

THE POETRY AND HUMOUR OF MOUNTAINEERING

By MICHAEL ROBERTS

Read before the Alpine Club, May 2, 1939

ON a foggy August morning some years ago, three of us set out from the Vittorio Sella hut intending to do the Grivola by the ordinary route. For guidance we were relying mainly on an Italian 1 : 100,000 map, a picture-postcard view of the S. face, and our own determination to avoid the 'deceptively easy-looking' N.E. ridge. As we came up to a plateau at the foot of the mountain, the mist lifted for a moment : 'That peak's as good as ours,' said No. 3, with unusual rashness ; but all went well till we got to the foot of the rocks. True, we crossed the glacier in five minutes instead of the twenty we had expected, and the ribs of the mountain seemed to be running up the wrong way ; but the map made it clear that this *must* be our mountain, and after some glib talk about retreating glaciers and the curious effects of perspective, up we went. I knew there were falling stones on the S. face of the Grivola, and when I found myself with one finger and the toe of one boot in a small crack with crumbling edges, I had leisure to listen to their vicious 'whing' as they invisibly whistled by at the rate of fifteen a minute. I did not like them. No. 2 announced that I could not be held : No. 3 pointed out that some of the stones were hitting the next ledge, fifty feet up. The mist lifted again ; anybody would have sworn that one could walk up the N.E. ridge in half an hour. But we remembered the words of Coolidge, and, very much ashamed of ourselves, wriggled down and went over to the S. ridge. That was grand : towers, spurs, caves, all littered with letter-box and jug-handle holds ; there seemed to be stirrups, ears and noses everywhere ; sometimes, when the mist thickened for a moment, we climbed a gendarme by mistake ; then the caravan would reverse and No. 3 would lead us into a pulpit or up a flying buttress. The sun burned its way through a few remaining wisps of vapour ; rock towers and gargoyles stood out bright red against the deep blue of a clear sky ; and suddenly No. 3 climbed up into a cave and emerged through a trap-door on

to the summit. 'We are deceived in our peak,' he said; and sure enough, a mile away and a thousand feet above us, we saw the Grivola, and at our feet there was the Trajo Glacier, the best part of a kilometre wide. We were on a peak not marked on the Italian map. We ran down our 'deceptively easy-looking' N.E. ridge in ten minutes and did the Grivola next day.

Better men than myself have done that sort of thing: it is annoying and humiliating (it happens even to airmen flying round Everest), but these exhibitions of our own foolishness are an intrinsic part of climbing, and some malicious humorist might well take a number of narratives, like my story of the accidental ascent of Punta Rossa, and work them up into a useful and chastening book, 'The Climber's Guide to the Wrong Mountains.'

Whilst we are thinking of that great unwritten work we might turn aside for a moment to consider its companion volume: 'The Climber's Guide to Imaginary Mountains.' It would deal not with mountains like the 13,000-ft. Mont Iseran, whose existence (like that of some Alpine huts) is purely cartographical, but with those nameless symbolic mountains that haunt our imagination. As the Wrong Mountains belong to the domain of humour, so the Mountains of Imagination (if we are cautious enough about the word 'imagination') belong to poetry. One can go astray among these mountains as easily as one can among the more material Alps, and our sense of humour, which often helps us to deal with hardships and humiliations, can also serve to check our wilder expeditions into the Mountains of Imagination, and to give us warning when we approach too near the point at which the sublime turns into something else.

I am not altogether a disciple of Hobbes: I do not share his distrust of poetry, his grimly practical view of religion, and his gloomy view of human nature; and though I agree, as any climber must, when he says that 'men are wont to laugh at mischances and indecencies wherein lieth no humour at all,' I wonder what he means by humour, and whether he would prefer us to weep and curse at all misfortune. For it is plain enough that most jokes *are* concerned with difficulties and mishaps: they remind us brutally of human limitations, they preserve our sense of proportion, or give it expression, and they restore us to reason when we are thinking of suicide or murder because we have stubbed our toe. Humour is often the seamy side of poetry, and a poem that cannot stand up to a joke or a parody with its brutal recollection of 'mischances and indecencies' is a bad poem.

