

Mountaineering and Mysticism

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MYSTICISM, a term derived from the significant Greek word *μύειν* to shut the eyes,—*μύστης*, one who is initiated into the mysteries—indicates a phase or state of feeling rather than of thought, which from its very nature is not susceptible of definition: and not communicable. The utterance of the philosopher, Augustine, “If you do not ask me, I know; if you ask me, I do not know,” is a celebrated illustration of this standpoint. In history it has appeared in connection with the endeavour to grasp the ultimate nature of things; this is its philosophical aspect; or to grasp the divine essence behind appearances and enjoy communion with it; this is its religious aspect. In Spinoza’s unique metaphysical work, *Ethica*, both aspects are combined: in it, traditional theology underwent an euthanasia in philosophy. *Deus sive Natura: Natura sive Deus*. The naturalistic Pantheism of Spinoza aimed at being thoroughly rationalistic; it tried to see everything in the clear light of the noon-day sun, and to demonstrate *more geometrico* the unity of Nature. Its apparent success, the apparent completeness of its synthesis, rests on the subtle intrusions of elements of feeling into a process of reasoning that has started with clear definitions and appeared to proceed with strict logic. The *intuitive science* of which Spinoza could not give a clear account, and which culminates in the intellectual love of God (an impersonal being), represents the most important of such intrusions. His wonderful system, which is both speculative and practical, its aim being to obtain happiness through knowledge, has appealed in its different aspects to scientists, mountaineers, and poets, and among the last to none more than to one of the greatest, a mountain lover, although not a mountaineer, who gave eloquent expression to Spinoza’s belief in the well-known lines:

God dwells within, and moves the world and moulds,
Himself and Nature in one form enfolds.

A mystical attitude has shown itself in recent years among British scientists in a movement against a naturalistic view of phenomena. It has for the most part only a negative basis, which

depends on the absence, or incompleteness, of knowledge. It insists on the spiritual character of nature, and then frequently leaves the position without further definition or proof. Recent nationalistic "heroics" in mountaineering appear to be tinged with mysticism. Wherever feeling or emotion and the will to believe prevail over views based on direct perception, exact knowledge and probability, whenever thought gives place to rhapsody, there a mystical tendency displays itself. Such an attitude is shown in the writings of F. S. Smythe¹ and Sir Francis Younghusband, the explorer, soldier and mountain lover in his book on Everest.

"There," Sir Francis writes, "in the great silence and other stillness, the radiance of the stars seemed positively to penetrate me. . . it was not the brilliance of any single star that pierced. It was the radiance of all in their togetherness which insensibly seeped into me. The whole vault of heaven seemed to shed a benign, but most elevating influence on me. And I no longer belonged to earth alone. I was still of the earth, for I was lying on it, in direct bodily contact with it; but I and the mountain and the stars were all bound up together in one whole."²

Was this more than a feeling of togetherness? What sort of a whole? Sir Francis believed it to be spiritual. "As he deepens his sense of unity with Nature, so will his joy increase: he will feel himself exalted to a higher order of being,"³ an utterance quite in the spirit of Spinoza. With much eloquence Sir Francis expounds the view that the unity of Nature is the outward aspect of a Personality and believes that most mountaineers, if only they meditated on the matter in the mountains themselves, would come to accept this view. It is because a mountain pilgrim or a hermit of the Himalayas meditates in remoteness from the disharmonious and disturbing events of a crowded Western life that he considers they are

¹ In his *Spirit of the Hills* and *The Mountain Vision*. In the former, p. 298, he declares: "I can only write of what I feel, and to me what I feel is infinitely more important than what I think, because what I feel is what I am, and what I think is merely a superficial means by which I endeavour to express what I feel, a task beyond all wit or understanding." On such a basis of mere sentiency, psychology, as a science, could not have been developed. And is there not an inconsistency in placing thought, which expresses itself in, and develops through the use of, language, in such an inferior position to feeling, and yet writing admirable books on mountaineering?

