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ALPINE UPLIFT

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A FEW sentences in the preface to *Brenva* struck my attention and acted as a spark to a train of thought which has run through my mind for some years. The author writes: 'the way in which the climber is absorbed in the climbing on all routes worthy of the name deserves notice, because that absorption is an important aspect of mountaineering, but has been overshadowed by the emphasis now conventionally given to what are displayed as higher and more spiritual interests.'

Has the emphasis become a convention and, if so, why? I must confess that if it has not become so already, it sometimes looks as though it soon will: for, undoubtedly, mountaineering literature is tending to bristle with Uplift. I use this much abused word as a convenient portmanteau to include moral, poetical, sentimental and even spiritual levitation. If we ask why this should be the case, the answer comes at once: Mountains are beautiful and, naturally, give rise to beautiful thoughts. But mountains have existed for millions of years and yet until about the beginning of last century they were regarded with very mixed feelings. Certainly the ancient Hebrews found inspiration in hills, and Italian painters used them as decorative landscape backgrounds, but travellers and writers of Western Europe generally considered them to be ugly, horrible and repulsive things, which filled the soul and mind with aversion and even terror. Thomas Gray, the Lake poets, and Ruskin were chiefly responsible for a revulsion of feeling, anyhow amongst English people, though the change of heart started a little earlier. One might fairly claim Rousseau as the prime innovator, and somewhat later Byron wrote—with rather dubious sincerity:

Are not the mountains, waves and skies a part of me and my soul,
as I of them?

Is not the love of these deep in my heart with a pure passion?

Ruskin did not indeed make mountains beautiful, but he changed the fashion of our outlook, just as Roger Fry changed public opinion in

respect of the modern art of his time, and as some comparable genius may presently change it in respect of Picasso's war-period pictures.

Keats observed that 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever': but of course it is not. It is only a joy as long as fashion decrees that our appreciation shall be educated to think it beautiful. Even I can remember the days when the neo-gothic edifices of Oxford and South Kensington were considered to be remarkable for their beauty. Now, we have been taught to know them as hideous blots on the architectural landscape. We have recently had a notable lesson on this change of outlook in the Exhibition of pictures bought under the terms of the Chantrey Bequest. Here were displayed works which great experts of their day thought so beautiful as to be worth buying for very large sums, but many of which to-day would be unsaleable or, at best, would only fetch a few pounds for their frames. This is because the change in taste causes even the modern amateur to find many of them not only very ugly but pieces of rank bad painting. Nevertheless, when they were first exhibited, the public swooned in ecstasy, honestly thinking them to be the embodiment of all that was finest and most uplifting in the realm of pictorial beauty. And yet a modern climber, in referring to mountains, lays it down in a recent book that 'failing to perceive beauty, we are as men dead'—a singularly unfortunate circumstance for the generations preceding Ruskin, if true. But it is not true. Generally speaking, the men of the eighteenth century were more intelligently alive than are most of us to-day. In fact we must not be didactic about beauty, and we are treading on dangerous ground if we try to lay down laws about its nature or the transcendental thoughts to which it ought to give rise.

Since Ruskin, there have been and still are people—and sometimes very intelligent people—who fail to find beauty in mountains. I have always been pleasurably chastened by Samuel Butler's Frenchman in Switzerland, who remarked 'Aimez-vous donc les beautés de la nature? Pour moi je les abhorre!' Somerset Maugham detests scenery; and do you remember Evelyn Waugh who, after a short but lyrical description of Etna, poised against a pale background of sky, suddenly concludes with the unexpected statement 'Never, in art or nature have I seen anything more revolting.' And what about Chesterton? 'There is a peculiar idea abroad,' he says, 'that the value and fascination of nature lie in her beauty. But the highest and most valuable quality in nature is not her beauty, but her generous and defiant ugliness.' Chesterton was a master of paradox. But it is possible that in fifty years another Ruskin will arise to remould ideas once more, and convince his generation that mountains are repulsive obstacles which inspire anything but beautiful thoughts. Less surprising things have happened, and modern Alpine Uplift will then seem to be as remote from reality as 'The Mysteries of Udolfo.'

