

ALPINE MYSTICISM AND COLD PHILOSOPHY

BY ARNOLD LUNN

Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy ?

KEATS.

SUDDEN changes in æsthetic fashion are often difficult to explain. Our ancestors, as we know, were all but unanimous in regarding the mountains with mild distaste or active disgust. There were outstanding exceptions, such as Petrarch and Gesner, but it is not in their works but in the writings of men like John de Bremble that we discover what medieval man thought of the mountains. 'Lord, restore me to my brethren,' exclaimed de Bremble on the Great St. Bernard, 'that I may tell them that they come not to this place of torment.' Now, of course, it is easy to understand why de Bremble, who crossed the Great St. Bernard in 1118, should have felt less at ease than a modern tourist who is driven over this classic pass in a charabanc, but there is no necessary connection between detesting mountain travel and disliking mountain scenery. The Alpine passes, which were often infested by brigands, may well have seemed 'places of torment' to the early travellers, but there is nothing alarming in a distant view of the Alps, and yet there is no medieval tribute to the ethereal beauty of the Oberland as seen from the Jura or Berne.

The Alpine dawn as seen from the roof of Milan cathedral inspired the loveliest quatrain that Tennyson ever wrote :

How faintly-flushed, how phantom-fair
Was Monte Rosa, hanging there
A thousand shadowy-pencill'd valleys
And snowy dells in a golden air.

Generation after generation of the gifted and artistic race which inhabited the North Italian plain saw what Tennyson saw, not once but many times, and left no trace in prose or poetry to prove that they were not blind to the enchanting loveliness of Monte Rosa rising beyond the foothills of Lombardy.

The dome of Mont Blanc reversed in the blue of Lac Lemman challenges comparison with Monte Rosa from Milan, but Calvin, Voltaire and Rousseau, who lived for years in Geneva, never mention Mont Blanc. It would be unreasonable to criticise Calvin's indifference to the scenery which surrounded him, for we should not

expect the prophet whose disciples destroyed with such gusto the glories of medieval stained glass and sculpture to be sensitive to beauty in any form, and we need not be surprised that Voltaire, whose æsthetic standards were those of his century, never refers to Mont Blanc and its Gothic aiguilles. Rousseau's failure to praise this glorious view is more surprising, and casts some doubt on his sincerity as the high priest of nature worship, but in spite of this lapse, Rousseau must be regarded as the forerunner of the Romantic Revival, whereas Calvin and Voltaire were, in their attitude to the mountains, as characteristic of their respective periods as John de Brengle was of his century.

The standards of taste which determine our attitude to scenery fluctuate with æsthetic fashion. The eighteenth-century humanist who enjoyed the artificial extravagances of baroque gardens regarded natural beauty as uncouth. The fashion for mountain scenery makes its appearance with the Gothic Revival. The æsthetic fashion which creates a criterion for the appreciation of scenery is itself very largely determined by the dominant philosophy of the age, for every culture is the expression of a creed. From the humanism of Greece is derived the bodily perfection of the Hermes of Praxiteles, the earthbound Doric temple, massively set upon the landscape, and an attitude to nature which finds nature attractive in proportion as nature is disciplined by man. To the neo-humanist of the eighteenth century, 'Gothic' was a term of abuse, mountains were uncouth, and religion faintly ridiculous. The æsthetics of the eighteenth century were moulded by the prevailing philosophy of an age in which institutional religion was fighting a rearguard action. 'It was an agreed point,' wrote Bishop Butler of his contemporaries, 'that Christianity should be set up as the principal subject for mirth and ridicule.' Man cannot rest content with negations without resuming his search for some integrating principles to give significance to life. The inevitable reaction against the arid deism of the eighteenth century was the pantheistic nature worship of Rousseau, Wordsworth and Shelley; the Gothic Revival, the discovery of mountain beauty and the Oxford Movement were different aspects of the same romantic movement.