² *Everest: The Challenge*, p. 221. The immediate conviction contained in a mystical experience is a kind of special revelation.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

more capable of grasping the nature of the universe than a modern scientist. Such an assertion or belief seems to lack foundation. It would indeed be astonishing if an ignorant pilgrim or a hermit, whose life is bare and limited, could reach such an insight. Are not his eyes closed to a great part of the content of nature? Why should the laws of physics, chemistry and biology, which help to explain and predict in part, at least, the course of events be so depreciated? Where are the spiritual laws which enable us to do likewise? Laws and generalisations in Psychology are just as naturalistic as those of physics. It may be that the world process is driven by spirit, as Sir Francis Younghusband and others have maintained, assuming that there is only one process; and that this process is an everlasting rhythmic one and will never cease. Whatever is conceivable is possible. Such a belief may lead those who share it to rejoice in whatever happens. But to others such a belief will seem to be no better than a mental opiate. However this may be, we maintain that it is not *from* the mountains themselves that such a conviction is derived: rather it is brought *to* the mountains from other sources.

That nature is intelligible is recognized as, at least, a postulate, if not as a fundamental principle of the possibility of science. It has received illustration and support by the establishment of exact relations between natural phenomena, which we designate as laws. But the intelligibility of nature is relative to our knowledge, and is limited by the nature of reality, and it cannot be predicted how far it can be realised. It does not mean or require that it is all intelligible, much less that it is an intelligent whole. Mountaineers who approach nature from the standpoint of philosophical or theological Idealism maintain that it does, and that one must find in nature something akin to the human mind, if nature is to be understood. This is an ancient refrain of Idealism, which has never been established or rendered probable. It illustrates the old fallacy of assumption, that cause and effect must be qualitatively similar, and that whatever is in the effect must be similarly in the cause: according to which, if there is pepper in the soup, there must be pepper in the cook who made it.

In the nineteenth century the human eye was regarded by many, including some scientists, as a strong argument in favour of design in nature; even J. S. Mill in a posthumous work (1873) thought

that the formation of this organ was from this standpoint worthy of respectful consideration. He was unaware that a great scientist, who had explored the eye more thoroughly than any previous investigator, having himself constructed the means of doing so, had already declared that if he had ordered anyone to make an eye, and it had been made so badly as the human eye, he would have felt entitled to withhold remuneration for his work. Since then the theory of biological evolution renders intelligible the imperfections of this organ. Similarly with the argument from beauty in nature: it is, at best, anthropomorphic. How much objectively attaches to beauty is doubtful. Some mountaineers see little that is beautiful in the hills. Some mountains and mountain spaces are positively ugly. There are plenty of views in the great peaks which can present a hideous aspect. If anxiety develops and fatigue predominates, all sense of beauty may, and probably will vanish, thus illustrating the saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and subjective.

“In these two eyes, that search the splendour of the earth, and seek the light-born mysteries on plain and peak, all vision wakes and dies.”

Climbers in the Himalayas have frequently declared that the peaks look cruel, and fail to supply the aesthetic enjoyment provided by those of Switzerland. “The thrill and mystery of travel,” says C. F. Meade, “are always upon one in the Himalayas, but the mystery is awful, and the thrill is sometimes a shudder.” In *The Kangchenjunga Adventure*, Mr. F. S. Smythe expressed a somewhat similar view to the effect, “that there is nothing friendly about a Himalayan peak. You feel that it is coldly hostile, that it resents intrusion. It will kill you if it can. And so if you climb it, you climb it only for the sake of achievement. When you have reached the summit, you have finished with it. There is no desire to renew acquaintance with it,” as there is, we may add, in the case of Swiss climbs.

