

Means and Motives: The Mystification of Mountaineering Discourse

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In *Into Thin Air*, Jon Krakauer writes, “in subjecting ourselves to week after week of toil, tedium, and suffering, it struck me that most of us were probably seeking, above all else, something like a state of grace” (136). Certainly, such transcendental language is nothing new to mountaineering discourse, as the mountaintop has been the place to receive the word of God since, at least, the time of Moses. However, today, when we exist in a state in which, following Donna Haraway, “we are cyborgs” (191), the notion of transcendence sought by mountaineers, a transcendence still rooted in Enlightenment notions of subject consolidation, is troublingly hierarchical. Krakauer, with his intimate understanding of mountaineering mythology, connects past and present attitudes toward technological aids in climbing. He writes,

Relying on bottled oxygen as an aid to ascent is a practice that’s sparked acrimonious debates since the British first took experimental oxygen rigs to Everest in 1921 . . . Initially, the foremost critic of bottled gas was George Leigh Mallory, who protested that using it was “unsporting, and therefore un-British.” (152)

On the facing page, Krakauer links the modernist icon of mountaineering with the contemporary: “In the 1970s, the famed Tyrolean alpinist Reinhold Messner emerged as the leading proponent of gasless climbing, declaring that he would ascend Everest ‘by fair means’ [that is, without bottled oxygen] or not at all” (153).

This discourse of purity remains dominant within mountaineering because value is attached to climbs in direct proportion to both their novelty and their difficulty; and novelty, as the availability of difficult first ascents dwindles, seems increasingly dependent on the means by which the climb is undertaken. Susan Frohlick quotes Joe Simpson: “early [male] mountaineers did not climb in order to win gold medals, or to become famous or wealthy. They wanted to climb the hardest routes on the biggest mountains in the purest way simply because it was a direct new challenge” (96). Frohlick goes on to note that “this nostalgia for a ‘pure style’ belies the wide range of ‘technical’ climbing gear, outdoor equipment, and other highly advanced late twentieth century ‘technologies’ that are in fact relied on for every climb to high altitude” (96). That is, climbers, like everyone else, exist in a state in which they are cyborgs, “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism” (Haraway 191). However,

while the discourse of purity is inextricably linked to the question of means (with oxygen or without, with Sherpa support or without, etc.), it is also connected to the issue of motives. Climbers rely on technologies that extend the capacities of the human body beyond those that exist in a state of “nature,” but also efface the importance of this technology (which is impure) by focusing on a purity of motivation. They rely on technologies both to make the ascent of mountains physically possible and to aid in structuring representations of ascents as the means of subject consolidation. Insofar as they are cyborgs, they are incapable of purity (of either means or motives); and insofar as they are unwilling to recognize their impurity, they are perpetuating a system of dominance of culture over nature. This essay will examine the agonistic relation between discourses of purity and discourses of technology in three mountaineering texts, with the aim of showing their interconnectedness and irreconcilability. While mountaineering seeks to affirm agential subjectivity, it mystifies the motives for doing so, covering over impure motives by representing pure ones.

It is no coincidence that mountains are enlisted in the service of subject consolidation. As sublime objects of nature, by which, according to Enlightenment thought, the subject makes sense of the world through the exercise of reason, mountains are the paradigmatic setting for the exertion of rational dominance over nature. For Immanuel Kant, the ability to exercise reason as a rational dominance of culture over nature is the foundation on which culture is built. He writes in *The Critique of Judgement* that, “without the development of moral ideas, that which, thanks to preparatory culture, we call sublime, merely strikes the untutored man as terrifying” (115). It is the ability to overcome this terror, through the exercise of reason, that allows the subject to order the world: it is precisely this quality that constitutes “enlightenment.” Kant, in fact, defines the term as “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage” (“What is Enlightenment?” 286).

