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Knights of Nothingness

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Looking over the list from Harish early in the year (for the Panch Chuli expedition), Chris Bonington commented on the name Muslim Contractor.

'That is a person, not a job, isn't it?'

'Yes Chris, he was with us on Rimo. Good company too.'

'Funny sort of name that, Muslim, don't you think?'

'Yes indeed.....Christian.'

Muslim will be missed in many ways but life has moved on for him and one has to wish him bon voyage.

This issue is published with all the usual supporters and the usual last minute rushes. Rajesh Gadgil joins us as Hon. Assistant Editor with the enthusiasm of a mountaineer, which he is. He is not an experienced hand at editing but he shakes his head vigorously, as you will read in the article here, so as to learn faster.

As we go to press, the Government of India has again dithered about the names, suggesting that the good old name 'Bombay' should be retained for international usage. I will leave it to readers to decide between the Bard's, 'What's in a name....' or my indigenous title of an article, 'Lots in a name'!

Bombay/Mumbai

HARISH KAPADIA

KNIGHTS OF NOTHINGNESS

The Transcendental Nature of Mountaineering and Mountain Literature

MIKEL VAUSE

HUMANS, IN THEIR search for knowledge and dominion, have struck out on many memorable expeditions to achieve these desires, many times at great risk. The old adage 'Nothing ventured; nothing gained' summarises the attitudes that rationalised the risk factor. But another element attached to the idea of risk was that there must be some purpose connected to the venture, i.e.: land, gold, science and personal fame. The idea of risk-taking for anything other than material gain or for science was sheer lunacy.

This is also clearly represented in other forms of activity that are risky such as Arctic exploration. Roald Amundsen, after being the first man to reach the South Pole, had little to show for it; he was greatly in debt and physically worn out. His only reward was the fact that he had done it.

The very birth of alpine climbing came as a result of an offer made by the Geneves scholar Horace-Benedict de Saussure, who, after first reviewing Mont Blanc, in 1760, offered a reward to anyone who reached the summit. It is ironic that an activity that, in the late part of the present century, is practiced for intrinsic, almost solely spiritual reasons, was the child of materialism. Material motive no longer accounts for mountaineering, yet the encouragement of individuality and personal liberty, the sort of romantic freedom that led visionary humans to great

*This essay appeared in a slightly different form as an introduction to *On Mountains and Mountaineers*, published by Mountain N'Air Books, La Crescenta, CA 1993.

achievements and rewards in science, industry and exploration is still questioned when applied to mountaineering. This is possibly due to mountaineering being so purely visionary as well as so lacking in any material recompense. Robert Frost examines the idea of climbing for its own sake in his poem 'The Mountain':

... It doesn't seem so much to climb a mountain
 You've worked around on foot of all your life.
 What would I do Go in my overalls,
 With a big stick, the same as when the cows
 Haven't come down to the bar at milking time ?
 Or with a shotgun for a strong black bear ?
 'Twouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it
 (Lathem, 40-44)

Even in a time of constant thrill-seeking and 'adrenalin highs,' the most adamant adventurer sees climbing as a sure-fire path to suicide. Those generally associated with mountain climbing are seen as somewhat deranged, having a death wish. In a television documentary dealing with the American Everest North Face Expedition, the American climber, Jim Wickwire, was asked why death seemed to override his wish to live, a question naturally directed to him as a mountaineer. His answer was that the death wish attributed to climbers is a fallacy, that in fact, climbing is an affirmation of life and all of its goodness, and joy.

The careful reading of essays dealing with ascent clearly illustrate that the climbers are more than just sportsmen, they are artists, poets and philosophers. Like Emerson, Wordsworth and other great thinkers and poets who believed in the divine nature of humans, they reach their godlike potential through such challenges as those found climbing, not only in the wild back country of the remote mountain ranges of the world, but many times in local crags as close to home as Walden Pond was to Thoreau's Concord.