In a later, and in parts brilliant book, *The Mountain Vision*, the same author, who admits the subjectivity of his standpoint, says at the outset: “Much of this book can be intelligible only to those who are prepared to accept as a truth the Divine Love and Purpose behind all creation.” Creation and purpose have deep implications and difficulties which it would be out of place to dis-

cuss here. But not even the sight of the pitiful remains of the friendly Sherpa porter, Chetin, crushed and shattered by one of Kangchenjunga's ice-avalanches, as other human bodies have been in those mountains, have shaken Mr. Smythe's belief that this is part of a beneficent and loving scheme. (Chapter XIII.) Does this not involve closing one's eyes to certain aspects of nature, in which all is just "weather?" Against such a personal interpretation, in support of which no objective evidence is offered, it is sufficient to say in the words of a leading character in Goethe's *Faust*: "*Es fehlt mir nur der Glaube.*" Mr. Smythe and other distinguished English mountaineers have asserted that it required men to emancipate themselves from materialism in order to appreciate the beauty of the hills—if one said superstition it would be nearer the point—and that those who see no purpose in nature are necessarily materialists. These assertions appear to be mere assumptions. Goethe, who denied purpose in nature, was not a materialist; and Tyndall and others, who accepted the materialistic implications of biological evolution, were still capable of enjoying and describing finely the glorious sights of the Alps.⁴

When on a fine day, our activity has been a source of enjoyment, and the exercise of a well-developed technique has enabled us to experience the exhilaration of being the first to stand on a summit, after difficult exertions, the resulting consciousness may be a feeling of power, which helps us to realise the philosophic teaching that the more we act, and the less we are acted upon, even though our actions are determined, the freer we are. In the stillness of the upper regions on a perfect day, unbroken except now

⁴ A religious and personal interpretation of mountaineering experiences is represented by R. L. G. Irving in his important work, *The Romance of Mountaineering*, Part III. There an attempt is made to show how mountaineering accompanies, if it does not actually support, great religious ideals, in particular those of Christianity. The author says amusingly that, if there is none but a materialistic basis to mountaineering—whatever this may mean—"then my philosophy of mountaineering collapses, built though it be in part upon the rock!" And he proceeds to explain what significance attaches to it, if a spiritual basis is admitted. That there is a philosophy, as distinct from a psychology, of mountaineering is doubtful.

Contemplating nature from the summit of a Swiss peak, Émile Javelle expressed himself thus, in *Souvenirs d'un Alpiniste*: "Man sees himself alone with emptiness, terrifying in its vastness, open around him; he is struck, as in no other place, by this thought that the universe is terrible in its mystery, that no religion, no philosophy, can give us a true idea of what it is; that the further the vision of our eye extends, the greater does that mystery become." Quoted from *The Mountain Way*, an anthology by R. L. G. Irving.

and then by the laughter of congenial companions, there may arise a sense of being almost outside the earth. One looks down and around on the glorious sights and *feels* existence in a many-sided sensation. One may be momentarily led to *feel* that the core of the world has been grasped in a single act of intuition (*uno intuitu*).⁵ The immensity of the hills, and the gloriousness of the experiences may call forth a response to the overwhelming impressions. They can give the climber a thrill different from any that he has ever had: they may produce the impression of a connexity of everything, including himself; but to identify this emotion with an insight into the ultimate nature of things is surely to fall into a confusion. We have to realise that the passionless hills are neither eternal nor spiritual in themselves; that our globe is a very insignificant bit of the "world"; and that these "experiences of a life-time" are personal and fleeting.

"These are indeed the rare moments of living," declares a distinguished mountaineer, "which we borrow from the golden age: when every thought is coloured glowing gold with the vigour and fitness of the body, and every fibre of the body vibrates to the joy of the eye and the glory of motion." "At moments when we are alone on the hills, we can almost *feel* their secret. But with the effort to shape it into words its meaning escapes us, like the music we have heard in dreams: or it becomes commonplace, like a drying sea-pebble from which the beauty passes with the shadows of its moisture."⁶

"No mountaineer who respects common sense and mistrusts sentimentality," says the same writer, "will claim for mountaineering that it is more than a great sport, if perhaps the greatest."⁷ It is not in any sense a religion: nor does it support any theological interpretation of reality. The beneficent, joyful and elevating experiences it affords are counterbalanced to a certain extent by the pitilessness of the electric storm, blinding snow, petrifying winds, flesh-shrivelling suns, and death-dealing avalanches.

