: ‘a broken rope and many minds wept in despair. Despair and weakness then strength again. Eigerwand a tombstone. We wanted a rood without a cross piece. A straight line to memory John’.<sup>61</sup> To retreat is cast as ‘weakness’, to continue as ‘strength’. The tone is defiantly Nietzschean, but hidden away behind it there is pathos. Despite losing a friend in tragic circumstances, Haston cannot allow himself to contemplate terminating the climb. Giving up is tersely dismissed, whilst continuing the route is rationalised as honouring and memorialising Harlin.<sup>62</sup>

So, through a breaking storm, the ascent continues to the summit. Haston emerges from his bivouac to an icy apocalypse, beset by multiple avalanches, a ‘nightmare wind’, eyes and face frozen to the point that he can hardly see. Yet he tells us that he feels ‘capable of days of struggle physically’, his mind ‘in a strange state of blank acceptance’ (77). In *Eiger Direct* he takes this even further: ‘in a strange way I was enjoying this test. I knew the odds were stacked with the house, but I felt in perfect control’.<sup>63</sup> This is Haston as *Übermensch*. Approaching the summit he tells us ‘I was in a position to look out over the edge of all things’ (78). Like Maurice Herzog, Haston reaches an existential boundary, a metaphysical viewpoint into the beyond that is only accessible to a self-selecting few. The consequences for Haston are life-changing: ‘I felt as if I had just come at last out of the darkness into the light, and the exploration of that light offered so many bewildering possibilities that my mind could scarcely cope with the contemplation of it all’ (79). The reasons quite why Haston may feel this way – or, indeed, may *want* to feel this way – are complex. But by reducing these

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<sup>61</sup> ‘Direkt’, p. 277.

<sup>62</sup> In the book about the climb he co-authored with Peter Gillman, Haston offers the familiar climber’s special pleading: ‘I knew he would have wished us to continue’. Gillman and Haston, *Eiger Direct*, p. 141.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p. 167.

events to the most primal and basic of metaphors ('out of the darkness and into the light') Haston draws the thickest of lines under his past; messy complexity discarded for teleological purity.

Stripping away style and affectation, we are left with a narrative that conforms to the most basic of genre formulae – an adventure story where the actor overcomes extreme obstacles to reach a triumphant conclusion.<sup>64</sup> In such a reading the temptation is to characterise Haston as some kind of comic-book *Übermensch*, the Mystical Mountaineer in a Marvel cinematic universe. But given the recent traumatic events in Haston's life – the death of James Orr, the time spent in prison, the death of Harlin, the almost-death of Haston himself on the North Face – his response, to separate the self he was beforehand from the (purified, simplified) self he is now, having 'come into the light', appears a rational one. Equally, given that one of the consequences of trauma is a loss of control, it is natural that Haston would seek to regain, and repeatedly reassert, that control.<sup>65</sup> Thus, for example, Haston may claim to have been in 'perfect control' as he approached the Eiger's summit, when the reality is likely to have been far more marginal. Rather than this being an exercise in self-mythologization, perhaps it can instead be seen as a response to trauma, an exercise in self-preservation.

### **'No doubt Dougal will go back to try again'**

*In High Places* ends in 1971, with Haston's account of his first attempt to climb the South-West Face of Everest. In September 1975, four attempts and three more deaths later, Haston reached the summit of Everest with Doug Scott. Subsequently Haston wrote a novel, finishing the draft manuscript the day before his death on 17 January 1977, killed by an avalanche whilst skiing near his home in Leysin, Switzerland. Published posthumously as *Calculated Risk*, it is a piece of semi-autobiographical climbing fiction that, in the words of Haston's biographer, 'perhaps told us more about him than his autobiography'.<sup>66</sup>

Whilst Haston had only completed a first draft, no one would suggest that it would ever have been a classic. The characters can be transposed to their real-life counterparts with little effort (the two main protagonists, John Dunlop and Jack McDonald, are clearly Haston and John Harlin). They are cartoon caricatures: 'he handled the Honda 750 well,

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<sup>64</sup> See John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 39-41.

<sup>65</sup> For example, see Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 73.

<sup>66</sup> Connor, *The Philosophy of Risk*, p. 201.

indeed with the same skill and cool which had made him one of Scotland's best mountaineers at the early age of 24'.<sup>67</sup> The dialogue would not look out of place in the speech bubbles of *The Hornet*: "Are you all right, Tony?" "Aye Willie, He got me on the side of the face... Did ye get him?" "Aye. He'll no be troublin' anybody for a while".<sup>68</sup> The plot itself is effectively a narrative account of two ascents actually made by Haston, the latter of which includes, in the novel, the sensational rescue of two other climbers (naturally, amateurs), before Dunlop and McDonald complete their own ascent; they are feted as 'simply heroes' on their return.<sup>69</sup>

Doug Scott plainly saw his friend in the text: 'it contained a wealth of information about this internationally known mountaineer that did not appear in his autobiography'.<sup>70</sup> Yet there is an emptiness in the characterization, a lack of interiority; it possesses the simple formulaic narrative of a superhero comic story.<sup>71</sup> The words of Roland Barthes, writing about the world of all-in wrestling, seem equally apposite here: what is portrayed is

an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction.<sup>72</sup>

One gets the sense that this 'ideal understanding of things' is precisely the condition Haston is striving for. Repeatedly committing the details of his ascents and expeditions to written narrative – here fiction, but also autobiography, memoirs, articles, log book entries and diaries – Haston's memories are rewritten, remade and gradually transmuted into a narrative of his life in which, to again quote Barthes, 'nothing exists except in the absolute'.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Dougal Haston, *Calculated Risk*, new edn. (London: Baton Wicks, 2006), p. 11.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>70</sup> Doug Scott, 'Foreword' to Haston, *Calculated Risk*, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> Mila Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 2000), p. 91.

<sup>72</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (St. Albans: Granada Publishing, 1972), p. 25.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

## Chapter III

### Our Blood on the Rock:

#### Jim Perrin and *The Climbing Essays*

I once, in a morbid moment, began to count the number of people I had known and climbed with who had been killed in the mountains. At 60, consumed by survivor-guilt, I stopped rather than reach a final figure.<sup>1</sup>

To philosophize is to learn how to die.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever Dougal Haston's take may have been on the idea of the mountaineer as sub-Nietzschean superman, there can be no such uncertainty with the climber and writer Jim Perrin. He peremptorily dismisses 'all that Zarathustra towards-the-superhuman bullshit'.<sup>3</sup> Climbers are rarely heroes, are never superheroes, are but simply 'children at play'.<sup>4</sup> Perrin directs us to Nietzsche's preface to *Human, All Too Human*, rather than to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for the essence of the climbing experience:<sup>5</sup> 'a pale, fine light and sunny happiness are characteristic of it, a feeling of birdlike freedom, birdlike perspective, birdlike arrogance, some third thing in which curiosity and a tender contempt are united'.<sup>6</sup> For over forty years Perrin has sought to convey in his prose precisely this sense of climbing as joyful flight, as dance, whilst at the same time acknowledging, and exploring, the flipside of the same, very sharply-edged, coin – the consequences of this 'dangerous privilege of being permitted to live *experimentally*'.<sup>7</sup> As a writer Perrin is very possibly unique, outside of wartime at least, in the sheer number of obituaries, memoir pieces and eulogies he has written for (generally, climbing) friends and acquaintances. Many of these people he has also profiled whilst they were alive. As an engagement with death in writing it is, in its way, exceptional.

Perrin's writing is life writing in the broadest sense – some biographical, much autobiographical, and all drawing upon personal experience to a greater or lesser degree.