It was no accident that the Gothic Revival coincided with the new-found enthusiasm for mountain scenery. The trite comparison between a Gothic spire and an Alpine aiguille is not so shallow as it seems, for both spire and peak suggest that upward soaring movement of the spirit from which the Greek humanist shrank. The entablature of the Greek temple binds the column firmly to earth. The Gothic spire and the Chamonix aiguille soar from the earth into the blue infinity of heaven. If the Gothic Revival coincided with the discovery that mountains were beautiful, why did not the men who built the great Gothic cathedrals love mountains? Perhaps because the old cathedrals expressed in stone a supernatural faith so secure against doubt that it did not require to be buttressed by the revelations of

God in nature. Petrarch, the first of the romantic mountaineers, tells us that he opened the Conference of St. Augustine on the summit of Mont Ventoux. 'The first place that I lighted upon, it was thus written, "There are men who go to admire the high places of mountains, and who neglect themselves" . . . I shut the book half angry with myself that I, who was even now admiring terrestrial things, ought to have learned from the philosophers that nothing is truly great except the soul.'

The greatest exponent, in its later phases, of the Romantic Revival was John Ruskin. He had more influence than any of his predecessors (or of his successors) in converting contemporary England to a love of mountains and to a love of Gothic architecture. Few men have loved mountains more passionately than Ruskin, and few have attacked mountaineers more bitterly. 'The Alps themselves, which your own poets used to love so reverently, you look upon as soaped poles in a bear-garden, which you set yourselves to climb, and slide down again, with shrieks of delight. When you are past shrieking, having no human articulate voice to say you are glad with, you fill the quietude of their valleys with gunpowder blasts, and rush home, red with cutaneous eruption of conceit, and voluble with convulsive hiccough of self-satisfaction.' The love of mountains, of which Ruskin was the greatest prophet, developed as an important phase of a general revolt against the narrow humanism of the eighteenth century. The beginnings of systematic mountaineering, which Ruskin hated, date from the decade in which Darwin published *The Origin of Species*. The devastating effect of the materialistic philosophy, which had deduced from Darwin's hypothesis conclusions which Darwin had explicitly disowned, was described in a notable passage by a great scientist, Romanes. 'I am not afraid to confess,' he wrote, 'that with this virtual negation of God, the Universe to me has lost its soul of loveliness, and though from henceforth the precept to work while it is day will doubtless but gain an intensified force from the terribly intensified meaning of the words that "the night cometh when no man can work," yet when I think, as think at times I must, of the contrast between the hallowed glory of that creed which once was mine, and the lonely mystery of life as I now find it, at such times I find it impossible to avoid the sharpest pang of which my nature is capable.'

Many of the early mountaineers were orthodox Christians, but there were many more, who in a greater or less degree recovered among the mountains that 'soul of loveliness' which the Universe appeared to have lost, and of these the greatest was the mountaineer who had left the church of his baptism, in which he had taken orders, to write *An Agnostic's Apology*. 'If I were to invent,' wrote Leslie Stephen, 'a new idolatry (rather a needless task) I should prostrate myself, not before beast or ocean, or sun, but before one of those gigantic masses to which, in spite of all reason, it is impossible not to attribute some shadowy personality. Their voice is mystic and has found discordant

interpreters ; but to me at least it speaks in tones at once more tender and more awe-inspiring than that of any mortal teacher. The loftiest and sweetest strains of Milton or Wordsworth may be more articulate, but do not lay so forcible a grasp upon my imagination.'

This confession will surprise readers who only knew Leslie Stephen as the high priest of a somewhat arid and unimaginative agnosticism, and Leslie Stephen himself would certainly have disclaimed any attempt to base any conclusions, however tentative, on his own emotional reactions to mountain scenery. Leslie Stephen was a mystic *malgré lui*. A man's half-beliefs are often not only more interesting but more illuminating than the beliefs which he is prepared to defend at the bar of reason. 'Der Aberglaube,' as Goethe says, 'ist die Poesie des Lebens.' Leslie Stephen's Victorian agnosticism is already a little dated, but his essay on Wordsworth and his *Playground of Europe* will outlast the mental fashion of the Victorian age.