Wilfrid Noyce, a prolific writer as well as active participant in mountaineering, states that the desire for risk and adventure is innate:

If adventure has a final and all-embracing motive, it is surely this: we go out because it is our nature to go out,

to climb mountains, and to paddle rivers, to fly to the planets and plunge into the depths of the oceans... When man ceases to do these things, he is no longer man. (quoted in Schulthers, 33).

But the climber must realise that with the commitment to climb comes responsibility and possibly death as a result of his choices.

An examination of the literature of mountaineering provides not only many exciting tales of high adventure, but also, if closely examined, one comes to understand the psychology and philosophy of those who wish, through the medium provided them by the ice-covered faces of nature's grand and timeless monuments, to ply their art in places of limited access. It is my intent to focus on the intellectual and social implications found in mountain writing as offshoots of the romantic essay rather than adventure stories only.

The literature of the mountains is transcendental by nature because language is limiting it contains the inevitably incomplete record of the climber/writer's sojourn in the ideal world, which though incomplete, still proves the reader with a vicarious account of enlightenment achieved by the climb, and a written vision of the climber's art achieved through his travels in the Earth's wild places and a record of the physical exhilaration felt by the climber fortunate enough to reach the summit. It matters not if it be a first ascent or the hundredth visit to the top, the experience is the end in itself.

The promise of reward to those willing to risk possible catastrophe is of little extrinsic value, but the intrinsic reward is beyond value or price. This gift from activity in wild nature is possibly best explained by John Muir, who constantly sought after the prize found at the tops of mountains :

Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves (Wolf, *Unpublished Journals* 317).

The mountaineer is glad for every opportunity to return to the mountains in search of the divinity only available to the

hardy. Muir put into words the inner feeling of all climbers upon their return to the mountain wilderness :

I am always glad
to touch the living rock again
and dip my hand in the high mountain sky
(Wolf, *Unpublished Journals*, 221)

This communion of humans with nature does not have to be unique to the climber, but to all who are willing to make the efforts needed - who willingly reach deeper within themselves to overcome the most difficult problems for the sake of the spiritual reward. In this study of writings which are the works of climbers, the purpose is to show that mountaineers are not only superb athletes, but also deep thinkers rather than demented and suicidal, and who, through their writing provide those who lack the climber's gift a record of the experience and possibly the understanding of the motives that drive the climber to scale the few high places and break from the otherwise natural horizontal existence of the generic human both literally and figuratively. The climber, by providing the record of his climb, acts as a proxy for those who, for various reasons are unable to go into the wilds. One philosophy of the mountaineer is very clearly presented by the Italian climber, Walter Bonatti, who explains the psyche of the climber as being set for high achievement, unwilling to settle for the mediocrity so commonly found in industrialised humans; who willingly takes risks, not for anything material, but for the uplift of the inner spirit which directs the character of humans in all of their aspects. This is not to say that the climber is a superhuman or semidivine, but that their philosophical perspective is an explanation of why the climber undertakes such risks.

Bonatti refers again and again to the effects of industry on society and how humans have come gladly to settle for a mere reaction of their whole potential. He contrasts this dull, over-civilised humanoid with the climber whose rebellion directed against the morbid effects one sees in 'collective society' is manifest in their willingness to risk their lives in order to issues their protest against such an anesthetised existence as if found in most human settlements. This philosophy is not unique to Bonatti but is patently romantic and could as easily be the words

of Wordsworth who in his poem 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' states his concern of how industry affects man.

Along with recognition of the romantic ideal that is clear in climbing philosophy it must be remembered that the rewards of the adventure do not come easy. Rob Schultheis explains the efforts of achieving spiritual growth by adventure this way, 'Adventuring requires determination, curiosity, toughness, and especially-the ability to solve problems with real creativity' (34) the same elements found anywhere there is success. It is with this in mind that the climber/writer writes.

All humans need to participate in adventure, to pioneer new frontiers, sometimes even at the risk of life, and to do it under their own power using few and possibly none of technology's products to add an even greater feeling of accomplishment and contribute to their ascent-physically and spiritually.