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Perrin, *The Villain: The Life of Don Whillans* (London: Hutchinson, 2005), p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. by M.A. Screech (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> 'Outlaw Hearts', *Climber*, August 1998, pp. 26-27.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Theory of Cosmic Jokes', *Climber*, September 1991, pp. 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> 'Outlaw Hearts', p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. by Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

Writing for climbing journals and the outdoor and national press, the bulk of his writing takes the form of short(ish) thematic essays: monthly columns on climbing and outdoor pursuits, book reviews, profiles, diary pieces, obituaries. That Perrin should elect to utilise the essay form above all others is not simply a dictate of the exigencies of the publications in which he appears. As a student and admirer of Hazlitt, Montaigne and Johnson, he is a practised hand at the art of essayistic persuasion, and many of his pieces are exemplars of finely wrought rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> Whilst some are not intended as persuasive pieces (the biographical profiles, the prose poems to the mountain landscape and the joy of climbing), it is with, and from within, the tradition of the literary essay that Perrin's work chiefly engages/emerges; this is his genre, and provides (in the words of Jonathan Culler) 'the context within which his activity takes place', no matter how much he may attempt to subvert its conventions.<sup>9</sup> Perrin has no difficulty in working within these strictures. In the introduction to his second collection of essays, *Yes, to Dance*, after quoting Hazlitt he explains: 'Every essayist – unless given over to the abject collusions of propagandism – quarrels with the world he or she inhabits, proposes new models, observes in protean subjectivity...we should never adopt the pretence of being invisible and uninvolved spectators'.<sup>10</sup>

One of the consequences of writing within this tradition, on these same subjects, for more than forty years is that Perrin has, at regular intervals, published collections of his essays.<sup>11</sup> His 2006 collection, *The Climbing Essays*, is different, to the extent that it consists of a selection of essays solely concerned with and around the subject of climbing, many of which have appeared before in his earlier collections.<sup>12</sup> The earliest piece dates back to 1967; the latest 2005; and the essays themselves are prefaced by a new extended essay, 'Autobiographical Sketches'. Indeed, taken as a whole, the book represents a kind of autobiography – or as near to it as Perrin is likely to give us – but one in which the constituent

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Scholes and Carl Klaus suggest that the essay is – together with the story, play and poem – one of the four generic forms of literature, its main characteristic being persuasion: *Elements of Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 116. The climber and academic Terry Gifford has suggested that the journal essay and magazine article are 'the natural forms in which to explore the rock-climbing experience', something suggested by the continuing success of certain anthologies of shorter climbing writing; or, alternatively, that these 'demonstrate that climbers have short attention spans for reading, which amounts to the same thing'. See *The Joy of Climbing* (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2004), p. 9 and *Reconnecting with John Muir*, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> *Yes, to Dance: Essays from Outside the Stockade* (Sparkford: The Oxford Illustrated Press, 1990), p. 9. Robert Macfarlane, writing on Perrin's essays in *The Guardian*, observed that, as 'the natural home of the contrarian', the essay was the obvious form for Perrin to choose: 'Common Ground: The Quartz Parliament', *Guardian*, 7 May 2005, Features & Reviews section, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> *On and Off the Rocks* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1986), *Yes, to Dance, Spirits of Place* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1997), *Travels with the Flea* (Glasgow: The In Pinn, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> (Glasgow: The In Pinn, 2006). Further references to this edition are given in brackets after quotations or references in the text.

parts have been written, some almost contemporaneous with events, over a period of decades. This is not the product of a single period of reflection, but one in which each successive essay is informed by, refines and revises its predecessors, a repetition with a difference, a *fort-da*. Moreover, these essays concern *thanatos* as much *bios*. As Robert Macfarlane observes in his Introduction, 'I have never read a book so full of life that is also so full of death' (xv).

Perrin has repeatedly acknowledged and made use of the rich tropological possibilities offered by mountains, climbing and their literature: 'climbing's got this crucial metaphorical dimension around inner quest' (183). He has pointed to the powerful importance of 'the path' and 'the mountain' as symbols in our lives.<sup>13</sup> The notion of the 'symbolic journey, the amelioristic impulse' is a recurrent theme in his prose.<sup>14</sup> Many of the individual pieces in *The Climbing Essays* operate at an allegorical level, and taken as a cumulative whole they certainly do – autobiography as parable. Over the years Perrin has regularly made passing reference to *Mount Analogue*, the deeply strange allegorical novel by the French writer and mystic Rene Daumal, left incomplete at his death. Before beginning the expedition to find the mythical Mount Analogue one of the novel's characters, Father Sogol, exclaims 'I suffer from an incurable need to understand. I do not want to die without understanding why I have lived'.<sup>15</sup> I do not think it is too much of a stretch to suggest that Perrin's essays, his repeated engagement with the same questions, meet a purpose that is something akin to this. In what follows I look at how, in *The Climbing Essays*, Perrin explores the joy and the jeopardy that lie at the heart of climbing and mountaineering; the symbiotic relationship that appears to exist between these two sides of the sport; and how, by his repeated engagement with these same questions over almost a lifetime of writing and bearing witness, his analysis has evolved.

After 'Autobiographical Sketches' the first pieces in *The Climbing Essays* – 'A Note on Commitment', 'Hubris' and 'Right Unconquerable: A Gritstone Paean' – are also Perrin's earliest, written in 1967 and 1971. They each describe the climbing of particular routes on cliffs in, respectively, North Wales and the Derbyshire Peak District. Perrin describes them as juvenilia, but the fact of their inclusion in the collection suggests they are something more than this, and certainly they introduce themes which have been central to Perrin's writing ever since. The first, 'A Note on Commitment' is also the first thing that he wrote about

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<sup>13</sup> 'Mending Your Ways', *Yes, to Dance*, pp. 114-118 (p. 116).

<sup>14</sup> *River Map*, p. xi.

<sup>15</sup> Rene Daumal, *Mount Analogue: A Tale of Non-Euclidian and Symbolically Authentic Mountaineering Adventures*, trans. by Carol Cosman (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 2004), p. 41.

climbing.<sup>16</sup> The use of the word 'commitment' is significant, its multiple meanings and connotations shading into one another; here, in the quasi-funerary sense, Perrin *commits* his body to the rock. The essay asks whether there is a 'new isolation, a new degree of utter commitment to certain crucial moves' on modern climbs, but Perrin clearly has more than just this version of commitment in mind: 'the more complete your qualities of commitment on rock, the less your degree of commitment in life' (23 and 22 respectively). There is a degree of ambivalence expressed here towards life 'off the rocks' that hints at a more general existential equivocation, something which the crucial moves on the climbs themselves help bring into stark relief. Here commitment brings clarification: 'you feel a commitment so complete that your only choice is to carry it through, a complete simplicity' (23). Ultimately it brings revelation: the appeal of such dangerous moves Perrin illustrates by quoting Bentham, "constantly actual end of action on the part of every individual at the moment of action; his greatest happiness according to his view of it at the moment"; he then continues:

In a situation like that below the crux of *Troach*, you are faced with this definition of happiness in close proximity to its ultimate form: the end of action is in view, its attainment demands for a few moments the total absorption in the problem of your mental and physical faculties – a totality of commitment, for should it falter, the outcome would most probably be fatal. In life that situation is a rare chance... (24)

Happiness as a factor of risk and proximity to death, life's 'rare chance', trailing off uncertainly into silence with those ambiguous ellipses. Similarly in 'Hubris': 'you must go so near to the edge really to know you are there' (26). Again, the idea of commitment: 'the effort is one of will: yes, I want to; of my own volition I will commit myself; to this coming situation' (26). That last semi-colon loads the word with further layers of meaning; Perrin could as easily be referring to admission to a psychiatric institution as to - as well as - the next move on a cliff face

All three essays contain descriptions of the technical moves required on each climb. The following, from 'Right Unconquerable: A Gritstone Paean', is typical:

Hunching your body beneath the flake, reaching high and out one-handed, suddenly you go, swinging right up on to the flake on huge layback holds, hooked hands, the crack sometimes closing, occasional little shuffles rightwards, awkward hand-changes, anxious moments, racing up the flake