The interpretation of Alpine mysticism has been the work of poets, using the word in its widest sense. It would be easy to compile an anthology of essays and long passages which deal either explicitly or by implication with such themes as 'the religion of the mountain,' or the 'philosophy of a mountaineer,' and so forth, but I have not yet discovered a serious attempt to formulate a scientific explanation of our reactions to mountain beauty, or to discover a philosophic basis for mountain mysticism. The diagnosis of mountain emotion is often inhibited by the distaste for the emotional, for we forget that emotion can be discussed unemotionally. The limestone of which the Wetterhorn is composed and the emotion which that limestone inspires have at least this in common: both the limestone and the emotion are facts of which philosophers and scientists may be invited to offer an unemotional explanation.

So far, however, the philosopher and the scientist have not come to the assistance of the mountaineer, and the Alpine poet has had the field to himself. I have no desire to belittle their achievements in this field, for the intuitions of the poet provide the philosopher with valuable data. There is no reason why those who try to explain the things which the poet feels but makes no attempt to explain, should not collaborate with the poets in a common enterprise. 'J'ai remarqué,' writes Anatole France, 'que les philosophes vivaient généralement en bonne intelligence avec les poètes. . . . Les philosophes savent que les poètes ne pensent pas ; cela les désarme, les attendrit et les enchante.'

I shall use the words 'mystic' and 'mysticism' in their popular rather than in their technical sense. The Greeks, to whom we owe the word mystic, described as 'mystae' the initiates of the mysteries who believed that they had received a direct vision of God. To the 'mystae' God was not an object of academic belief, but a Being experimentally known by direct intuition. The great mystics were fully conscious of the immense difficulty of communicating what is

incommunicable—one remembers St. Augustine's 'If you do not ask me, I know; if you ask me, I do not know'—but, none the less, they never ceased in their attempts to illuminate the obscure, and to discover the apt word, phrase, analogy or metaphor which at least suggest that which can never be accurately described.

In Alpine literature, on the other hand, the word 'mystic' is often used as if it were the equivalent of 'misty,' and as if obscurity rather than illumination were the essence of mystical experiences. The vagueness of Alpine mysticism is partly due to those paroxysms of shyness which overwhelm the average Englishman in any discussion of religion. The Greek 'mystes' claimed without embarrassment that he enjoyed a direct vision of God, but Alpine mysticism might be described as an attempt to construct the corpus of Alpine theology without mentioning Theos. It is significant that the only passage in the literature of the mountains which has found a place in Alpine anthologies, and which could equally well be quoted in any representative anthology of mystical literature, is a passage which we owe not to a mountaineer, but to a mountain worshipper, who did not climb because he was 'afraid of slipping down.' This is what Mr. Belloc saw from the heights of the Weissenstein :

'I saw between the branches of the trees in front of me a sight in the sky that made me stop breathing, just as great danger at sea, or great surprise in love, or a great deliverance will make a man stop breathing. I saw something I had known in the West as a boy, something I had never seen so grandly discovered as was this. In between the branches of the trees was a great promise of unexpected lights beyond. . . .

'Here were these magnificent creatures of God, I mean the Alps, which now for the first time I saw from the height of Jura; and because they were fifty or sixty miles away, and because they were a mile or two high, they were become something different from us others, and could strike one motionless with the awe of supernatural things. Up there in the sky, to which only clouds belong and birds and the last trembling colours of pure light, they stood fast and hard; not moving as do the things of the sky. They were as distant as the little upper clouds of summer, as fine and tenuous; but in their reflection and in their quality as it were of weapons (like spears and shields of an unknown array) they occupied the sky with a sublime invasion: and the things proper to the sky were forgotten by me in their presence as I gazed.