Hobbes would have been a bad companion on a rope: there

is a wildly non-utilitarian element in mountaineering which finds no place in his philosophy ; there is a good deal of scope for poetry ; and there is also something inherently funny in a sport in which you get up at 2 A.M., bruise your shins, blister your face, get one ear nicked by a falling stone and, after getting soaked in a rainstorm on a three-mile-long moraine, blunder into a hut after dark, only to find the Chasseurs Alpains sleeping on every inch of floor and table. When we explain that we do all this for pleasure, the psychoanalyst will always give us a special kind of look, and the ordinary citizen will feel that there is a joke lurking about somewhere, and that if there isn't, there ought to be. But this joke is the one joke that is missing : each of the separate pains and penalties of climbing has its classic joke, but the transcendental joke, the joke of transfinite order that would reconcile outsiders to our incomprehensible passion, does not exist. Our justification, if it is to be found at all, must be found in poetry ; but the English as a race prefer humour to poetry, and we might find that if we billed ourselves as the world's ultimate practical jokers we would more often escape the awkward 'But *why* do you do it ?'

Meanwhile we have all the separate constituent jokes of mountaineering : the Alpine flea, now less virulent than in the sixties (or are we a more hardy generation ?), the sardine-tin on the virgin summit, the glacier that goes down faster than the climbers go up, the mountaineer who doesn't feel very well at the foot of the big crack. There is even the search-party joke—and anybody who has ever taken part in an unnecessary search party knows how necessary that joke is. It takes its best form, I think, in Dorothy Pilley's *Climbing Days* :

'The ground above the Cascade des Ignes is famous as a place for benighted parties. There is the remarkable story of the man the search party could not find. When in despair they went back to Arolla, there he was sitting in the hotel garden. "Wherever have you been ? How did we miss you ? Didn't you hear our shouts ?" they asked. "Yes," replied the benighted one, "but they sounded so terrible and angry that I hid under a rock till you had gone by."'

All these are what I would call functional jokes ; I do not know whether to include in this category the story of Mrs. Aubrey Le Blond's traverse of the Zinal Rothorn, in which she got nearly down to Zinal, and then had to go back over the mountain to Zermatt because her skirt had been left under a rock on the Trift Glacier. It can hardly have been a joke at the time ; in the middle

distance it may have seemed excruciatingly funny ; and now, when ladies are allowed to enter hotels in trousers, it seems quaint rather than funny, and creeps into the class of historical anecdote concerned with personal peculiarities rather than with climbing itself. The same may be said of the description of Coolidge as ' the American who climbs with his aunt and his dog,' or of that former President of the Club, to whom the innkeeper ascribed ' immense political powers as ' il presidente di Londra.' Conway's guide, too, will be remembered as the man who said ' It is the natural instinct of man to run from gendarmes ' ; and Hope and Kirkpatrick will always survive in Alpine legend as the inventors of the aluminium collar-stud. But a whimsical, nostalgic flavour finds its way into these anecdotes and appellations : they become tinged with regret for an age in which men could roam over the Alps making new ascents every other day, when frontier guards were a nuisance, but not a danger, and when male climbers would no more think of entering an hotel without a collar-stud than Mrs. Le Blond would go down to Zinal without a skirt.

The personal anecdote, the incident or phrase that reveals a character and at the same time helps us to make light of our own troubles and difficulties, finds a natural home in narratives of climbing. Tilman, in *Nanda Devi*, after weeks of difficult climbing and still more troublesome descents through bamboo jungle, exclaims characteristically at the sight of the first mud village, ' We shall be down in time for tea.' A more scholarly and no less effective manner was that of Buxton on the first ascent of the Aiguille de Bionnassay. He spent the day arguing about Greek and Sanscrit roots, and halfway through a cold, uncomfortable bivouac he first agreed with Craufurd Grove that inasmuch as all things have an end, even a night on the Bionnassay must finish some time, then added thoughtfully, ' that in the present case the question was, which would finish first, the night or ourselves.'

Here we are back at the functional joke, which is grim, spontaneous and necessary. The works of Samivel are a *locus classicus* for such jokes, and they will be needed as long as climbing remains painful, laborious and enjoyable. But there is another kind of mountaineering joke which is far less common. Elaborate and painstaking intellectual foolery has often been one of the expressions of our national distrust of logic ; but I know of only one example of such fooling applied to mountaineering, and that was not the work of an Englishman at all, but of an advocate from Lyons who one wet afternoon filled three pages of the hut

register of the Refuge Félix Faure with a variation¹ on a theme supplied by the guardian :

‘ Le gérant du Refuge Félix Faure ayant attiré l’attention des alpinistes sur la présence au refuge d’escargots disponibles à toute heure (5 francs la douzaine) la question s’est posée de savoir de quelle façon pouvaient être utilisés au cours des ascensions ces intéressants gastéropodes.’