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<sup>16</sup> See *On and Off the Rocks*, p. 156.



to the where the top layer juts disturbingly, and all the time on your arms, moving fast. If you do this climb at all, you do it quickly. (28)

This is odd stuff, effectively meaningless to anyone other than a climber who has completed the route. As a narrative it is too technical to grip the imagination of a non-climber; it is not sufficiently guide-book precise to be of practical use to a climber. But it is a style the essentials of which Perrin has continued to utilise in his descriptions of climbing ever since. What I think it does approach is the communication of what the poet Elizabeth Bishop called 'not a thought, but a mind thinking', a kind of poetry of action<sup>17</sup> (look how expertly Perrin conveys the abrupt exposure of each movement, the slow stretching monosyllables 'reaching high and out one-handed' before release, all giddy acceleration and swishing alliteration, 'suddenly you go, swinging'). What the climb description also does is function as form of a repetition, in the Freudian sense of attaining mastery, 'the urge to psychically process powerful experiences, to achieve full control over them'.<sup>18</sup> In these early essays Perrin engages in psychological gymnastics not dissimilar to the exercises in contorted logic we have previously seen attempted by Joe Simpson, Maurice Herzog and Dougal Haston in their own efforts at rationalization. This is his reasoning on attempting the climb *The Boldest*, from 'Hubris': 'a tenuous act of faith that it will not, though it could so easily, break and slide into the blackness that surrounds the narrowing, sharpest peak of consciousness. The action, and the meaning, and the meaning more than a derivative of the action. Perhaps...' (26). Again the ellipses, the frank uncertainty in the face of death dominating the writing.

We have to keep in mind here the fact that Perrin is in his very early twenties when writing these pieces. Death should have hardly intruded into his life, yet climbing has ensured that is a commonplace. Take a look at the climbing guidebook to Cwm Silyn and Cwellyn that he co-wrote in 1971; a section on the history of climbing there contains six deaths on just one double, A5-sized page.<sup>19</sup> 'Early days, early struggles, our blood on the rock' he states matter-of-factly in 'Right Unconquerable' (27). The ubiquity of death in Perrin's world requires a response, an attempt – a commitment - to reach an accommodation between climbing and its implications. In another early essay, written for the Climbers' Club Journal in 1969, Perrin tries this by dipping into climbing folklore and making reference (for the first of many times in his writing) to the last words of the climber Jim Madsen – surely too perfect to be anything other than apocryphal - as he slipped from the end of the abseil ropes to his

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: The Selected Letters*, ed. by Robert Giroux (London: Pimlico, 1996), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. by John Reddick (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Mike Yates and Jim Perrin, *Cwm Silyn and Cwellyn* (Climbers' Club, 1971), pp. 2-3.

death three thousand feet below on El Capitan in Yosemite: 'Ah, what the fuck...'.<sup>20</sup> Perrin draws a parallel with Camus' Meursault, 'accepting and returning the universal indifference when faced with his death within it', tentatively suggesting that the position to be taken by the mortality-aware climber lies somewhere between that of the stoic and the nihilist.<sup>21</sup>

Yet there is always also that 'rare chance', the *joy*. The dialogue between this and death, two halves of a dialectic, is the dominant trope of *The Climbing Essays*, and of Perrin's writing as a whole. For Perrin, the former implies, requires, the latter; what Perrin later calls the 'joy-life' (111) demands the possibility of death against which to gauge its own existence. It is as if the climber, starting time and again from the bottom of the mountain, is obliged to enact – figuratively at least - the scenario offered by (ironically enough) Nietzsche's Zarathustra, in one of his many attempts to explain the idea of eternal recurrence: 'Did you ever say Yes to a single joy? Oh, my friends, then you said Yes to *all* woe as well...if you ever wanted one time a second time, if you ever said 'You please me, happiness! Quick! Moment!' then you wanted it *all* back'.<sup>22</sup> Perrin's words in the brief introduction to the second section of essays (sub-titled 'Closing on Darkness'), lead us to somewhere approaching the same place: 'God preserve us from a world governed by Health & Safety decrees. If you want to climb, this is the core experience, and not the sad pastiche available from moulded resin bolted on to indoor plywood panels' (29).<sup>23</sup>

That 'core experience' is described in harrowing detail in the subsequent essay, 'Street Illegal', from 1977, which recounts Perrin's cocaine and amphetamine fuelled solo climb of *Coronation Street* in Cheddar Gorge. The piece starts from a point of utter despair: 'You could say I was not well. My life was in pieces and I was too shocked to recognise the case'. This is followed by the positive recognition of what is going on - 'It was a willed thing' – and the realisation that the climb may be something to be embraced: 'there was a certain thrilling tightness. As if the day for it had come. You have a thing suggested to you, perhaps even years before, and you know with a sense of terror that one day you have to put yourself on those rails' (29). There is a real sense of the one forcing the other, the *joy* and the *woe* in constant, oppositional, dialogue: 'This day there was the momentum: inside somewhere quietly weeping, and all the while there was something inexorable going on' (30). A kind of

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<sup>20</sup> 'Existential Psychochemicals', *Climbers' Club Journal* (1969), 20-24 (p. 23).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 283.

<sup>23</sup> This is (almost) Perrin paraphrasing Nietzsche for the twenty-first century: 'for believe me: the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is – to *live dangerously!*': *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 228.

schizophrenia creeps in, as Perrin identifies one part of him which is 'subdued and very frightened', whilst the other 'couldn't have given a fuck about anything' (30). As he begins to climb the latter dominates: 'I was laughing. I set off and steamrolled it'. But then, having climbed over half the route, Perrin takes a rest: 'And now I broke the rhythm of the thing, sat down, and the subdued me broke back with a terrorised sense of the place I was in. I wept' (30). The schizophrenic repetition of the word 'broke' - the 'I' breaking the rhythm, the 'me' breaking back into consciousness - with its connotation of sudden, jarring disruption, the dance suddenly ended, the re-imposition of reality; the drug-wired superman is suddenly brought back to the human once more. Now there is a reversion to pure nihilism:

The greyness – rock, sky, road – was everywhere. Even the grass had a wintergrey sheen. Not so much as a woodlouse faltering out of its crevice. If I just relaxed, I could relate to it, resign myself to it, and not give a fuck. I was letting myself down gently into being the objective correlative of a dead and inert world. (31)

Grey, not black and white, but between, a fading from one into the other, the alliteration (relax, relate, resign) letting us down gently before the text itself makes this explicit. Perrin is on the frontiers of life and death, both actually and figuratively – the objective correlative indeed. Somehow he manages to struggle to the top, but the oppressive sense of nihilism is retained: 'I now felt desolated. There was nothing cathartic in it. I felt worse than before' (31). Note how Perrin's words recall Dougal Haston's 'numbness' upon reaching the summit of Annapurna, or Joe Simpson experiencing 'the usual anticlimax' on Siula Grande. There is something deeply bathetic about this aspect of climbing experience, and Perrin understands this: 'It seems odd to me that you, as readers, will evaluate it, say this or that about it, as though it mattered, which it did not' (31). The sense that the entire endeavour was pointless, ultimately ludicrous, is strengthened by the lengthy footnote which Perrin wrote to accompany the essay at the time of publication. There Perrin – clearly trying to keep a straight face – explained his use of drugs and justified his use of both 'foul' language and Latin quotations. The essay and note are put in context by Perrin in his introductory remarks at the beginning of the section:

It began life quite innocently as an honest account of a daft, semi-impulsive experience, embroidered on to which was a bit of coat-trailing intended to wind up an older generation who regarded such antics as beyond the pale. The po-faced footnote was insisted upon if it was to be published, and I went along with that in some glee, thinking its very po-facedness actually increased the piss-taking quotient. (29)

The whole thing becomes a ludic exercise, the playful sense which on its face seems to be entirely absent from the essay is instead to be found in its wider context. Yet we are also told that the piece started out as an 'honest account' of what must have been at the time a terrifying and disturbing experience. Just as Nietzsche, finding his concept of eternal recurrence frightful, could only live with it by accepting it joyously, ecstatically,<sup>24</sup> so Perrin here appears constrained to present his own painful experience as, and in the manner of, the spirit of play - and he rejoices in it as such: 'Am I now quietly appalled at what I used to get up to? Do I take responsibility for the example it might set others? No, I don't' (29).