'To what emotion shall I compare this astonishment? So, in first love one finds that *this* can belong to *me*.

'Their sharp steadfastness and their clean uplifted lines compelled my adoration. Up there, the sky above and below them, part of the sky, but part of us, the great peaks made communion between that homing creeping part of me which loves vineyards and dances and a slow movement among pastures, and that other part which is only properly at home in Heaven. I say that this kind of description is useless, and that it is better to address prayers to such things than to attempt to interpret them for others.

'These, the great Alps, seen thus, link one in some way to one's immortality. Nor is it possible to convey, or even to suggest, those few fifty miles, and those few thousand feet; there is something more. Let me put it thus: that from the height of Weissenstein I saw, as it were, my religion. I mean, humility, the fear of death, the terror of height and of distance, the glory of God, the infinite potentiality of reception whence springs that divine thirst of the soul; my aspiration also towards completion, and my confidence in the dual destiny. For I know that we laughers have a gross cousinship with the most high, and

it is this contrast and perpetual quarrel which feeds a spring of merriment in the soul of a sane man.

‘ Since I could now see such a wonder and it could work such things in my mind, therefore, some day I should be part of it. That is what I felt.

‘ That it is also which leads some men to climb mountain-tops, but not me, for I am afraid of slipping down.’

Every poet, Hilaire Belloc among others, accepts consciously or unconsciously, the Platonic distinction between αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν, beauty itself and τὰ πολλὰ καλά, many beautiful things; that is, between beauty as a universal and beauty in its particular manifestations. The loveliness which Hilaire Belloc saw from the Weissenstein is a reflection in time and space of that timeless loveliness which is uneroded by change. ‘ Natural beauty,’ as St. Thomas Aquinas says, ‘ is but the similitude of divine beauty shared among things.’ On these great issues there is a generous measure of agreement among poets. ‘ These, the great Alps, seen thus, link one in some way to one’s immortality,’ can be compared with Baudelaire’s words: ‘ It is the immortal instinct for beauty which is the liveliest proof of immortality.’

Leslie Stephen would have rejected, perhaps with regret, Hilaire Belloc’s interpretation of mountain beauty. ‘ The mountains,’ writes Leslie Stephen, ‘ represent the indomitable forces of nature to which we are forced to adapt ourselves. They speak to man of his littleness and his ephemeral existence.’ This is true, but that is only part of their message. ‘ La nature a des perfections,’ says Pascal, ‘ pour montrer qu’elle est l’image de Dieu; et des défauts pour montrer qu’elle n’en est l’image.’ Mountains only ‘ speak to man of his littleness ’ if he is so foolish as to accept a yard measure as the criterion of his status. ‘ All our dignity,’ says Pascal, ‘ is born of thought.’ What then is the origin of the thoughts which mountains inspire in the minds of mountain lovers? Can science and philosophy add anything to the intuition of the poet?

Scientists assure us that there was a period when life was non-existent on the surface of the planet, from which it follows that life was potentially present in the molten crust and gases of the primeval planet, or alternatively some cause external to the planet must be invoked to explain the origin of life and the origin of a sense of beauty. Darwin’s attempt to meet this difficulty was evasive. He assumed the existence of the sense of beauty, and instead of explaining its origin discussed its influence on evolution. According to Darwin’s theory of Sexual Selection, beauty has a survival value. The female is attracted by a beautiful mate with the happy result that beauty is passed on to the next generation, whereas the uglier examples of the species fade away and pass their days in forlorn bachelorhood. No doubt, but our problem still remains unanswered. I am prepared to believe that the peahen’s reaction to a peacock’s gay colouring influences the evolution of peacocks, but what we want to know is why the peahen thinks the peacock beautiful, and whence is derived the æsthetic sense which manifests itself throughout the animal kingdom. This is a question

to which the materialist has no reply. 'When the materialist,' writes J. M. Mosley, 'has exhausted himself in the effort to explain nature in terms of utility, it would appear to be the peculiar office of beauty to rise up as a confounding and baffling extra.'