With this kind of joke we leave the region of natural humour and enter that of literature : we are climbing not the Wrong Mountains, but the Mountains of Imagination, or, to placate Coleridge, let us say the Mountains of Fancy ; we are using words not merely to report material happenings but to build up an experience that is not visible to the outer eye at all. Between the extreme outposts of the Mountains of Imagination and the brutal realities of the Wrong Mountains there is a turgid bog of purple prose and watery verse to which I must at length return, but at one point the two chains are connected by a delicate snow ridge. Precariously poised halfway along this ridge stands the French barrister, immobilised for ever with his retracted snails ; and near by there is a party led by A. D. Godley. They too have had experience of the Wrong Mountains and they have seen the Mountains of Imagination : they know the pains and the pleasures of climbing, and they are too experienced to try to describe directly the feelings they most value.

The deep satisfaction that we get from climbing is something that many of us would like to express in poetry rather than in prose, partly because the rhythm of poetry is the more memorable, and partly because poetic rhythms encourage us to pitch our

¹ The variation is as follows :

L’escargot (*Helix somatea*) présente en effet deux propriétés avantageuses à notre point de vue : la puissance adhésive et la faculté de laisser une trace visible.

La seconde peut permettre à une cordée accompagnée d’escargots d’effectuer facilement son retour malgré la survenance du brouillard.

La première est inappréciable pour gravir les roches lisses verticales ou même surplombantes.

Toutefois l’expérience a révélé qu’on ne saurait attendre aucun service des escargots sur le glacier, le froid les saisissant par la base et les faisant rapidement rentrer dans leur coquille, dont aucun procédé persuasif ou même coercif, ne peut ensuite les extraire. Un alpiniste chinois avait suggéré, il est vrai, de remédier à cet inconvénient en tiédissant au préalable par un moyen quelconque la surface glaciaire que l’escargot doit parcourir, mais ce procédé serait coûteux, peu pratique et tout à fait opposé aux meilleures traditions de l’alpinisme français.

Au contraire, des résultats intéressants ont été obtenus dans le rocher par l’emploi d’escargots, lequel comme celui de l’artillerie, se fait par masses. Le nombre d’escargots à employer pour enlever un poids déterminé est obtenu par l’application de la formule $n = \sqrt{(tXa^3)y^3/\pi + k}$, k une constante suivante l’hygrométrie du rocher.

sentiments a little higher than we can do in prose without falling into the lush verbiage of that familiar purple bog. Those who have tried know it is very hard to write that kind of poetry. There is a poem by James Reeves, called *Climbing a Mountain*, but that scarcely meets our need, for it describes the feelings of an inexperienced amateur. In the more traditional measures appropriate to unqualified enthusiasm there are the poems of Douglas Freshfield and Geoffrey Winthrop Young. Even the most modest descriptive poetry has its dangers: the rhythms run away with us, the mood sweeps up into the false heroic, familiar epithets come away in our hand, and before we know where we are we have stepped off into the empty air.

Most of us would be content to avoid the problem if we could escape as elegantly as Godley, who uses the familiar, high-sounding epithets half-comically, half in earnest. He pokes fun at himself and his friends for feeling so strongly about it all, and he reminds them that 'They will dine on mule and marmot and on mutton made of goat.' It is a mood familiar in the light verse of English academic writers—among others, Calverley and J. K. Stephen. It is not the mood of enthusiasm, but the mood in which one smilingly deprecates one's own enthusiasm, without being ashamed of it.