The philosophy of unencumbered progress as advocated most clearly by Henry David Thoreau, in *Walden*, is also the philosophy of Walter Bonatti, who states that though climbing starts out as a sport, the end result can be great spiritual rewards, and that the less material baggage one takes in the mountains, the greater possibility of reward.

Bonatti's belief is that mountaineering is an activity which provides inspiration and fulfills requirements set by his temperament, and which follows a tradition established 'out of sacrifice, suffering and ... love,' which does not allow for the easy win or to win at any cost. Bonatti's philosophy fits the theory of risk exercise (RE) of Dr. Sol Ray Rosenthal, who after many years of research and study has found 'that there is something in risk that enhances the life of the individual - something so real, something with such impact that people who have experienced it need to experience it again and again' (Furlons, 40).

The idea of risk must be clarified; it is more than just 'the joy of survival or a sense of self-validation. It (is) a powerful psyche and visceral kick-an exhilaration, a euphoria, a sense of heightened awareness' (Furlons, 93).

Heightened consciousness is reward of the transcendental experience common to Emerson, Thoreau and Muir, Dr. Rosenthal

indicates that such 'transcendent' experiences are common to the risk taker. Risk taking results in a very personal revelation about one's limitations and abilities. What is 'risky' to one may be commonplace to another, but regardless, 'risk.... heightens perceptions because it enforces an absolute concentration on the moment, as opposed to the ennui. This can pervade any endeavor in which there's nothing important at stake' (Furlons, 94).

Dr. Rosenthal, in an interview with *Outside* magazine's William Berry Furlons, explains the differences between RE and risk taking this way: Risk exercise differs from the common concept of risk taking in that it is measured. Rosenthal is not talking about a mindless pursuit, such as diving off the Golden Gate Bridge to see if, just this once, you can survive. 'In the manic risk, terror or despair is the only predictable emotion,' he says. One of the assumptions of RE is that the risk taker has the skills to match or overcome the risk. 'Otherwise terror simply overwhelms the RE response.'

In essence, this response is a sensation that envelopes the risk taker, usually, though not inevitably, after the activity. The sensation varies in intensity and duration according to the individual and to the degree of risk. Rosenthal is careful to distinguish the RE response from the 'adrenalin high' some risk takers say they have experienced. Adrenalin, notes Rosenthal, is simply a 'fight or flight' secretion that speeds up the body or gives it more energy. The RE response goes further, taking on both a strong sensory and strong cerebral dimension.

Sensory : 'In talking with people who've had in RE response,' says Rosenthal, 'you find that they describe a very pronounced sense of well being. In most people it's a feeling of exhilaration, even euphoria. They talk of having achieved more of their potential as human beings, of feeling fulfilled and yet having a greater expectancy of their lives.' They talk, he adds, not only of feeling keenly aware of the world around them, but also of themselves and their own awareness. They not only see, for example, but they know what they see. And they know that they know. This accounts for the risk taker's vivid feeling of potency - he can control his increased sensory power beyond anything he ever knew. Unlike someone who is drunk or otherwise mind-altered,

he is not separated from reality. 'Reality doesn't intimidate him, because he feels so good within himself,' says Rosenthal. 'He has the strong feeling that his whole life has been enhanced, that he has been enhanced.'

Cerebral : In the more pronounced RE response, the individual enjoys the power and pleasure of summoning up the 'wholeness' of his thought. His mind, given more information from his senses, somehow seems to give it all greater meaning. At the same time, the mind discriminates among the various sensations and meanings so that there is less mental clutter and an increased capacity for setting priorities. 'The result is that people find their concentration is increased immensely,' says Rosenthal. 'They find that they can go to the heart of a problem and find a solution.' What if the problem is emotional, not cerebral? 'They manage to take the hardest step in meeting such a problem - they recognize that it involves their emotions, not their reason, which is an enormous discipline in itself.'