Whilst Perrin's 1980 essay, 'The Gate of Horn' begins on a similar note to 'Street Illegal' - 'there was an inauspicious feel to this day. It began badly' (74) - it nevertheless takes us to a very different place. The title, of both the essay and the climb it describes, are taken from Virgil's *Aeneid*: Book VI describes how in sleep the gate of horn leads to genuine apparitions, to 'true visions', whilst the gate of ivory leads only to 'deluding lies'.<sup>25</sup> Between the two lies a distinction which I think is important for the understanding of Perrin's mountain writing. Taking 'Street Illegal' as an example, Perrin's climb in the Cheddar Gorge was always a climb through the gate of ivory; it is concerned solely with achieving certain *ends*. Throughout there is an undercurrent of aggression and (self-) loathing, which surfaces dramatically after Perrin's hysterics: he is only then able to complete the ascent by harnessing a 'vicious controlling anger; he is 'absolutely tight', his climbing 'jerky, hurried and imprecise', his struggle 'distasteful, as I would imagine a dung-beetle to be'. And, after and despite all this, upon reaching the top he finds that there is still no catharsis (31). The motivating premise is found to be false - as Perrin mocks elsewhere, 'and these activities of ours...are sometimes seen as conquests...'.<sup>26</sup> At the end of a more recent essay, also included in the 'Climbs' section of *The Climbing Essays*, Perrin distils years of thought on his bipartite approach as follows:

I have an intuition: that there are ways of approaching mountains; that properly, if your own character is to grow through contact with them, it must be by appreciation of their beauty, by respect and a concern to establish between you and your desire's object the perfection of mutual rhythm - that

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<sup>24</sup> See Walter Kaufmann's introduction to his translation of *The Gay Science*, pp. 3-26, p.19.

<sup>25</sup> This is Dryden's translation; see Robin Sowerby, *Dryden's Aeneid* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1986), p. 160. Modern translations have it slightly differently - the gate of horn through which 'true shades pass with ease', the gate of ivory through which 'false dreams are sent'; see Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. by Robert Fitzgerald (London: Harvill Press, 1984). See also trans. by C.H.Sisson (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1986).

<sup>26</sup> 'Tryfan', *High*, April/May 1982, p. 25.

it must be to do with love and not the assertion of power, must be a marriage and not a rape.

Good! Know that! Kiss the joy as it flies... (63)

The climb Perrin describes in 'The Gate of Horn' ultimately takes the 'proper' route outlined here. The essay describes the first ascent of a route on the Pembrokeshire sea cliffs. The first quarter or so of the essay describes an atmosphere of general listlessness. Perrin is 'so mellow' that he had 'almost ceased to move'. He and his group head to the cliffs, where Perrin 'fretted and mooched'; he examines a possible route but finds it 'just too loose and too scrappy to be worth doing', and instead carries on down the cliff in a 'desultory sort of manner' (74). The initial paragraphs convey a dragging sense of apathy, the enervation of it all: 'I tried to put in another belay stake for my abseil. It wouldn't go in. The other stakes sloped towards where I wanted to go. I tied them off and tried to make myself think, "so what if they do fail?"' (74). Perrin slouches in his indifference: 'I tried', 'tried to make myself', 'so what'; a casual shrugging of the shoulders at mortality. Then, on impulse, Perrin looks around the corner of the cliff, immediately spots a possible, staggering, new route - and suddenly the whole tenor of the piece changes: 'Jesus Christ!' There is a sudden injection of urgency: 'I was dumbstruck and juddered my way back up the rope as fast as I could to the top' (75). He quickly rouses his climbing partner, who is 'somewhere between sleeping and waking' - once more the sense of being at a boundary, at the cusp - and the narrative begins to accelerate:

And he knew that I was on some sort of high and gripped out of my head and on to something big. So he brought round his gear and I was obsessive about big nuts and Friends and scrounged some of his chalk and he set up the rope and went down first whilst I fretted about how cold it would be down there and should I wear shorts or Polar pants. (75)

The words breathlessly tumble over one another, the repeated use of 'and' as a connective offering immediacy, the impression of unmediated thought. Perrin is now on a 'high', 'gripped', 'obsessive', all extremes of mental activity; the word 'fretted', repeated from earlier in the piece, now bearing the full weight of its additional, more compelling, meaning(s), Perrin worrying over the minutiae but also consumed by the thought of the climb, champing at the bit - 'let's go for it now'. The incongruous - but now familiar - juxtaposition, 'on some sort of high' yet 'gripped out of my head', tells us that here mortal terror must be accepted as part of the deal, Perrin emerging from dull insensibility into a state of hyper-awareness as to both

the serious possibility of death and the absolute necessity for this.<sup>27</sup> The climb then beginning, it becomes apparent that this is a movement *beyond*, not merely from one place to another: 'The wall overhung as much as the one around the corner. I peered around: "Oh, shit! Oh, Jesus!"...Through the cleft you saw into the bay beyond, through dark green walls, and out in the daylight the water was an incandescent ultramarine glow, more emanation than substance, shockingly beautiful, an acid trip of sunlight' (76). And Perrin is unrecognisable from the figure at the beginning of the piece: 'it was all so cool and good. I was so strong and concentrated, and the ledge came almost before I wanted it' (77). Without wishing to over-egg the (already rich) Nietzschean pudding, there is one further metaphor from *Zarathustra* which is valuable here, and which Perrin himself references in a later piece in *The Climbing Essays*: 'the human is...a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking back, a dangerous shuddering and standing still. What is great in the human is that it is a bridge and not a goal'.<sup>28</sup> In the later essay Perrin refers to Nietzsche's phrase in the sense of man being defined by his aspiring, 'a bridge and a going across', equating in climbing terms ultimately, and negatively, to attainment, measurement and commodification – precisely the motivation that lies behind the climb in 'Street Illegal'. But there are (with Nietzsche, inevitably) other interpretations. Zarathustra's words are prompted by the imminent appearance of a tight-rope walker, a 'rope-dancer' (two words which in many ways encapsulate Perrin's climbing ideal). The whole interest to us of and in a rope-dancer is in the 'dangerous across', in the dance, in his time on the rope, in the bridge and not the goal. As Perrin puts it elsewhere in *The Climbing Essays*, 'there is no achievement in the having done this thing, only in the how of doing it' (271). Thus, in 'The Gate of Horn', the end of the climb comes 'almost before I wanted it', whilst Perrin's partner exclaims 'Oh God! God! I don't want it to stop. This is so good'. They both reach the top:

At the top his eyes were shining. We were inarticulate. I believe we so far forgot ourselves as to hug each other and scream with laughter. And there it was, a supreme fiction, an experience lived through together which all the memorial words, all the splintered shards of definition we vainly tried to gather could never approach. Something quite beautiful, searing and, beyond. (77)

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<sup>27</sup> As an further gloss on this - in an essay from 1996 in *Climber* magazine, reflecting upon the fact that the safety equipment available to the modern climber means that falling is often no longer the lethal proposition it once was, Perrin questions as follows: 'what I do wonder is this: if climbers are no longer afraid, if they grow increasingly nonchalant, does then also the adrenalin buzz, the rush of intensified sensation after acute fear, abate or even absent itself?' 'Fear of Flying', *Climber*, August 1996, pp. 56-58, p. 58.