However, Alpine Uplift is rife and perhaps deserves a little effort to trace its origins and to find the reasons for its modern vogue. It first made its appearance in the writings of early foreign travellers, such as

Bourrit, and also in those of English clergymen, not to mention the American Divine, Cheever, who described walking tours in the Alps. All these bubble with high-flown sentiment and self-righteousness. But this was probably simply vocational, since such displays were—and perhaps still are—expected from moral preceptors. It should be carefully noted, however, that these writers were not good mountaineers: Bourrit, who as precentor of Geneva Cathedral, had good cause to display Uplift, and was filled with athletic ambitions, was very jealous of de Saussure and tried to belittle his greater daring and endurance, while he entirely suppressed Exchaquet's passage of the Col du Géant before his own crossing of the pass. De Saussure himself is almost entirely free from Uplift, as will be found to be the case with the early British mountaineers.

In connection with the latter, many people have remarked to me that Uplift would naturally be expected to appear in their writings, because young men at that time must have needed some excuse to justify a form of activity which seemed quite mad to their contemporaries. They mostly came from the Upper Middle Classes, which, at that period, lived in a hotbed of culture and sentimentality. Their homes were crammed with replicas of Italian art: their what-nots groaned with curios, their tables with albums of water-colours of Grecian ruins; whilst wax flowers, horrid models of the Temple at Jerusalem and of the Taj Mahal, glittered under glass shades. The older ones among us recall with nostalgic regret that to thread one's way across some of the drawing-rooms of that period which survived into our own was almost as dangerous as a passage through tottering séracs. The young gentlemen read aloud Scott, Lytton, Ruskin and Thackeray, while the young ladies painted flowers on velvet antimaccassars and revelled in Longfellow and Wordsworth. The evening rang with ballads of unrequited love, tuberculosis, and tiny tombstones. The males of the family were seldom in the hunting set: walking tours, boating, and fishing were usually their only forms of sport. When, therefore, from this glasshouse atmosphere of Sesame and Lilies, here and there a young man sallied forth and took to climbing, he was considered most eccentric and might understandably have tried to show that mountaineering was actually a highly cultural and elevating pursuit, well in accord with the atmosphere of his class and period. So at least runs the theory.

But nothing of the kind. The early volumes of the ALPINE JOURNAL are singularly free from Uplift, but the writers often embellished their records with a wealth of scientific observations which, incidentally, did go some way to justify their excursions to their stay-at-home friends. Just occasionally they were mildly sententious in rather a pompous way and thereby incurred some gentle mockery from Leslie Stephen, but of Uplift there was little or none.

Winthrop Young, in his paper on the great Alpine writers of the early and mid-Victorian age, puts forward a theory that most of them were, in fact, longing to indulge in Uplift, but were restrained by a fear of going against contemporary sentiment. With this I venture to

disagree, because contemporary sentiment would probably have approved, and also because most of them were men of striking individuality, who were perfectly prepared to say what they wished. In fact these pioneers of real climbing kept their private emotions to themselves, which, after all, has until fairly recently, been a common characteristic of outdoor Englishmen; they realised that they were writing for fellow mountaineers who were interested in their climbs and not in their sentiments.

Wills, Hudson, Kennedy, Whymper, Moore and Mummery are factual: Freshfield and Tuckett wrote with a vivid appreciation of mountain scenery but made no lofty deductions from it; while Coolidge probably never had a sentimental thought in his life and, if he had, would have shuddered to reveal it. During the second half of the century, certain forms of facetiousness crept into our literature. To us much of this is rather painful, but it was firmly and finally lampooned in Robertson's paper on *Alpine Humour*¹; at the time, however, it was as acceptable as were the laboured and italicised jokes in *Punch*, or the dreadful vogue of punning, which was the awful joy of that generation. The seventies and eighties were decades of hearty laughter, but of little wit or sentiment.

Reading on, we find, generally speaking, that it was not until the present century that Alpine Uplift reared its lovely head, and that only between the two wars did it really begin to shake out its golden tresses for all to admire.

Strangely enough, it seems to have been reserved for the usually reticent English to be the principal wearers of the Crown of Wild Olives. One finds a certain ebullience in Italian writers, such as Guido Rey, but very little among the French or, oddly enough, among the pre-Hitler Germans, whose sentimental love of Schwärmerei might have been expected to find full bloom in their mountain literature. On the other hand, Nazi accounts of climbing and particularly the too frequent 'funeral orations' over victims of Nazi madness for fantastic competitive achievements, are positively nauseating.