⁵ "Natur hat weder Kern noch Schale"

"Alles ist sie einem Male."—Goethe.

⁶ G. W. Young in *On High Hills*, a great work, in which the psychological aspects of mountaineering predominate, while the brilliant climbs serve primarily as objective occasions for exemplifying the former: a departure from much earlier writing on mountaineering.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

Much of the expression of alpine mysticism is the work of the poets, and, "On the whole," declares Mr. Michael Roberts, with more particular reference to English writers, "the poetry of mountaineering shows all the vices of bad description. It is bloated, pompous and sugary, and the explanation seems to be that it deals with . . . the Wrong Mountains of Imagination. It expresses a kind of sham religion, a sentimental day-dream in which brutal realities are not transcended, but conveniently ignored; and as one kind of blindness or evasion leads to another, this easy-going religiosity finds expression in images and rhythms that are as crude and limited as its theology."⁸ These strictures are not undeserved. The "religion of the mountains" deals in imagery and symbols without concern for reality. "Mountains may be symbols or images of some other reality, but the worship of images as if they were something more than images is a form of superstition."⁹ The poetry of mountaineering, usually optimistic and pretty, tends to ignore the difficulties, the discomforts, the humiliations, of climbing, "the odours reminiscent of sardines and rancid butter"; its selection of details and images involves a distortion of fact and hardly applies to the real world. Mountaineering is only a very small part of actual life; which it reduces temporarily to great simplicity. It provides a brief escape from a tiresome routine: it demands qualities that are valuable in the business of living, while it provides a rich imaginative experience. It supplies fresh draughts of simplicity and beauty, so desirable in agitated and complex modern life. It unites in friendship those who may have otherwise little in common. Of all the forms of sport and recreation in which men can refresh themselves, mountaineering appears to be one of the worthiest and most reasonable; at least for educated human beings, notwithstanding the prejudiced animadversions of John Ruskin and Dean Inge. It affords not only a pleasurable exercise of muscle, but the enjoyment of incomparable views; it promotes meditation in magnificent solitudes, and is unique in that it stimulates the aesthetic sentiment. "In the upper snow world there is a mystery and force," said Frederick Harrison, "which has an overpowering effect upon human nature. It does what Aristotle

⁸ In an article on "The Poetry and Humour of Mountaineering," *A. J.* 52, 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

tells us is the function of tragedy to do, to purify the mind by sympathy and terror." Of a day of storm spent on Monte Rosa, Sir Martin Conway said: "Such struggles with nature produce a moral invigoration of enduring value. They wash the mind free of sentimental cob-webs and foolish imaginings. They bring a man in contact with cold stony reality . . . they act as a moral tonic." They help us to test ourselves and our companions, and to find out what we, and they are.

Some individuals enjoy being out in the mountains in mist and fog. They say that "its atmosphere of wrapped up immediacy" appeals to their sense of mystery. They feel it is a stimulus to take risks and explore. It excites their curiosity. When the latter is satisfied, the mystery may disappear. Those who revel in mysteries, however, without desiring to resolve them display, of course, a mystical attitude.