<sup>28</sup> *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 13. See 'Contumely of the Conquistadors', pp. 225-229 (p. 229).

Now only joyous inarticulacy, expression having been wordlessly articulated and exhausted in the primal dance of the climb itself. It has been a spiritual, quasi-religious experience, a 'supreme fiction' that has nevertheless been 'lived through', which Perrin then tries (but finds himself unable) to adequately memorialise. The implications of ultimacy, the past tense of 'lived', the funerary connotations of remembrance, the notion of *the beyond* – the sense is of Perrin and his partner having crossed, however transiently, beyond their own mortality, to a whole new metaphysical sphere. In the aftermath of the climb Perrin makes this explicit, telling us that his 'head was singing', and quoting a passage from Blake's great creation myth *The Book of Urizen* – "...like a black globe / Viewed by sons of Eternity, standing / On the shore of the infinite ocean / Like a human heart struggling and beating. / The vast world of Urizen appeared".<sup>29</sup> This is, categorically, not the humorous understatement with which we are familiar from mountain writing, but rather a serious and candid attempt by Perrin to communicate the 'true vision' he glimpsed from his rope over the abyss.

Reading the essays in the 'Climbs' section of *The Climbing Essays* is to be struck by this concomitance of the ecstatic, spiralling joy of climbing and the ultimate certainty of our extinction; there is rarely, if ever, the one completely without the other. The philosopher Gaston Bachelard, considering his ascription of Nietzsche as the archetypal ascensional poet, offered the following aphorism: '*Verticality tears us apart*', characterizing it as the 'dialectics of positive and negative, of height and depth...the hope of rising or the fear of falling'.<sup>30</sup> Brutally apposite, this is pretty much a *précis* of the essence of these pieces. Death *intrudes*. So, in the otherwise frothy and amiable 'Small Climbs in Germany', Perrin begins 'like civilisation itself, I got lost somewhere in the region of Dachau' (43); in 'Welsh Slate', climbing in the old Dinorwig quarries, he is haunted by the ghosts of the men whose 'brief, hard lives' were spent working and dying there (86); and in 'Adventuring on the Lley'n' Perrin describes the 'intimation of mortality' he experiences during a trip to the dentist the day after climbing a route on the 'terror terrain' of the Lley'n sea cliffs (33, 34). In 'The True and Authentic History and Description of Fachwen' he explains how 'the place has never seemed the same since' the death of Al Harris, the climber who first introduced him to the cliffs (105).

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<sup>29</sup> Perrin's quotation is taken from the section of Blake's poem in which Urizen buries himself to escape the wrath of the Eternals. In so doing - in the lines which almost immediately precede those quoted by Perrin - Urizen creates the very landscape of Perrin's prose: 'He dug mountains & hills in vast strength, | He piled them in incessant labour | ... | and a roof, vast petrific around, | On all sides He fram'd: like a womb': 'The First Book of Urizen', *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), chap. III, verse 6 – 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, trans. by Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988), p. 156.

Something like the dialectic Bachelard identifies is at work in Perrin's 1993 essay, '(Beinn A'Chaorunn and) The Vision of Glory'. He describes the rare moments, which 'seem to come more easily in the mountains', where sudden unexpected glimpses of beauty can have a transformative effect: 'our essential life, the joy-life, is a sequence of these moments. How many of us could count even 60 such?' (112 and 111 respectively).<sup>31</sup> Perrin tells us how he climbed Kinder Scout in the Peak District, alone, aged 12 or 13. Overcome with terror as the mist descends, he flees from the plateau, stops and then watches as the landscape 'transfigured itself before my eyes':

The valley-greens flared with fierce intensity, bracken seemed on fire, mist was gilded with the sun. What had been terror was now beauty. As I sat and watched it there was a stillness within me beyond anything I'd known. I was annihilated, had no existence, simply looked out at the inconceivable beauty of the world that had detached me from any concept of self in order that I might see. (111-112)

That first line, heavily alliterative, reads like a line of Old English verse; the figurative language incongruous ('valley-greens flared', 'mist was gilded'), creating another, unfamiliar, world, 'beyond anything I'd known'. Perrin experiences the same vision of nature that struck Ralph Waldo Emerson years before ('all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all').<sup>32</sup> It seems appropriate that Perrin's vision is revealed to him at the top of Jacob's Ladder, the well-worn track up Kinder Scout transformed into the ladder to heaven seen by Jacob in the Book of Genesis. Yet even at this moment of rapture there remains a sense of the darkness that accompanies the light. 'I was annihilated': the sense that none of this would be possible without the accompanying shadow of mortality. There is a negotiation being conducted here, a bargain being reached whose essence is captured by the (Scottish hillwalking) poet, Norman MacCaig: 'grace is a crippling thing. You've to pay for grace'.<sup>33</sup>

The price that is paid is made very clear in Part Two of *The Climbing Essays*, 'The Climbers'. Only a handful of the individuals described in these short essays were still alive at the time of their composition. Many read like (or are) obituaries; one is an actual funeral address. It really appears, as Eliot put it, that 'the dancers are all gone under the hill'.<sup>34</sup> In

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<sup>31</sup> Again the echoes of Nietzsche: 'life consists of rare, isolated moments of the greatest significance' (and mountains are included in Nietzsche's list of exemplars). Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 247.

<sup>32</sup> *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Organic Anthology*, ed. by Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> Norman MacCaig, 'No Accident', from *Collected Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p. 140.

<sup>34</sup> T.S.Eliot, 'East Coker', from *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), p. 16.



‘John Hoyland: The Missing Dates’, Perrin gives us a potted biography of Hoyland, a promising mountaineer, who was killed on Mont Blanc de Courmayeur in 1934, aged 19. Those who knew him lament his early death, an accident with its roots in inexperience. Perrin nevertheless cautions against looking back ‘judgementally or even wishfully’:

Instead we have to accept that his ambition overreached itself, colluded with adverse circumstance, and brought about his death. Yet all that rich promise he possessed is not a mere *ignis fatuus* – it is the ore, the essence, the inspirational element of our humanity, which only hard-won experience – which must sometimes entail loss – can refine or distil into achievement and perhaps beyond that wisdom. (124)

Hoyland died exercising the Nietzschean privilege of living experimentally, offering himself to adventure. The bargain here is ultimately little more than a coin toss – one lost in Hoyland’s case – yet for Perrin this does not invalidate the attempt. The element of risk, the chance of disaster, is essential. In a subsequent essay, ‘Eating Bear Meat’, Perrin explores this by referring to the chapter entitled ‘Iron’ in Primo Levi’s *The Periodic Table*. Levi repeatedly stressed the importance he placed upon the time he had spent in the Italian mountains.<sup>35</sup> In ‘Iron, which concerns his mountaineering friend Sandro Delmastro, Levi distilled the experience as follows:

This was it – the bear meat; and now that many years have passed, I regret that I ate so little of it, for nothing has had, even distantly, the taste of that meat, which is the taste of being strong and free, free also to make mistakes and be the master of one’s destiny.<sup>36</sup>

Levi’s great metaphor goes to the heart of Perrin’s approach. Without the ‘taste of bear meat’ our activities in the mountains cease to be adventure, become sport: ‘their active principles are poles apart: sport and adventure – rules and chance’ (218). As Perrin says later in the same essay, it is spontaneity, not calculation, that is key, the endeavour proceeding from a natural impulse, an action taken of one’s own free will; and yes, by that absence of calculation we inevitably invite the possibility of jeopardy (219).

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<sup>35</sup> Levi makes reference to ‘my mountains’ in *If This is a Man*, first published in Italy in 1958 (London: 1987, Abacus), p. 120. He published a short story, ‘Bear Meat’ in 1961 which contains an almost identical formulation to that contained in *The Periodic Table*: see ‘Bear Meat’ in Primo Levi, *A Tranquil Star: Unpublished Stories*, trans. by Ann Goldstein and Alessandra Bastagli (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 31 – 45. He reflected specifically upon mountaineering at length in a 1984 interview with Alberto Papuzzi: see ‘Mountaineering’ in Primo Levi, *The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961 – 1987*, ed. by Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, trans. by Robert Gordon (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), pp. 59 – 64.