The impotence of the scientist to reconcile a sense of beauty with a purely mechanistic interpretation of evolution provides a negative argument in support of the Platonic doctrine of beauty. The philosopher reinforces these conclusions with the positive argument that nothing can be present in an effect which was not present in the main cause. It is fantastic to suppose that our reaction to mountain beauty could be potentially present in the lifeless rock, sea and mud of the primeval planet. You cannot get plus out of minus.

It is not necessary to climb in order to accept the Platonic interpretation of mountain beauty, but the mountaineer has a great advantage over the non-mountaineer. He has chosen the ascetic way to mountain understanding, and among the hills, as elsewhere, asceticism is the key to the higher forms of mystical experience. An ascetic might be defined as one who sacrifices pleasure to happiness, for pleasure and happiness are not identical. A candidate for the Oxford Greats School was once invited to comment on Aristotle's dictum, 'A good man can be perfectly happy on the rack.' He answered, 'Possibly, if it were a very bad rack, or if he were a very good man.' Good men have been happy even on good racks, for, as that puzzled pagan Seneca observed, men have been known to laugh, and 'that right heartily' under torture. Indeed, the very word 'ascetic' comes to us from the pagan world, and once meant no more than 'exercise.' To the Greek the athlete was the typical ascetic, for he exercised his body by sacrificing the pleasures of self-indulgence to the happiness of self-discipline. He was, as St. Paul said, 'temperate in all things to win a corruptible crown.' No illustration, as St. Paul knew, was more calculated to impress his hearers with the reasonableness of Christian asceticism, for where institutional religion declines, as in pagan Rome, the ascetic instinct finds expression in strenuous sport. If it were not for this peculiar form of happiness, which is the reward of the ascetic, there would be no boat racing and no rock climbing and no ski racing. No ski racer can reach the international class unless he is prepared to risk fall after fall when practising or racing, at a speed which often attains to 60 miles an hour. There is no pleasure in such ski-ing, but there is a queer kind of happiness.

'The racer's mind must overcome the physical reactions, which shrink from the fastest line on steep slopes, and must keep the body under the control necessary for performing turns with complete precision.

'When the racer is ski-ing well there come moments when he knows that his mind has won, and for a few brief seconds he has complete control over his body. Such moments are rare, but it is for them that men endure the physical discomforts attendant upon all ascetic sports, for they then experience a happiness, almost an ecstasy, which has nothing in common with pleasure or enjoyment as these terms are normally understood.

'It is this spiritual, perhaps almost mystical, thrill, this fleeting glimpse of

the paradise of Eden, which causes men to encounter gladly the dangers and hardships of mountaineering, to endure the acute physical agony of rowing and long-distance running, and to overcome the physical difficulties attendant on all sports.' ¹

The happiness of the rock-climber is derived from the same source as the happiness of the racer, from the dominion, that is, of the mind over the body.

'The great peaks,' says Mr. Belloc in the passage I have quoted, 'made communion between that homing creeping part of me which loves vineyards and dances and a slow movement among pastures, and that other part which is only properly at home in Heaven.' Had Mr. Belloc been a climber, he would have discovered that the dominant theme of mountaineering is not the communion between but the contrast and perpetual quarrel between the homing creeping part and the part which is at home in heaven.