In an article entitled "Alpine Mysticism and Cold Philosophy," Mr. Arnold Lunn refers to the devastating effects of the materialistic philosophy which was deduced from the theory of biological evolution in last century.¹⁰ Whether such a deduction was legitimate need not be discussed here. It did not undermine the enjoyment of the mountains and their scenery by those who had accepted the new scientific theories, among whom Sir Leslie Stephen, quoted by Mr. Lunn, Professor Tyndall and Frederick Harrison were conspicuous. Certainly the clarifying effect of the new biological standpoint showed itself in regard to traditional views of the origin of man, cleansing the intellectual atmosphere of heavy cobwebs of unanalysed beliefs. It showed that man was a natural product, the highest of the animals, but "lower than the angels," and whose capacity for investigation and reasoning bestowed on him a dignity, while it was also the source of the new scientific theories which tended to humble him. Biology combined with physics to teach man of his ephemeral existence; that his life, "viewed outwardly

¹⁰ *A. J.* 51, 286. The devastating effect of philosophical theories is relative. The writer found Bishop Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge* and *Dialogues* very disturbing when he read them at the age of twenty, because, owing to their weakness, they shook the beliefs which he had been taught to regard as indispensable for his moral welfare. The bad reasoning and fallacies of assumption which pervade Berkeley's pages, had the opposite effect to that intended by the author, who believed that he had once for all supplied unanswerable arguments for theological Idealism, and against free-thinking and materialism.

is but a small thing in comparison with the forces of Nature." Eloquently has Bertrand Russell put it: "That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of collocations of atoms; . . . that all the labours of the ages . . . are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the débris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand."¹¹

The eternal forces of nature, said Goethe, exercise their power as they please, without regard to the happiness of man. This holds true whether they are conceived ultimately as spiritual or material.

"All things that move and breathe with toil and sound
 "Are born and die; revolve, subside and swell.
 "Power dwells apart in its tranquillity
 "Remote, serene and inaccessible:
 "And this, the naked countenance of earth,
 "On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains
 "Teach the *adverting* mind."—*Shelley*.

Mankind has experienced every kind of emotion from abject fear to ecstatic joy through the sight of, and contact with, the massive forms of snow, ice, and rock that form the great ranges of the earth. But it was not until the nineteenth century, when science had dissipated many prejudices and sufficient leisure had been acquired and peace had prevailed for some time that men sought adventure in the mountains instead of in international wars.

"To what extent," asks Mr. F. S. Smythe, "are mystical feelings toward mountains induced by ancient and inherited fears and to what extent by a recognition of a Divine Power of which mountains are symbolic?"¹² To a modern scientific climber neither of these alternatives will appear to be important. Knowledge and experience have helped to eliminate, as Mr. Smythe recognises, that kind of superstitious fear depending on legend, a supposed indefinable mountain spirit or presence; in fine, on ignorance of the mountains. As regards Mont Blanc such were eliminated by the ascents of Paccard and de Saussure. The fear of falling stones

¹¹ In "The Free Man's Worship" in *Philosophical Essays*.

¹² *The Mountain Vision*, p. 239.

and of avalanches, not always avoidable; the fear created by a sudden and violent storm on a high peak, are not in the least mystical, but clearly understood. Of all the dangers, not deliberately incurred, a severe electric storm, accompanied by driving snow, is perhaps the worst. It is terror-causing because it is an almost overpowering event, in which one feels utterly helpless, hesitating whether to throw away or retain one's ice-axe. But it would be superstitious to think that it was a malevolent act directed against the climber. Similarly to see in an escape from what seemed to be an inevitable catastrophe a providential intervention strikes a rational interpreter of nature as both childish and conceited.

The emotionless mountains present a note of constancy, and hold out a hope of high adventure. Our relations with them are not simple, but complex, and not always easy to define comprehensively. The value of mountaineering adventure depends not only on the incidents and physical impressions of a climb but on what the individual brings to it from his own nature and outlook. "The more we can understand imaginatively of the ideas for which mountains stand as the greatest natural symbols, the more will they inspire and enlarge our design. The more we learn from them by experience or observation, the more they can guide us in shaping the material we add to theirs."

"There is much comfort in high hills,

"and a great easing of the heart.

"We look upon them, and our nature fills

"with loftier images from their life apart.

"They set our feet on curves of freedom bent

"to snap the circles of our discontent."

—*G. W. Young.*