<sup>36</sup> Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 40.

The key tension at the heart of *The Climbing Essays*, and much of Perrin's work as a whole, is that found between this conception of climbing's essence and the fundamental question of whether the potential consequences are worth it. Over the years Perrin's views have oscillated. In 'A Valediction', first published in 1973, Perrin tells us he has had enough of climbing: 'I have come to see the nature of the sport; it is not a creative act and it has little left to give me'. Taking issue with 'the intense neurotic urge to seek out the limits of subjective possibility on rock', he denounces it as offering an illusion of omnipotence, where 'the philosophy behind it is one of despair... We turn from a world of which we cannot be the centre, to an experience so intense that we cannot but see ourselves at the centre of it'. The 'toying with death' that forms so much of its attraction is only worthwhile for those for whom 'the proximity of negation increases the attractiveness of life'. Perrin concludes that the lessons he has learned from climbing should now be applied to 'the creative act of living', not 'squandered in the negative sphere of rock' (257-259). The tone of the article is austere, severe; an admonishment. The version originally published in the Climbers' Club Journal even contained formal endnotes, emphasising his seriousness of purpose; and the article is there credited to 'James', not Jim, Perrin (as far as I am aware the only time he has not used the diminutive version of his name in publication), reflecting his argument that 'there are more phases to a man's life than just one'. He is moving on, a different person.<sup>37</sup>

In *The Climbing Essays* he prefaces the essay with a brief observation: 'I suppose you might ask, 33 years after this piece was written, how come I'm still climbing? Hey ho...' (257). He answers his own question in the preface to another essay (from 1976) a few pages later, "'Denn Bleiben Ist Nirgends'": 'quite soon I had to recant'. This time the tone is rueful ('believe me, I've tried very hard to give it up. Oh yes, so very, very hard'), making an attribute of his inconsistency ('we look for life's essence in its fix or flow; and I would rather, in my own self, live in the flow'), Perrin describing himself as a lapsed Catholic, on 'the climb up to Hell' (275-276). He describes an epiphany:

And I, I wanted the heights and the naked edges and the steep plunge of rib and groove, the splintered rock, wind-whistled and myself upon it. So up I went on that shattered hillside in company with a certain fear. It was so beautiful, I was lost. There were pinnacles and great drops; there were moves to be made and lakes far below, mauve horizons and I was unutterably alone; and the mountain did not shake me off, for I am not hubristic. It led me on like the eyes of a woman moving to her recline and I could not but follow'. (277)

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<sup>37</sup> *Climber's Club Journal*, 16 (1974), pp. 33-34.

So he begins climbing again, for the 'joy' that brought him here. But look at how Perrin describes his surroundings: 'naked edges' 'steep plunge', 'splintered rock', 'wind-whistled', 'shattered hillside', a landscape that inculcates 'a certain fear'. It sounds like a hellish desolation, yet Perrin describes it as 'so beautiful'. There is something of the sublime about the description – the plunge of the mountain landscape, the fear, the unutterable loneliness – but, unlike Herzog or Haston, Perrin's approach feels more like a surrendering, an act of abnegation – the gleeful nihilism of the natural contrarian. The playful personification of the mountain as a lover, the ludic impulse again evident. Yet the words 'I was lost', freighted with so many meanings (to be lost in the moment, but also to go astray, to perish, to be brought to ruin), hint at something else altogether. In the 1995 essay 'After the Funeral' Perrin addresses this head on, ruminating on the deaths of two of his friends, Paul Williams and Nat Allen, the former from a fall whilst climbing on Froggatt Edge in the Peak District. He recounts how, after Williams' funeral, he went up to Froggatt Edge to repeat the route from which Williams fell, which felt the 'proper way' to say goodbye. Perrin reflects upon the funeral, where he gave the eulogy, and asks 'what other community is as ours is, coming together with such frequency to honour the dead?'. Then this:

In some subtle, and I think *essentially* religious way, their deaths and our celebrations of their lives offer us the opportunity for redemption of our own faults. That strange process perhaps has something to do with a collective recognition of the true nature of our activity, something to do with being jolted back into an innate sense of our own smallness, presumption and impermanence by contrast with the indifferent grandeur and impersonal beauty of the mountains among which our games takes place. (231)

'*Essentially* religious': the first word italicised for emphasis. Perrin is not referring to a specific mainstream faith here, rather a more general sense of the sacred. He links it to a formulation which is far from conventional, where the climber's death and subsequent funerary commemoration allow 'the redemption of our own faults', a deliverance, the deceased climber as (almost) Christ, atoning for the sins of those left behind (given that most climbers – and certainly those covered in Perrin's essays, where their foibles are recounted with relish – are very far from being Christ-like figures, I think we can take Perrin's characterisation of this as a "strange process' as a given). This is a redemption through climbing that cuts several ways. Perrin also wrote obituaries of both Williams and Allen, for *The Guardian*. In his obituary for the former he describes Williams as 'deeply disenchanting', someone whose life beyond climbing always seemed 'somehow shadowed', and suggests it was only 'on the rock' where 'he found his actuality, self-belief and redemption'. At the same time, however,

Perrin has to concede that Williams 'lost through it as well, though'.<sup>38</sup> The eulogy he gives at the funeral turns this around: 'yes, climbing took away Paul's life, but it also gave him a life'. And again: 'his death holds up a dark mirror to the way we live our lives... It dulls the brightness of things, makes us forget that the rock which took away Paul's life also redeemed his life'.<sup>39</sup> All these formulations, the same but different, Perrin making multiple attempts to answer the question.

Perrin's reflections on the lives and deaths of his friends leads to an accommodation: 'I'll not mourn for any of them, good men that they were'. We all go 'down the long slide' eventually. Rather, 'they, who added to the richness of life, through their deaths remind us how good life is' (232). This, then, is redemption by way of the jolting reminder of everything that is at stake, a restoration to life by the presence of death. Perrin ends the essay by modifying a line from Auden: 'We must love one another and die' (233).<sup>40</sup> The two are linked, one not existing without the other - the paradox at the heart of climbing.

The essay 'For Arnold Pines' was first published in *Climber and Rambler* magazine in 1982; included as the concluding essay in Perrin's first collection, *On and Off the Rocks*, in 1986; revised and read on BBC Radio 4's 'Reading Aloud' segment in 1993; included (in its revised version) in Perrin's collection *Spirits of Place* in 1997; and now included in *The Climbing Essays* (again, in its revised broadcast version). The repeated publication of this essay suggests its centrality to Perrin's writing and thought. Towards the beginning Perrin quotes Montaigne: 'ever since I can remember, nothing has occupied my imagination more than death, yea, even in the most licentious season of my life' (301). Risk, and the chance of death, are intrinsic to why we climb; and whilst risk can be minimised it can never be entirely removed: 'there will always be occasions when the human animal, with all its aspirations to dignity, power and control, is reduced to a limp bundle of crushed flesh and rags' (302). So Perrin lists some of the friends who have died in the mountains, and the bewildering array of mishaps that did for them: avalanche, failed abseil belay, lightning strike, broken hold, a simple slip. All accidents that could just as easily have happened to Perrin himself, he posits a sequence of rhetorical questions – 'why not me?', 'what does it matter?', 'why should it?' – that lead to the conclusion that, in our focus upon limiting our exposure to life's contingencies, in seeking a 'risk-free role', we forget that ultimately death

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<sup>38</sup> 'Paul Williams: A life of Living Dangerously', *Guardian*, 6 June 1995, p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> 'Funeral Address for Paul Williams', *Spirits of Place*, pp. 66 – 69 (p. 66).