However, this ordering through reason in the release from “tutelage” is inevitably hierarchical, and it is posited on the existence of an other. Gayatri Spivak writes in response to Kant, “To the raw man the abyss comes forth as merely terrible. The raw man has not yet achieved or does not possess a subject whose *Anlage* or programming includes the structure of feeling for the moral” (14). For Kant, then, one recognizes the sublime and transcends it only through a “preparatory culture.” Furthermore, that the “untutored” or, as Spivak translates it, “raw man” does not possess this preparatory culture suggests that the possibility of transcendence depends on a hierarchy. Spivak also states that, “in Kant, the ‘uneducated’ are specifically the child and the poor, the ‘naturally uneducable’ is woman. By contrast . . . man in the raw can, in its signifying reach, accommodate the savage and the primitive” (13). Clearly there is a hierarchy here, with the “cooked” man at the top and the primitive woman at the bottom.

The logic that allows for a consolidation of the reasoning subject, which leads to the development of culture, is circular, as Spivak shows,

because it is based on the subject's development in a society already possessing "preparatory culture." This excludes the "raw man" from attaining the state of subject-hood, since his origins do not include "preparatory culture." Enlightenment logic, in fact, depends on this exclusion, as the exercise of reason is one of domination over the sensory incomprehensibility of the sublime: "reason has to impose its dominion upon sensibility" (Kant 120). And, since the untutored/ raw man appears to the tutored/ cooked man as part of nature, that is, as an object available for understanding through sensory perception, then the raw man is excluded from "humanity." Mary Louise Pratt, in *Imperial Eyes*, notes in her discussion of natural historians' discourse on South Africa, that, "the residents of the country, whether indigenous Africans or Boer settlers . . . turn up in the narration mainly as traces on the landscape" (59). Here the raw man is excluded from the category of "culture." Culture, for Kant, is requisite for the exercise of reason. Reason is necessary for the development of culture. Culture is required for the consolidation of the subject. Consolidation of the subject is obligatory for access to humanity. And round and round the hierarchic cycle continues.

This cycle is pertinent to mountaineering discourses because the consolidation through dominance over the sublime continues to structure mountaineering narratives. Furthermore, technology serves as evidence of preparatory culture for mountaineers confronting the sublime. In *The Shining Mountain: Two Men on Changabang's West Wall*, the opening pages confront the reader with a sense of *ennui* at culture's excessive structuring of life:

it takes more endurance to work in a city than it does to climb a high mountain. It takes more endurance to crush the hopes and ambitions that were in your childhood dreams and to submit to a daily routine of work that fits into a tiny cog in the wheel of western civilisation. (12)

Having just returned from a successful expedition to Everest, Peter Boardman is profoundly unsatisfied with his trip to the top of the world and the fame he is receiving because of it. He writes, "On Everest, the summit day had been presented to me by a large systematised expedition of over a hundred people. During the rest of the time on the mountain, I had been just part of the vertically integrated crowd control" (13). He feels that he was the same cog in the machine on Everest that he is in "civilisation." The summit is presented to him; he does not *act* to gain it. Despite his expectations for mountain climbing, on Everest he did not, at least for the most part, attain the escape from civilization that he desired. However, returning from the summit in a storm, for a moment he experienced a brief, profound, instant of subjective consolidation: "We nearly lost our way twice, and were constantly swept by avalanches in the blizzard, but then I felt myself go hard inside, go strong. My muscles and my will tightened like iron. I was indestructible and utterly alone" (13). It is this experience that he wants to replicate, this movement from an unstable "we" to an indestructible "I." He decides to attempt the West wall

of Changabang with Joe Tasker because he believes such a climb will provide the opportunity to replicate this experience.

To achieve this radical solitude, it is necessary to leave the culture of the city behind. However, to leave this culture behind, to make contact with sublime nature, it is necessary to prepare technologies. Carrying these technologies, they carry their culture to Changabang. The preparation work in the time leading up to the two-man expedition involves, for one thing, contacting a mountain equipment company to develop special equipment for this unique climb. Boardman writes, “we persuaded Troll Mountain Products, in Oldham, to develop some hammocks for us” (21). Boardman and Tasker go on to test the new equipment in a cold storage facility, simulating nature in preparation for their experience of it. In using this equipment for their climb, the requisite preparatory culture enables a Kantian confrontation with the sublime that can result in the overcoming of terror through the exercise of reason. Boardman and Tasker carry with them the latest advances in mountaineering technology with which to confront nature.