For generations, risk activities were thought to be for the inane or the insane. 'We've all been taught from infancy that danger, the presence of risk, is the signal to stop, to turn back, to cease whatever we're doing,' says Rosenthal. People who persisted in risk taking were said to be unbalanced in a dazzling variety of ways. Some were said to have death wishes, the favorite cliché of journalism. Some were said to be exhibiting supermasculinity as a way of overcoming subconscious feelings of inadequacy. Some were said to be counterphobic, seeking to conquer their own worst fears by exposing themselves to whatever caused those fears. Rosenthal, on the other hand, believes that measure risk becomes understandable and even desirable when seen simply as the act of a person seeking to enhance his life by exploring inner resources (Furlon, 40-93).

Mountaineering, clearly, is more closely related to RE (risk exercise) than to risk taking, because its effects or rewards are mostly intrinsic.

The influence of mountaineering and the results of the influences are the creation of a more spiritual and ultimately responsible individual who is given over to spiritual intrinsic betterment which comes from increased personal awareness and

self-control in all situations rather than a self-indulgent, self-centered being who receives uplift only through ratification of worldly appetites achievable by no effort or at best the slight effort it takes to unloose his purse strings.

The comparison made by Galen Rowell in his essay 'Storming a Myth,' dealing with the physical and spiritual, explains in elegant terms the necessary philosophical approach to climbing:

I know that climbing is merely a vehicle, a tool, and the climber a tool user. As a tool, climbing can be used to overcome 5.12 cracks, the difficulties of a Grade 6 wall, or an 8000 meter peak. But held only to this narrow definition, it can eventually bring boredom and despair. The climbing tool has a spiritual component as well. At the heart of the climbing experience is a constant state of optimistic expectation, and when that state is absent, there is no reason to continue climbing. 'I have found it!' can apply not only to those who feel they have found God, but to those who, like me, continue to find Shangri-Las where we experience fresh, child-like joy in everything that surrounds us, including memories that are the most long lasting and intense of our lives. (quoted in Tobias, *The Mountain Spirit*, 85-91)

It is the purpose of climber / writers to provide the reader with at least some information that was uplifting to them during the climb and which not only provides extrinsic justification for climbing, but also is an intrinsic reward, that comes from sharing their experiences with others. No matter how eloquent or profound writers are they cannot live the total experience for their readers, but through their writing they can entice the reader to an active involvement, possibly on a firsthand level.

This tactic was used, with great effect, by John Muir during his campaign for national parks in America. His glowing reports of America's wild places attracted a great deal of attention. He invited all 'overcivilised' people into the wilderness and promised them 'terrestrial manifestations of God.' Because of writings many national parks were established like Yellowstone and Yosemite.

Doug Scott is a leader in modern British climbing and an active

climber/writer. His essay, 'On the Profundity Trail,' an account of his climb of El Captain's Salathe Wall with Peter Habeler, carries the idea of participation and calculated risk to the more limited audience of the climbers but is applicable to non-climbers as well and again illustrates Bonatti's mention of the harmful effects a collective society can have on man.

Not only does Scott support Bonatti's basic philosophy, but his ideas also tie in with the Emersonian theory of the transcendental experience from contact with wilderness. This results in personal growth as well as a 'higher conduct of life' when one returns to the social world. But according to Scott the chances of achieving such spiritual and intellectual heights come from one's willingness to risk something of value - the longer the trip the more risk involved and the greater the possibility of growth.

These examples represent the psychological and philosophical ideas that help connect the realities of mountaineering, mountains and travel. The next step is to see the effects mountains have had on literature. One can hardly read the works of the romantic writers, regardless of nationality, without coming across numerous references to mountains or wild terrain: men being naturally impelled to ascent in all its forms. This literature could hardly exist without reference to mountains and attempts to ascend them. As before mentioned, after man put aside the need for justification for climbing mountains, i.e. science and material wealth, mountains become a source of spiritual riches. The effort made to climb them was rewarded by spiritual uplift and a triumph of the inner man over himself. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in 1802, made what has been recorded as the first descent of Scafell Cliff in the Lake District of England. Just the small entry in his notebooks that recorded the event is filled with awe and wonder: 'But O Scafell, thy enormous Precipices.' The description of Coleridge's climb appears under the dates of August 1 and 9, 1802:

The poet Samuel T. Coleridge made what he described as a 'circumcursion' from Reswick by Newlands to Buttermere and St. Bees, up Ennerdale, thence by Gosforth to Wasdalehead, from where he climbed Scafell, descended to Taws in Eskdale, and the continued by Ulphaand, Coniston to Brathay and so back to Keswick. It is clear

from his notebooks, now in the British Museum, that he descended from the summit of Scafell to Mickledore by the route we now call Broad Stand. He got down by 'dropping' by the hands over a series of 'smooth perpendicular rock' walls, got 'cragfast' or nearly so, and finally slid down by a 'chasm' or 'rent' as between two walls. He recorded too that on reaching Mickledore his 'limbs were all of a tremble,' a phenomenon not unknown among modern cragsmen (*Mountain* 30,17-18)

It was sixty years before the next climb of Scafell was recorded.

The myth of mountains being terrible and the hiding places of evil was dispelled by the men who climbed and returned with a report of the sublime rather than dread. As John Ruskin explained:

Thus the threatening ranges of dark mountains, which in nearly all ages of the world, men have looked upon with aversion or with terror, are in reality sources of life and happiness, far fuller and more beautiful than the bright fruitfulness of the plain (Smith, *The Armchair Mountaineer*, 182).

Lord Byron, in his poem, 'Solitary,' written in 1820, takes the idea of Ruskin further: To climb the trackless mountains all unseen, the wild flock that never needs a fold, alone o'er steeps and foaming falls to lean, This is not solitude; 'tis but to hold converse the Nature's charms, and view her stores unrolled (Styles 337)

Byron, in 'Solitary,' mentions the extrinsic beauties of the mountains but in "The True Shrine" he explains the intrinsic blessing derived from mountains by those who climb them:

Not vainly did the early
Persian make
His altar the high places and
The peak
Of earth-o'er gazing mountain,
And thus take

A fit and unwalled temple,
There to seek
The Spirit, in whose honour shrines
Are weak,
Upreared of human hands.

The awesome power of nature is also recorded by Wordsworth in his poem, 'England and Switzerland, 1802,' in which he deals with the sea and the mountains and the freedom that wild places provide for the man who is willing to venture out:

Two voices are there; one is of the sea,
One of the mountains, each a mighty voice;
In both from age to age thou didst rejoice,
They were the chosen music, Liberty!
There came a tyrant, and with holy glee
Thou fought'st against him - but hast vainly striven:
Though from thy Alpine hides at length and riven
Where not a torrent murmurs heard by these.
-Of one deep bliss thine ear hath been bereft;
Then cleve, O cleve to that which still is left-
For high-soul'd maid, what sorrow would it be
That Mountain foods should thunder as before,
And Ocean bellow from the rocky shore,
And neither awful Voice be heard by Thee!

As early as 1668 William Penn recognized the virtues and necessity of wild nature even from a religious point of view:

Christ loved and chose to frequent Mountains, Gardens,
Seasides. They are requisite to the growth of piety, and
I reverence the virtue that feels and uses it, wishing there
were more of it in the world (Styles, 157).

As mentioned before man seeks ascent; whether viewed from an evolutionary perspective or a religious perspective the need to more up is there. The whole society of man is built on advancement. In 1740, Alexander Pope talked of the inborn need for man to ascent in the lines of his poem, 'Alps on Alps':

So pleas'd at first, the tow'ring Alps we try,
Mount o'er the vales and seem to touch the sky;

The eternal snows appear already past,
 And the first clouds and mountains seem the last,
 But those attain'd, we tremble to survey
 The growing labours of the lengthening way;
 The' increasing prospect tires our wond'ring eyes...
 Hills peep o'er hills; and Alps on Alps arise !