<sup>40</sup> W. H. Auden, 'September 1, 1939', *Selected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson, rev. edn (London: Faber, 2009), pp. 95 – 97 (p.97).

cannot be avoided (Perrin again quotes Montaigne: 'there is no road but has an end'). As for death, 'nothing so very dreadful about death, in the natural order of things... A shocking moment beyond recognition of accident and then release, resignation, and for a time, grief' (305). Perrin is here taking the long view. These are not words of comfort for those mourning the loss of a loved one in the mountains (it is fair to assume that he never used these words in a eulogy). He takes the question, turns it around, and looks at it from another perspective. This time the bargain is described thus: 'in great danger there is great joy. Life is then very light; it weighs upon us hardly at all and could so easily be blown away' (304).

Reading these essays you find yourself a party to an intense conversation that Perrin has been conducting, with himself and others, over a period of decades: a dialogue where 'toying with death' is set against 'the core experience', the 'philosophy of despair' against the chance of redemption, great joy against great danger. The argument never reaches an end. Perrin's preface to *The Climbing Essays* is a new essay, 'Streets, Outcrops, Space: Autobiographical Sketches'. At its conclusion, thesis and antithesis come together in a section titled 'Synthesis'. As he acknowledges, 'the mountains are problematical'. Perrin reflects upon the many funeral addresses he has sat through where the reading has been from Psalm 121: 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my salvation':

What salvation was it for these friends, among whom down the years of my involvement with mountains there have been so many deaths? It is no use flourishing this verse emptily and providing no sense of its relevance, especially in situations like these – of young people passing so long before their time. What salvation do the hills bring? To us, who continue with our lives...? (20-21)

This time there is an angry frustration to Perrin's rhetoric which, whilst ostensibly directed at a certain type of crass funeral oration, is also plainly directed inwards, and at the climbing community as a whole. There can be no wholly adequate resolution; that ellipsis at the end of the paragraph comes loaded with all the weight of a lifetime spent grappling with these questions. So Perrin tries a different approach, posing a different question – 'the 'why' of our going to the mountains' (20) – as a way of trying to reach a kind of partial, ethical accommodation with the fact of all those 'young people passing so long before their time'. We venture into the mountains for 'the gifts they bring to our consciousness' – and, as Perrin implies through the examples that he gives, those gifts do not just come to those who climb. He quotes Eliot, from *The Wasteland*: 'in the mountains, there you feel free' (20). This is still

that 'core experience', but not one that is accessible only to those pushing their limits on the rock.

Perrin's essays circle these issues over and over. The questions are formulated and reformulated, the rhetoric deployed one way and then another, the same key problems rehearsed and repeated, conclusions reached although never conclusively. Perrin's subsequent book, *West*, starkly illustrates the point. *West* reflects upon the deaths of his wife and son within weeks of each other in 2004. Describing the events leading up to the death (by suicide) of his son, Will – at the time, one of the country's leading rock climbers – Perrin quotes at length from his essay 'A Valediction', effectively reproducing the whole essay in a condensed form. He writes:

I remembered back to an essay I'd written on underlying motivation in one of the climbing journals when I'd been Will's age, wondered to myself if my own thinking had moved on beyond its young and visceral perceptions from a time when I was absorbed by the sport and ambivalent about the effect it had on me, or whether it stood as a valid response to his concern.<sup>41</sup>

Perrin recollects his words from 1973, and then repeats them virtually word for word, a repetition with a difference, over thirty years later. What is striking here is that the circumstances ultimately render Perrin speechless; he makes no attempt to answer the question he poses in the text; there is, can be, no answer.

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<sup>41</sup> *West: A Journey Through the Landscapes of Loss* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010), p. 233.

## Conclusion

What did we learn from it, other than that it could be overcome? Never mind what we did on the rock. What did the rock do to us – what lessons did we learn, in that inhuman sphere? What did we bring to it, and what did we take away? What choices did we make? Rancour, ego, resentment, aggression – or things more positive?<sup>1</sup>

*Shining solitude, the void of the sky, a deferred death: disaster.*<sup>2</sup>

I was almost seven years old when Dougal Haston and Doug Scott reached the summit of Everest, by the South West Face, on 24 September 1975. They were the first Britons to summit Everest. I remember it, if only very distantly, because of the regular updates that Chris Bonington transmitted via the BBC's Blue Peter children's TV programme. The successful summit push by Haston and Scott, followed by an overnight bivouac at 8000 metres, was effectively our own minor key version of the moon landing. Reading the transcripts of Bonington's broadcasts is to be transported back to a time when this was national headline material, Himalayan peak bagging at its 1970s height. It was exciting stuff; it was also the stuff of life and death. One of the expedition members, Mick Burke, disappeared, presumed dead, last seen a few hundred metres from the summit. A film maker and an outstanding mountaineer, as a member of the second summit team he had intended to place a Blue Peter flag on top. Bonington concluded his report by describing the expedition as 'a wonderful, exciting, thrilling experience and yet one that ended so tragically'.<sup>3</sup>

One could argue that Bonington's concluding statement is mountain literature in microcosm. It reflects the tensions that exist in so many of the narratives referred to in this thesis. At the same time I offer this fragment because of the lasting effect Bonington's broadcasts had on me, and no doubt many others, back in 1975. The allegorical opportunities offered by the mountains, the symbolic and metaphorical roles fulfilled, are embedded in our culture. Jung noted this central psychological importance: 'the mountain stands for the goal of the pilgrimage and ascent, hence it often has the psychological

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<sup>1</sup> Perrin, *The Villain*, p. 336.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock, new ed. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> Transcripts of tape recordings, *Chris Bonington Archive*, Mountain Heritage Trust, ref: CBO/ 01/08/06/11.

meaning of the self'.<sup>4</sup> How these symbols are interpreted, figurations construed, is likely to be different, if only subtly so, for every one of us. In his essay, 'End of a Climb', John Menlove Edwards put it like this:

We will each make a little image from what we like to see of ourselves in the mirror of the hills. One will laugh at the image, so one-sided. One will make it into a grey God and will then fall down and worship himself. Another will set it up for the great spirit of man, and will lay down to his own image.<sup>5</sup>

It should be apparent that each of the primary actors in this thesis – Simpson, Herzog, Haston, Perrin – have all made their own image from the reflection in that mirror.

Joe Simpson began documenting and narrating the events that occurred in Peru almost from the moment he left Siula Grande, and he has continued to do so, his story refracted through the narratives of others and in turn repeated by him, from iteration to iteration, ever since. In his attempts to comprehend his survival Simpson now finds himself in a position where he cannot venture forth without yet again having to repeat the story;<sup>6</sup> and no matter how many times he retells, reformulates, reinterprets, he is never able to do so definitively – becoming not the story, but the story of the story. Maurice Herzog's response to the horrors that befell him on the descent from the summit of Annapurna is almost the direct opposite: he took a position and stuck to it, told his story and lived by it. For Dougal Haston, like Simpson, there is a need to record, to repeat, but the purpose here seems to be to refine, to simplify and to reduce down to absolutes – not so much to work through trauma but to work it *out*, to erase it from existence, almost to the point of becoming a textual cipher. In a letter written following Haston's death in 1977 Chris Bonington, who was as close to him as anyone, tellingly confided, 'in some ways one never really knew him'.<sup>7</sup> Finally Jim Perrin: a lifetime spent attempting to formulate answers to the same questions, eloquently utilising climbing narrative to make connections, establish linkages, striving to reach conclusions that remain tantalisingly out of reach. Jan Morris has described Perrin as 'a sort of rucksack Thoreau' - the essayist, chronicler and philosopher of the British

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<sup>4</sup> C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 219.

<sup>5</sup> From *Mirrors in the Cliffs*, ed. by Jim Perrin (London: Diadem, 1983; repr. London: Baton Wicks, 1999), pp. 28 – 37, p.35.