The central problem, of plain unwhimsical description, remains; and beyond that there is the problem of imaginative writing. Wordsworth's lines on the Simplon, Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, and Coleridge's *Hymn before Sunrise* all contrive to express imaginative insight without falsifying or distorting the material vision; but all these belong to the poetry of mountains rather than the poetry of mountaineering. Perhaps, in the end, pure descriptive poetry, whether of mountains or of mountaineering, is not possible: the underlying significance that we read into our experience is inseparable from the experience itself. Certainly Freshfield and Geoffrey Young are seldom content with simple physical description. But it is just here that the dangers of falling into empty air are most acute: the precision and brevity of prose are lost; writers who would never venture to exaggerate or over-emphasise in a 'paper communicated,' are tempted to throw off the rope and abandon honest climbing for a titanic struggle with the infinite cliffs of the wildly impossible. Poetry, when it rises above the level of accurate reporting, differs from common speech in something more than the use of metaphor and rhythm, for the poet writes under a sense of compulsion, and sometimes disregards the claims of reason and material fact; but the poet who will not take the trouble to make accurate concrete observations is not likely to get any depth of meaning into his allegories and metaphors.

'Aesthetic distance' is not the same thing as a colourless abstraction ; and a strong and precise emotion is not communicated by a hackneyed style eked out by wild exaggeration. Like the prophet and the dreamer, the poet is all the better for keeping his eyes wide open in his ordinary waking moments.

In this matter the prose writers of mountaineering have something to teach the poets : consider the accuracy of Tyndall's observations, and the vigour of his images : ' Veils of the silkiest cloud began to draw themselves round the mountain, and stretch in long gauzy filaments through the air, where they finally curdled to common cloud, and lost the grace and beauty of their infancy.' Or turn to Craufurd Grove, when he speaks of ' the gradual extinction of sound all over the glacier as the cold became more intense.' The word 'extinction' is right not only scientifically but also sensuously : the middle syllable suggests both the cold and the last sharp cracks as the glacier freezes ; and imaginatively also, for the sound does not merely *stop* : it is extinguished in another element, the encroaching silence.

In modern writers we find the same capacity to choose the illuminating word or phrase : Dorothy Pilley tells us that the rocks of the Devil's Kitchen are ' rather like slippery and brittle toffee,' or that she herself, after being pulled out of a crevasse, walked ' for the rest of a day as though on a soap-film.' If we try to give the impression of extreme delicacy by direct description—' I walked more carefully than I have ever done before or since '—we are left with the same information, but we no longer have the *feeling* of the experience. A good metaphor or simile plays upon our senses, and no amount of exaggeration, no deliberate working up of the tawdry vocabulary of purple patches, will do the work of one apt phrase.

Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson find such phrases when they write of mountains, and so at times does F. W. H. Myers, but on the whole the poetry of mountains 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—not the Wrong Mountains of material reality, but the Wrong Mountains of imagination. It expresses a kind of sham religion, a sentimental daydream 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.

The phrase ' the religiosity of mountains ' is Mr. Arnold Lunn's, not mine, but I would like to explain more fully what I understand it to mean. From the earliest times the loneliness, immensity and

permanence of mountains have made men think of a power beyond themselves. The superhuman force of cataract and glacier, the gloom of mountain forests, the sudden contrast of the minute mountain flower, and the pure contradiction of snow and sunlight, have all helped to fascinate and terrify; and the difficulty of reaching the heights, with their wide vision over a landscape of towns, fields, rivers and all the world of ordinary life, has made the climbing of mountains an image of life itself, with its difficulties, dangers, and moments of unexpected insight.

Material imagery is always necessary to the writer who is concerned with spiritual reality; and it is natural that the religious writer should turn to mountains for his imagery—the gods dwelt on Olympus, and Dante's Earthly Paradise was set on a mountain. The Austrian poet Rilke, in one of his poems,² uses mountains explicitly as symbols of human existence and the struggles of the human spirit:

'Exposed on the mountains of the heart. Look, how small there,
Look: the last village of words, and higher,
But still how small, yet one remaining
Farmstead of feeling. Can you not see it?
Exposed on the mountains of the heart. Bare rock
Under our hands. Yet here too
Something blooms: from the dumb precipice
A plant unknowing blooms singing into the air.
And the knower himself? Ah, he began by knowing,
Now silent, exposed on the high hills of the heart.

And here, with undistracted mind,
Roam many creatures, sure-footed mountain beasts,
Pausing and passing. And the great bird dwelling in secret
Soars round the pure, forbidding summits—beyond all shelter,
Here, on the high hills of the heart.'

More often, as in Wordsworth, the symbolism is implicit, but whether the symbolism is explicit or implicit, people are apt to take the imagery for the reality, and the great nineteenth-century movement against the Christian religion, influenced perhaps by the kind of pantheism that we find in Wordsworth, served to encourage the error. The symbol was taken for the reality, and while ordinary people talked of listening to the sermons of Dr. Greenfields, the climber began to talk about mountaineering as a religion.