At the same time, however, in structuring this as a climb of “pure” tactics, at least purer than those of the Everest expedition, Boardman calls attention to the excessive technological requirements of earlier expeditions to Changabang: “In June, Joe and I heard the news that a six-man Japanese expedition had climbed the South-West Ridge [of Changabang]. They had used traditional siege tactics—six climbers had used 8,000 feet of fixed rope, three hundred pitons, one hundred and twenty expansion bolts in the thirty-three days it had taken them” (19). This is presented as a direct contrast to the Boardman and Tasker expedition (although it is more a question of degree than opposition); Boardman is attracted by the possibility of climbing with Tasker because of the simplicity of Tasker’s recent success in a two-man climb on Dunagiri. He claims that, as opposed to his experience on Everest, two-man climbs “generate a greater feeling of indispensability and self-containment” (14). At the airport, Boardman says, “we were feeling hot and incongruous in our down jackets and double boots, which we were wearing to take precious weight out of our luggage” (26). He also contrasts this trip with the means of the earlier Everest expedition of which he was a part: “Joe and I were trying to climb Changabang on a budget of about £1,400, whereas the Everest expedition had been sponsored by Barclay’s Bank International to a sum of £113,000” (27). Despite these contrasts in means, the account of the climb of Changabang remains focused on technological details. That is, its focus is on the means of climbing, and these means, which are to be understood as pure, are also meant to stand in for a purity of motives. Much of the book is taken up with detailed descriptions of fixing ropes, jumaring, carrying loads, and establishing camps. Though not a “true” alpine ascent (in which the climbers carry all of their gear with them as they climb; Boardman and Tasker established supply camps), they maintain a claim to self-containment for their ascent because no other person carried supplies after the Sherpas left base camp.

After reaching the summit, Boardman writes, “for a moment I felt omniscient, above the world” (149). Such is the moment of transcendence made available through the exercise of reason in domination of nature; however, “this feeling of invincibility was an illusion of pride, for we had yet to descend” (149). The moment of perfect individuality vanishes with its suggestion, as did his feeling of individual indestructibility on Everest, which “did not last beyond our arrival at camp six” (13). In both instances the “I” of invincibility is immediately replaced, after only the briefest existence, with a plural pronoun—“our” on Everest and “we” on Changabang—which calls attention to a situation of collective tenuousness.

Do Boardman and Tasker achieve the transcendence they seek? Early in the book we read that “Today’s frontiers are not of promised lands, of uncrossed passes and mysterious valleys beyond . . . There are so many ways, so much documentation, that only the mountaineer’s inner self remains the uncharted” (19). The technology of mapping and the documentation of previous exploratory expeditions have filled all the blank spaces on the map. The only boundaries that remain are subjective. As we have seen, the attempt to access this subjective limit requires a specific kind of experience, a confrontation with the sublime. In Boardman’s case, this experience has been constructed as one that necessarily leaves behind the apparatus of civilization, is importantly constructed as being self-contained, but also carries with it the preparation established by the culture it seeks to escape. Claims to purity serve to efface this dual origin: the climb is motivated by a desire to escape culture, but that culture also facilitates it. By claiming to climb as a self-contained unit, Boardman and Tasker obscure the existence of the labour involved in producing their equipment, flying them to India, and porting their equipment to and from base camp. As Spivak suggests, “In the moment of the Sublime the subject accedes to the rational will. It has often been noted that the rational will intervenes to cover over a moment of deprivation” (10). The moment of summiting is not one of omniscience, as we will see, but reason presents it as such, covering over the deprivation felt in a moment that is supposed to be totalizing. Claims to transcendence function to disguise a lack and thus are not complete.