<sup>6</sup> Every interview with Simpson I have attended, heard or read always makes (at least) a passing reference to the story of *Touching the Void* – and usually it forms the greater part of the conversation. Indeed, what is often striking is how very keen Simpson is, still, to answer questions on the events in Peru, over thirty years later.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Kate McCrae, 10 February 1977, *Chris Bonington Archive*, ref: CBO/04/03/01.



climbing scene, acting as sometime confessor to the dissolute congregation of that particular ruined church.<sup>8</sup>

What each of the chosen texts demonstrates is how, in the face of actual or apparent trauma, the act of repetition, effected in subtly varied ways, functions as the primary response. So, at its simplest, we find Maurice Herzog describing on page after page the sublime nature of his enterprise, a transcendence of the sensible that allows him to configure his achievement not as a personal tragedy in which he suffers horrific injuries, but rather as a 'victory for all mankind'; steadfastly repeating this narrative thereafter ultimately earns him the soubriquet *Monsieur Annapurna*.<sup>9</sup> With the other texts the act of repetition is more complex: Joe Simpson's endless return to the trauma of Siula Grande; Dougal Haston, the mountaineering equivalent of Coleridge's Mariner; Jim Perrin facing down the same unanswerable questions year after year. Each may be seen as an exercise in Freudian *fort/da*; and each is an ultimately doomed attempt to reach a definitive interpretation. Following through with the classically Freudian psychoanalytical approach, we find these narratives, in which the risk of death is ever present, are suggestive of nothing so much as the drive towards death and self-destruction that Freud theorizes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Mountain literature is a genre that is widely read, certainly in its most popular iterations. At its best it includes literature of the highest standard, engaging with issues of fundamental concern. Its forms and styles range widely, from traditional literary sources through to magazine articles, expedition reports and jottings in climbing hut log books. In its particular combination of characteristics it is unique. Yet it has received little in the way of systematic study. My hope is that this thesis will go some small way to correcting this omission, and will help to (summit) flag up the important issues the genre raises: the role of repetition, the telling and retelling of the story, in the processing of trauma, and the implications this has for the ways in which we read certain autobiographical narratives; how the tropes we associate with the genre – such as the sublime, the figurative quest and the view of the climber as exceptional, a superman – can be pressed to serve a particular teleological purpose, again bearing on our approach to reading these 'non-fictional' autobiographical texts; and the specific tension that is at the heart of the genre, risk against reward, something which absolutely underlies every one of the primary texts analysed above. All these are issues which in themselves are worthy of more detailed forensic study.

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<sup>8</sup> Jan Morris, 'Fits of Peak: Review of *Spirits of Place*', *Guardian*, 23 October 1997, p. A12.

<sup>9</sup> See Messner, *Annapurna*, p. 173.

Further issues also present themselves. What is the future for mountain literature in an age where climbers live-stream footage of ascents in the Himalaya, where technology and social media allow each climber to instantaneously record and disseminate every venture they make into the mountains? And as the way in which we tell our stories evolves, so too does the nature of our activities in the mountains. One example: try Googling ‘queues on Everest’, and you will find numerous images of what Peter Beaumont in the *Observer* described as ‘an anxiety-inducing conga line in the death zone above 8,000 metres’, a staggering photograph taken close to the summit of Everest in May 2019.<sup>10</sup> Once the preserve of the most skilled and experienced mountaineers, our highest peaks have been commodified, such that anyone with a deep enough wallet can pay to be guided to the top. The nature of what is being experienced is fundamentally altered; where does the sublime, or the climber as superman, fit in here? What is the nature of the quest, the figurative pilgrimage being undertaken?

An example taken from the opposite end of the spectrum flows from the extent to which the limits of the possible in the mountains are being pushed ever further. Free soloing involves climbing without a partner, without ropes or other means of artificially attaching the climber to the face; this means that any fall will almost certainly be fatal. Its most celebrated proponent is the American climber Alex Honnold, who in 2017 completed a free solo ascent of the 3000 foot El Capitan wall in Yosemite National Park, his progress followed by a film crew.<sup>11</sup> Here we find the tenuous link between risk and reward pushed way past breaking point (even Honnold’s closest climbing friends tell us they wish he would stop).<sup>12</sup> There is something profoundly discomfiting here, the lurch of ethical boundaries shifting, a nauseous feeling of complicity, of accommodations being made – an unease that is only accentuated when Honnold tells us the reason he started doing it all in the first place: ‘the truth is that when I started climbing outdoors, I was too shy to go up to strangers at a crag and ask if they’d like to rope up with me... So I just started soloing’.<sup>13</sup>

This notwithstanding, ultimately, and however the context may change, any writer of mountain literature is likely to face precisely the same questions that have hung around ever since the golden age of Victorian alpinism; and I suspect that the answers will continue to remain just as elusive. In 2010, as part of the ‘Philosophy for Everyone’ series, a collection

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<sup>10</sup> 26 May 2019, in *Nexis UK* <<https://www-nexis-com.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/>> [accessed 19 August 2019]

<sup>11</sup> The subsequent film, *Free Solo*, released in August 2018, won the Oscar for best documentary feature film at the 91<sup>st</sup> Academy Awards.

<sup>12</sup> Alex Honnold with David Roberts, *Alone on the Wall* (London: Pan, 2016), p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

of essays was published, written by a number of (climbing) academics working in the field of philosophy.<sup>14</sup> It considers, not altogether seriously, various ethical and philosophical issues arising from climbing as an activity. Unsurprisingly a significant portion of the book is given over to attempts to answer questions of the ‘why risk it?’, ‘is it ethically justifiable?’, kind. Various strategies are tried, including: adapting the stoic conception of freedom; a costs/benefits analysis; an explanation drawn from the evolution of the human species; an argument taking the climber’s underlying motivation as the key determining factor; it goes on. There is even an attempt to establish whether free soloing is morally permissible. The answer arrived at by Marcus Agnafors, the author of the essay, is - not really an answer at all. ‘No matter how hard one tries, I doubt that any universal answer will be the outcome’; however,

Let me suggest one moral rule which, unless there is some kind of emergency, the aspiring free soloist is required to abide by in order for the free soloing to perhaps be morally permissible: *every free soloist must, before embarking on a free solo, carefully weigh all the above considerations (if not others in addition)*.<sup>15</sup>

Hmmm. Well, Joe Simpson is still weighing these considerations after more than thirty years; so is Jim Perrin. The U.S. writer David Roberts came down on one side in 1980 (‘it was worth it then’), but recanted in 2005 (‘there are more important things in life than joy’).<sup>16</sup> Perhaps it takes an outsider to possess the necessary perspective, to take the sublime turn and see things from that precise point of alignment. On 5 November 1964 the writer and journalist James Morris – who had covered the successful 1953 ascent of Everest for *The Times*, despatching the coded telegram that broke the news to the nation – gave an address to the Alpine Club. Before the assembled worthies of the mountaineering establishment Morris observed, ‘it is as though the mountains are only an excuse’. I think it is worth concluding with Morris’ words:

Perhaps death has something to do with it, standing as it does at the foot of every rock. Certainly, to this one outsider, the most haunting and nagging

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<sup>14</sup> *Climbing: Philosophy for Everyone: Because it's There*, ed. by Stephen E. Schmid (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> ‘The Ethics of Free Soloing’, *ibid*, pp. 158 – 168 (p. 167).

<sup>16</sup> *Moments of Doubt* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1986), p. 209; *On the Ridge Between Life and Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 382.

thing about the company of mountaineers is a streak in them of a kind of nihilism – something less frivolous than escapism, less sententious than anarchy, less specific than religion... You will find, at the end, to my mind, only a restless yearning for an impossible fulfilment – a blank at the bottom.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> 'Climbing from the Outside', *Alpine Journal* 69 (1964), 63 – 72 (p. 71).

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