Mountaineering is a game, a sport, a recreation, the best of recreations. It takes all our energy and attention, it sets us a

² The translation given here is adapted from Mr. J. B. Leishman's version.

job that we can do, but only just do ; for the time being it reduces the complexities of life to neat simplicity ; it calls for qualities that are valuable in civil life ; it gives a harmless outlet to instincts and desires that might otherwise turn to evil ; and it offers an experience rich in symbolic significance. But it is not real life and it is not religion. There is no virtue in the exercise that it gives to valuable qualities unless we turn those qualities to good account when we are no longer playing ; and there is a real danger in the experience if we confuse the act of submitting ourselves to the conditions and difficulties of mountaineering with the act of submitting our will to a spiritual power beyond ourselves. 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.

Often, in mountaineering poetry (and sometimes in prose), this pantheistic heresy is combined with another. I mean, the doctrine of the unreality of evil. There is a sense in which the religious poet is concerned to show the transcendental good arising from the struggle of good and evil ; but to say this is not to deny the reality of evil. The existence of evil, in the world and in ourselves, is as real and demonstrable as the existence of crevasses in the Mer de Glace and bad rock on the Matterhorn ; and to ignore it is to live in a fool's paradise. It is natural that the kind of poetry which expresses what is sometimes called an optimistic view should ignore the real humiliations of climbing—the blisters, the occasional belly-ache, the foul air in the huts. A make-believe religion is imaged by a world of make-believe—a world in which all Hobbes's ' mischances and indecencies ' are not transcended, not treated as part of the material out of which transcendent good arises, but merely ignored. To select pretty details, as Tennyson does in his lines on Monte Rosa, is harmless : a selection of that kind is still fundamentally true, and it would not be wholly upset by the intrusion of some realistic detail taken from the seamy side. Poetry can be honest without treating the intrinsically ugly equally with the beautiful. The danger begins when selection becomes distortion of fact, so that the poem falsifies both the sentiment and the world described, and rests on a religion that is bad because it cannot be applied to the real world.

Judging from internal evidence, the writers of this sentimental poetry are seldom climbers. It would be unkind to take an example from the minor offenders of our day, and for me it would be unfair, for I have served my time as a reviewer and my feelings about bad poetry are exceptionally strong. Let us turn to Matthew Arnold, who would certainly agree with most of our

contentions, but sets us a bad example in *Rugby Chapel*. In that poem he has a long descriptive passage :

‘ Cheerful with friends we set forth :
Then, on the height, comes the storm ’—

Bad judges of the weather, evidently, Arnold and his friends ; and they pay for their imprudence :

‘ Friends who set forth at our side
Falter, are lost in the storm.’

But there is no practical nonsense about trying to rescue them : the note is too romantically heroic to admit common sense :

‘ With frowning foreheads, with lips
Sternly compressed, we strain on,
On, and at nightfall at last
Come to the end of our way ’—

Happily, they arrive at an inn, and the innkeeper, who seems to know the ways of this kind of traveller, asks whom they have left in the snow :

‘ Sadly we answer : We bring
Only ourselves ! we lost
Sight of the rest in the storm.
Hardly ourselves we fought through,
Stripp’d, without friends, as we are ;
Friends, companions, and train,
The avalanche swept from our side.’

We don’t really talk of disasters in that tone of voice, and, to put it mildly, disasters don’t happen like that in a well-organised party. Arnold knew quite well that the whole passage was only a metaphor for his real meaning : he was trying, as he always did try, to say that life was a struggle, and that difficulty and danger were inseparable from life, or at all events from any life of value ; but it would have been far more convincing if it had been more practical, and if it had contained less of the *Excelsior* spirit and more of the cheerful acceptance of real indignities and sufferings.