If, therefore, it is among English mountaineers that we now find the phenomenon chiefly displayed, it is, perhaps, the more worthy of note, since it seems to be confined to the exponents of this one sport. For, of course, climbing is primarily an athletic sport. It calls for muscular strength, endurance, courage, judgment, patience and dash. But many another sport claims most of these qualities of mind and body in varying degrees, whether it be hunting, stalking, or sailing; as even does such a game as football, cricket, or golf. Moreover, in some of them we are brought close to nature and natural beauty in all its moods. I think it would be difficult to find any Uplift in the innumerable descriptions of any of them except, possibly, those connected with the sea. Let us take golf. Not a comparable analogy, I admit: but I take it for a special reason. I suppose the most accomplished and delightful writer on any sport to-day is Bernard Darwin. I am a

¹ *A. J.* 25. 127.

singularly feeble golfer and consider it a tiresome pastime ; yet for many years I have read with delight Darwin's matchless descriptions of the game. He is a master of English and a highly intelligent and sensitive man ; he has played and watched golf in many of the loveliest places in the world ; but I cannot recall that he ever expatiated on the uplifting effect on his soul engendered either by the game or by its natural surroundings. Now, if in his more active days, he had been persuaded to climb a neighbouring mountain and to write an account of it, would he have changed his metier and waxed eloquent about the effect on his soul of the scenery ? I cannot tell. But if he had, one might fairly ask : Does the vertical inspire where the horizontal does not ? Perhaps it does. Perhaps Pythagoras has a word for it.

Hunting men and women, some of them also mountaineers, tell me that nothing can compare with the thrilling feeling of a ride over lovely country with the hounds in full cry. Sailing brings one very close to nature in its sweetest and its most terrific moods. Fishing offers endless opportunities for contemplation. But in the considerable literature dealing with these sports one must search deeply to find much in the way of Uplift. On the other hand in many English accounts of climbing one can, nowadays, hardly see the rocks for the flowers of sentiment.

I would not have it thought for one moment that mountain beauty should not move present generations, and most of them deeply. Goethe cried ' Gedenke zu leben ' and deplored the tendency of man to deprive nature of intelligent purpose and to have merely a technical and mechanical relationship with her. The real question in my mind is simple—is it necessary to say so when writing accounts of mountain climbing ? Oddly enough, Wordsworth wrote something about mountain scenery which seems not wholly out of place here :

The tall rock

The mountain and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite : a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm
By thought supplied, nor any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.

In prosaic language, the beauty of the mountains was, to him, enough in itself, without any consequent moral or spiritual uplift, nor, one judges, with any desire on his part to express what was in itself enough. Later, however, he was slightly ashamed of a merely quiet self-contained satisfaction such as most of us feel when surrounded by mountain beauty. True to the romantically moral trend of his day he adds :

I have learned

To look on nature, not as in the hour
of thoughtless youth ; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity . . . And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts.

Now, I trust that we all have elevated thoughts. I trust they are a joy to us. But Englishmen (apart from preachers and poets), being by nature extremely reticent and even somewhat inarticulate about their inner emotions, usually keep them to themselves or reserve them for their immediate family circle, where they are listened to with courtesy generally accompanied by ill-concealed embarrassment. Why then, when describing a climb up a mountain are these sermons in stone allowed publicly to emerge in cascades of awful loveliness?

I am reminded of a story told me by a well-known actress who, to her surprise, was asked to be the special guest at a luncheon-meeting of Buchmanites. After the meal one and another got up and proclaimed his or her spiritual experience. Then she was called upon. Much embarrassed she rose and said, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, in matters of the Spirit I believe in reticence' and, amid a ghastly silence, resumed her seat.

We therefore come to another sentence in the preface to *Brenva*. 'We are all moved by Alpine scenery; but the pleasures of scenery and contemplation remain the *predominant* memories of the day only on those occasions where the action has required small effort from the climber. . . . Days of this sort often give memorable pleasure, but also feelings of incomplete achievement; and it is then that romantic or poetic fantasies are likely to suggest themselves as substitutes for the good climbing which the day has lacked.' In a word, can Uplift ever be a record of events? Does the intense concentration needed by most good climbing actually leave the mind free for beautiful thoughts, or are the beautiful thoughts possibly evoked by lack of events? Is there a tendency to compensate for lack of hard achievement by a display of personality?