It is the part which is at home in heaven that forces the creeping part which loves vineyards up the steep and rocky mountain side, and with every foot of ascent the protest of the creeping part becomes more pronounced. For though the result is the same whether one falls two hundred feet or two thousand, the downward drag of the earth below varies with the aerial distances which separate the body from its natural habitat, the gross and comfortable security of the horizontal. There is no sport which illustrates more perfectly the ascetic principle that with the happiness which must be paid for by pain the degree of happiness is in proportion to the price paid. 'How singular is a thing called happiness,' exclaimed Socrates, 'and how curiously related to pain, which might be thought to be the opposite of it; for they are never present to a man at the same instant, and yet he who pursues either is generally compelled to take the other: their bodies are two and they are joined by a necessary single head.' Few sports offer their devotees a wider range of disagreeable moments. The agony of the half slip when one is leading on an exposed climb, the desperate struggle to regain balance, a struggle which is a matter of infinitely small readjustments on a battle ground measured in inches, are the price which the cragsman pays, not only for the exquisite relief of safety after peril, but also for the quasi-mystical happiness of those moments when his mind has established complete dominion over his body, moments when the effortless rhythm of the upward movement transforms the accident of crack and ledge into an ordered sequence of harmonious movement.

Many mountaineers who have lost all contact with institutional religion have discovered among the hills the satisfaction of certain aspirations which others have fulfilled within the framework of the religious life. They have caught the reflection of eternal beauty in the temporal loveliness of the hills. They have been initiated into the secret of the ascetic, and have found the happiness which is the by-product of pain and danger. But when we have said this we have

¹ From *High Speed Ski-ing*, by Peter Lunn.

said all that can usefully be said on the relation of mountaineering to religion. Points of contact do not suffice to establish their identity. Boxing involves asceticism, but no one has yet claimed that there is a religion of the ring. It is a pity to make exaggerated claims for our sport.

There is something to be said for the view that the better type of young men gravitate naturally towards the ascetic sports, such as mountaineering, which involve the discipline of danger, but though the individual mountaineer is entitled to claim that he is a better man than he would have been if he had never climbed, he should not imply that he is a better man than those who do not climb, or even than those who detest all forms of active and dangerous sport. Samuel Johnson was no ascetic. He disliked mountains and detested solitude, and was seldom happy outside the congenial atmosphere of London, but he was a better man than most mountaineers. Is the man who detests crowds necessarily more spiritual than Samuel Johnson who detested solitude? Epictetus, the greatest of the Stoics, addresses the same admonition to those who hate solitude as Johnson hated it, and those who hate mobs. 'If you are fated to spend your life alone, call it peace . . . if you fall in with a crowd try to make holiday with the crowd.' If we could acquire this Stoic detachment we should all be serenely unaffected by our environment, whether this environment were a bank holiday crowd, or the severe loneliness of the Arctic regions. The Chinese proverb reminds us that 'noise is not in the market place, nor quiet in the hills, but in the ever-changing hearts of men.'

It is foolish to invite the ridicule of the discerning by making claims for mountaineering which cannot be substantiated. Mountaineering is neither a substitute for religion nor a civic duty. It is a sport, for we climb not to benefit the human race but to amuse ourselves. In so far as mountaineering is something more than a sport we must base this claim on the fact that it is carried out in surroundings which suggest spiritual truths even to the unspiritual. Ruskin compared mountains to cathedrals, and the comparison is sound, for one does not worship cathedrals, though one may worship in the cathedrals of man, or among the cathedrals of nature.

All evil, as a great medieval thinker remarked, is the result of mistaking means for ends. Mountaineering is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. 'It is true,' as the first mountaineer to ascend the throne of St. Peter remarked, the late Pope to whose memory the ALPINE JOURNAL paid a felicitous and discerning tribute, 'it is true that, of all innocent pleasures, none more than this one (excepting where unnecessary risks are taken) may be considered as being helpful mentally and physically, because, through the efforts required for climbing in the rarified mountain air, energy is renewed, and owing to the difficulties overcome the climber thereby becomes better equipped and strengthened to resist the difficulties encountered in life, and by admiring the beauties and grandeur of the scenery as seen from the mighty peaks of the Alps his spirit is uplifted to the Creator of all.'