There is another interesting point in *Rugby Chapel*. Here, as in many passages of this kind, the heroes are travellers, presumably with some good reason for making the journey. The mountaineer seldom has any such reason : his climb has to be its own justification, and in this it symbolises life even better than a journey does. Climbing derives its most profound symbolic meaning from its gratuitousness, its apparent pointlessness. The climber, however tentatively and reluctantly, accepts risks as well as discomforts and indignities, and unless

he is a professional he cannot say that he is compelled to do so. He makes a free choice, and deliberately rejects greater safety for less. The final entry in Hartmann's Nanga Parbat diary is one that inevitably turns our attention to this aspect of climbing. Hartmann had spent the day making a track up to Camp V, and in his diary he writes :

' June 14. It was wonderfully fine and I was making height so easily without breathing spaces, and that moreover in snow where usually I broke in more deeply than the others and had consequently to undergo greater fatigue. I wondered at all this and was confident and grateful. I think moreover that I smiled all day to myself—well, it was because of my son's birthday ! Slowly, one after the other, came the Sherpas, each throwing his load down on the ice nose.'

Hartmann had no designs on the reader, and it is only our knowledge that those were his last words, and most likely his last thought, that gives them their special poignancy. ' I think moreover that I smiled all day to myself.' The words are not poetry, yet they make a great deal of mountain poetry look silly. They are not sentimental, for the sentiment is neither exaggerated nor misplaced, and yet it would be almost impossible for them to occur in poetry without being grossly sentimental. No one could use such an incident in poetry without first answering the question the whole disaster makes us ask : What right has anyone to throw away his life like that ? Granted that a good climber, once he decides upon his mountain and his route, uses all his skill and knowledge to minimise every kind of risk, what right had he to take the risk at all ?

I think there is an answer : but all the subsidiary reasons we give, all the adequate reasons that justify our scampering up and down familiar Alpine peaks, are ruled out. It is plainly inadequate to talk of the view, the exhilaration of physical effort, the satisfaction of escaping for a time from all the problems and annoyances of daily life and losing oneself in a job that takes all one's thought and skill. If climbing were nothing more than a brief escape from worry and responsibility it would be the same as any other sport, but the fact that we can talk of the poetry of mountaineering and keep near to the subject of great poetry shows that there is an element in climbing that is lacking in golf or motor-racing. If climbing were valuable merely for its contributions to scientific knowledge, there would be no excuse for our prejudice against dynamite and iron ladders. If it were merely a healthy exercise, there would be no excuse for occasionally risking our necks. To justify mountaineering in the fullest sense, we must justify the loss of life, the deliberate taking of risks. And I think the only

answer is in the sheer uselessness of the loss : man can preserve his dignity only by showing that he is not afraid of anything, not even death.

To take a stupid risk in crossing the road or to amuse ourselves by drawing lots for suicide would not satisfy the condition, for it would show merely that we did not value life at all. There must be something to set against the risk, and something adequate ; and there, I think, all the other reasons for climbing are thrown into the scale. The sacrifice is not necessary : the risk brings no material gain, but it offers something—the exhilaration, the sense of clear vision—which partly excuses the risk. And then, for the rest, the risk excuses itself. It is a demonstration that man is not wholly tied to grubbing for his food, not wholly tied by family and social loyalties ; that there are states of mind and spirit that he values more highly than life itself on any lower level.

A simpler explanation might be offered : it may be said that our appreciation of life is keenest when our hold on it is most precarious ; and certainly a psychopathic passion for living in a state of artificial intensity may account for the conduct of some climbers. But for most people it is only a small part of the explanation : the whole explanation cannot be grasped unless we have a sense of intrinsic value such as we find in religion. A thing is not good for any purpose or end, but just because ; and sacrifices are good because they show superiority to all mere utilitarian values : they show an excess and overflow which is really a gesture of confidence and vitality. The primitive man who sacrifices his last loaf to the gods is not necessarily a fool : he may die of starvation, but he shows the spirit of a race that will not die.

This relation between mountaineering and religion is one that almost everyone has felt, but it need not be mistaken for identity. If we are to use mountaineering as a symbol, let us keep clear the distinction between symbol and reality, and let us at the same time preserve the vitality and scope of the symbol by frankly admitting both the mischances and indecencies of climbing. In this way we can do something to ensure that our interpretation of life is not a sentimental daydream but a comprehensive and adaptable philosophy : if we use our sense of humour wisely, we can use it not merely to save us, as it saved Godley, from an embarrassing public exhibition of private sentiment, but also to remind us that mountaineering, even when it supplies the symbols of our religious thought, is still distinct from religion. The *Guide to the Mountains of Imagination* is distinct from the works of Ball and Coolidge, but it should be no less practical, and to guard against our own vanity and exaggeration this *Guide to the Sublime* should be read in conjunction with the *Guide to the Ridiculous*.