But here let me pause and explain that a clear distinction must be drawn between climbers as such and poets as such—between the climber, who decorates his account of an expedition with sentimentality, and the poet, who takes mountains as a medium for his muse as he might take any other subject. We have had, and still have, mountaineers who write excellent verse; but mountains do not make poets, poets make mountains lyrical. Incidentally, I cannot agree with Michael Roberts, who apostrophised all Alpine verse as 'bloated, pompous and sugary.' But I am inclined to agree with his remark that much of it deals with mountains of the imagination and is a 'sentimental daydream in which brutal realities are conveniently ignored.' After all, anyone who is stirred by what seems to him to be grand and beautiful is free to retire to an Ivory Tower, whether in mountains or anywhere else, and to devise his own cult of beauty, to seek his own crock of gold, and metaphorically to contemplate his own navel with the ecstasy of a Yogi. But such spiritual experiences, while of intense importance to the recipient, are often not of the slightest interest to anyone else, especially to anyone absorbed in reading an account of an expedition in which he is keenly interested. Any tendency to compare spiritual reactions with mountaineering seems to me to be somewhat

subversive of what we mean by the latter word. Keats lived in an Ivory Tower in which he found beauty in a strange diversity of forms. He wrote an exquisite poem on a Grecian Urn, but his Ode would certainly not be quoted in a book on ceramics. He probably did not know the difference between Slip-ware and Red Anchor Chelsea, and even his Grecian urn may actually have been Etruscan! He did not confuse beauty with technicalities and, as I am discussing mountaineering prose, let me firmly place poetry *hors concours*. Everyone with a gift for versification is free to rhyme on any subject that appeals to him. This is a gift that comes to men and women whatever their interests in life may be, but the making of verses is certainly not a necessary part of a climber's equipment and it is the narrator of mountaineering expeditions who is the subject of this paper. I am almost tempted to agree with Graham Brown's suggestion in *Brenva* and to believe that artificial displays of personality in a paper on climbing are sometimes put forward as a substitute for action on snow and rock. One can certainly cite instances where accounts of fine climbs are graced by sentimental passages, although on the whole these would seem to be exceptions which prove the rule. But if the exceptions are ever to become established as accepted models, is there not a risk that young climbers, fearing to be considered merely as 'tough guys,' may feel that they must drag a few elevated thoughts into their narratives to keep in line with the highbrows, and may even believe that beautiful thoughts are an acceptable qualification for membership of a Mountaineering Club? It is true that one of the objects set forth in the constitution of the Alpine Club is the promotion of better knowledge of the mountains through literature; but it would be a sad day if, as the result of the worship of Uplift, meetings, thirty years hence, consisted of gatherings of long-haired men, each holding a gentian, wrapped in silent contemplation of the Infinite, while the President reads poetry aloud to them. Indeed, any tendency to suggest that one cannot be a true mountaineer, or even a true lover of mountains, unless one is uplifted by beautiful and mystical thoughts, seems to me to cut across all the best traditions of British climbing. To encourage a belief that afterthoughts may be a suitable substitute for action does also appear to be so far removed from our usual standards of reticence as to justify a little philosophical analysis and reflection.

Of course we have all enjoyed the visual pleasures of shapes, colours and shadows; the startling contrasts of the higher whiteness with the lower green. We have all been impressed by the great silences and by the roar of thunderstorms. The climber with a gift of scenic description—a pretty rare gift, by the way—does well to heighten the interest of his narrative by such descriptions. The pleasure of the reader is naturally enhanced if he can get a picture of the climb in his mind: and not only a picture of the rock against which the climber is plastered at a given moment, but of the changing scene around, beautiful or awful, as the climb progresses. The reader is also interested in certain automatic reactions of the climber's *mind*: his fear, his weariness; perhaps

a glimpse of his humour : certainly his discomfort and his pleasure in relaxation, and even his food. But John Addington Symonds puts it quite flatly when he says : ' The proper attitude of the Soul among the Alps is one of silence.' Moreover, every writer must perpetually keep his reader in mind. As Harold Nicolson says somewhere in this connection : ' Only those who possess an acute sense of audience, realise that those passages which interest them personally, are not necessarily those which will interest their readers.'