Even in times of sorrow and tragedy directly resulting from climbing the mountains, there comes intrinsic beauty. In 1903, three climbers were killed while attempting to climb Coleridge's Scafell Cliff. Here is the epitaph from the gravestone in Wasdale Head Churchyard:

One moment stood they as the angels stand
 High in the stainless immance of air;
 The next they were not, to their Fatherland
 Translated unaware (Styles, 165)

The number of references to the grandeur and beauty, the strength and power, and the spiritual necessity derived from mountain travel are many. And man of the poetic lines are direct results of firsthand experience of the poets in the mountains; but the writings of those who live to climb and participated in the ascents of the extremely high and wild mountains provide even better insight into the need to climb - for man to continually scrape and pull themselves toward the clouds by way of the eternal rocks and snow and ice of which the mountains are made.

Basically, it is a romantic tendency: this emphasis on individuality, on close contact with nature as a spiritual matter, on the release and freedom that comes from this kind of experience. And all this tends to be put in an elevated language, a kind of inspirational 'chant.' The selections also produce elevated ideas which are the result of serious craftsmanship not as mountaineers only, but as artists, as writers.

As Hilair Belloc said : The greater mountains, wherein sublimity so much excels our daily things, that in their presence experience dissolves, and we seem to enter upon a kind of eternity.
 (Styles, 153)

History illustrates the special place mountains have held in the past. Is it any surprise that humans naturally look to mountains as sources of inspiration? Mountains represent a place of renewal, of rebirth which draw humans toward them. This desire to visit and climb the mountains will always be alive in humanity regardless of the efforts of technology to make humans soft; their mind, their memory will pull them toward the pearls. Human potential is unlimited and climbing recognizes it :

However mechanised, or automatised, the conditions of human life may become, the same number of human beings will, I believe, continue to carry this inherited memory, reinforced for action by the new awareness of mountains and of mountaineering which has come with this last century. There will be men and women who find among hills forgetfulness of fear and of their anxieties, in the restoration of their sense of proportion, the recovery, of reasonable measure, which was the mountains' original gift to men; or who, like Smuts and like so many, will see again upon the mountains spirits of religion - true symbols, founded upon the same inspiring mountain principles of measure, proportion, order, and of an uprightness which points a way beyond clouds and, at least, towards the stars.
 (Young, 115-116)

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SUMMARY

Discussing the evolution and nature of mountaineering and its philosophy through mountain literature. The author has written several articles, poems and short stories which appeared in leading journals and magazines. He is an editor, has authored several books and teaches English at the Webster State University, Utah, U.S.A.

RECOLLECTIONS OF AN EDITOR

MARGARET BODY

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE cutting your publishing milk teeth on an icon. I was given Eric Shipton's maps to sort out and that was my introduction to the literary climbing world. The Shipton title in question was *Land of Tempest* (1963) and the maps that exercised us, as well they might, were of the Patagonian Icecap. And from that experience I learnt the first basic fact of publishing climbers: they don't usually know where the hell they've been.

Working with Eric Shipton on *Land of Tempest* and later *That Untravelled World* was a somewhat unnerving experience. I was far too young to act the bossy old party which the job soon turned me into, and he left a distinct impression that publishers' offices were not his natural habitat. So our encounters were vague, delightful but disconcerting. I remember him telling me the famous story of how he absentmindedly left Mallory's ice axe in the street outside his Chelsea house and how a passerby handed it in to the police and how the very intelligent local constable brought it round to Eric's because he knew he was a mountaineering gentleman. Nowadays they'd be measuring the length of the blade and discussing whether or not it was an offensive weapon. Working with Eric Shipton, I can't say I was on top of the job, but I, like every other lady, was so charmed by him that I hardly noticed.

As for the mapping problems, I was blessed with a marvellous calming cartographer, Uncle Alec, whose finest hour had been drawing maps for Monty in the war and was now architect to the headquarters premises of Midland Bank, not far away from Hodder's office at that time on the edge of the city. So whenever I needed him, he'd just declare a site meeting and come ambling round to sort me out.