I think that the same thing applies to the increasing number of general readers who are not necessarily climbers themselves, but are interested in accounts of mountaineering, as they are in any well described adventures. In the former category Whympers *Scrambles* and the various books on Everest immediately come to mind ; in the latter Livingstone, Franklin, Hooker, Scott, Shackleton, and many others, including, of course, books connected with War. In these there is no Uplift. Drama, yes. But drama, while it may uplift, is not sentimental preciousness. Alpine drama might well form rich material for an essay. Our literature abounds in it. Tuckett's *Race For Life* ; Whympers' account of the descent from the Matterhorn ; Winthrop Young's *Täschhorn* ; the death of Bennen, and many another.

I am sure it is true that, as regards mountaineering, as with other forms of adventure, nothing pleases the reader so much as a straightforward narrative, heightened by allusions to the excitement, fear, discomfort and amusement caused by events. Mystical emotions and elevated thoughts may please the writer but they are not demanded or expected by the reader, though not necessarily disagreeable to him. He probably skips them if he is really interested in the story itself.

What therefore urges climbers to indulge in Uplift ? Can it be a form of self-indulgence, or has it merely become an imitation of popular fashion ? Again, if it is neither, can it be vocational, as in the case of Bourrit, or the Protestant clergymen describing early Alpine walking tours, from whom spiritual uplift was naturally expected in those days ? It is quite conceivable that to-day some vague vocational feeling stirs the writer ; but I think we must not exclude, as a possible cause of these displays, either frustrated ambition or lack of achievement. One is inclined to wonder whether a writer, who feels that his climb hardly justifies his narrative, may not be tempted to use spiritual experience as a substitute for physical attainment because, self-righteously, it enables him to claim competitive superiority over the supposedly un-uplifted. This sense of lack of achievement may often be due to the fact that most climbs have been so fully described already that, however novel the ascent may have been to the writer, he realises that it is not novel to the reader, and tries to pad out his description by accounts of his own reactions. Thus, just as Uplift may be a substitute for real athletic achievement when that was lacking, it may also be a substitute for what actually is an athletic achievement, but, nevertheless, one which has lost its significance as a topic for a written description.

None of this would matter very much if Alpine literature had little or no effect upon mountaineering—or as little effect as descriptions of cricket, football, golf or hunting have on these activities. But I believe that Alpine literature has a predominant influence on climbing and that fashions set by our literature are of great importance to the sport. Consequently, stress on personal reactions rather than on the action of climbing, and certainly any dogma that the spiritual reward or ‘secret treasure’ of Uplift is a more laudable objective than the blood, sweat and toil of hardworn achievement, may be really subversive of the best interests of mountaineering. Is there not a danger that the recruit, sensitive to suggestion, may be tempted to confine himself to mediocre expeditions if he is led to believe that these mystic prizes can be found on easy peaks, that they are more to be desired than really hard achievement, and that many successful mountaineers never find them at all and are, therefore, objects for pity rather than for emulation? The recruit may do so and, let there be no mistake about it, it may bring him great happiness; but it will never make him a good climber, and certainly not a great mountaineer. Even in our own country, what would have happened to British rock climbing if the idea had got about that it was better to feel than to conquer?

But perhaps I exaggerate—as one is apt to do when musing on matters hypothetical. And indeed my musings do not seem to have led to any conclusion. It was one of those trains of thought, leading to no terminus, but like those trains on the Inner Circle, merely going round and round. But after all it was that great mystic, William Blake, who said ‘Great things are done when men and mountains meet,’ and I still think it is the ‘doings’ we want to hear about. No doubt beautiful things have been written which come into the category of Uplift: occasionally they have not been so beautiful. It has been well done: it has been badly done. Some have not taken Mrs. Trollope as an example. Deeply moved by her first sight of Niagara and its ‘shadowy mystery,’ she writes, ‘but I dare not dwell on this, it is a dangerous subject and any attempt to describe the sensations produced must lead direct to nonsense.’ But even though I should hesitate to describe any but a small portion of our Alpine Uplift as ‘nonsense,’ I have failed to discover what urges writers to indulge in it in narratives of this one outdoor sport.

I do not deride romantic or elevated thoughts in a climber—or, indeed, in anyone else. On the contrary, I believe they should be immanent in all intelligent men and women who are in close touch with nature, and I can modestly quote the words of Whymper’s guide in quite another connection: ‘I do not pretend to be different from anyone else: I have them’—

But I keep them to myself.