At the same time, the desire for such completeness conflicts with Haraway’s view of the cyborg, who, as she writes, “is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity” (192). Although this may be the condition in which the mountaineer exists, the prevalent discourse of purity seems to reject the possibility of such partiality functioning as an acceptable mode. Mountaineers may exist in a state of partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity, but they do not seem to accept such an existence. The importance of first ascents, and the preoccupation with the history of the sport, suggests a focus on origins that the cyborg should find foreign. Haraway continues: “Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation and incorporation by the other. The relationships for forming wholes from

parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world” (192). Mountaineering, on the other hand, seems the embodiment of hierarchy, requiring clear distinctions between culture and nature for subject consolidation to occur, but also seeking to disguise that distinction to maintain a claim to purity. As Kenneth Burke explains,

Though *hierarchy* is exclusive, the *principle* of hierarchy is not; all ranks can “share in it alike.” But: It includes also the entelechial tendency, the treatment of the “top” or “culminating” stage as the “image” that best represents the entire “idea.” This leads to “mystifications” that cloak the state of division. (141)

This entelechial tendency is clearly present in Boardman’s narrative. It is at the top of the mountain that he obtains a feeling of being “omniscient.” That is, at the top of the hierarchy of labour that served to put him on the top of Changabang, Boardman is able to accede to a justifying omniscience that represents the idea of mountain climbing as reasonable, and also covers over, or mystifies, the external assistance that put him on top. Rather than reworking the Kantian hierarchy of culture and nature, Boardman uses a rational intervention, as embodied by the text, to cover over the sensory lack that confronts him on top of the mountain. Instead of showing a commitment to partiality, he constructs himself as a unified whole.

Such moments of asserted rational omniscience are appropriately named by Mary Louise Pratt as the “monarch-of-all-I-survey scene” (205). Although she is writing with a specific focus on a particular kind of travel writing, in mountaineering literature, another kind of travel writing, the position on top of the mountain still presents itself as one of an unobstructed vision of dominance. That is, it offers a situation in which the seeing subject is unified in a situation of naturalized dominance. Boardman writes, “To the north-east, we could see Kalanka Col, with Kalanka rising from it. Beyond that more white mountains, and I photographed them, determining to discover their names later. But they were tame to our eyes” (148). The other mountains have been tamed through the climbing of this one, and, interestingly, it is through the technology of photography that the supersensibility of this sublime scene of nature is brought under control. He does not know everything he would like to know about the mountains, is not truly omniscient, but by taking their pictures, he feels comfortable in his mastery (feels he has the power to “discover” the mountains’ names). His vision is not perfect: “I sat in the snow and changed the film in my camera. But now Nanda Devi and Kalanka were obscured by cloud” (148). Nonetheless, he goes on to claim a feeling of omniscience, since he has exercised reason in domination of the sublime.

Kant writes in reference to the comprehension of what is beyond the ability of the senses to apprehend,

The mind, however, hearkens now to the voice of reason, which for all given magnitudes—even for those which can never be completely apprehended, though (in

sensuous representation) estimated as completely given—requires totality, and consequently comprehension in *one* intuition, and which calls for a *presentation* answering to all the above members of a progressively increasing numerical series, and does not exempt even the infinite (space and time past) from this requirement, but rather renders it inevitable for us to regard this infinite (in the judgement of common reason) as *completely given* (i.e. given in its totality). (102)

The exercise of reason requires this moment of apparent omniscience, of presenting the infinite as completely given. Kant goes on to claim that, “it [the exercise of reason] represents all that is great in nature as in turn becoming little; or, to be more exact, it represents our imagination in all its boundlessness, and with it nature, as sinking into insignificance before the ideas of reason, once their adequate presentation is attempted” (105). Of course, this totalizing field of vision, this omniscience, offered through the use of reason is posited, as we have seen, on the existence of dominance through hierarchy. That is to say, the attempt at adequate presentation is structurally flawed; it is impossible for reason to adequately present the sublime because all attempts at presenting that which is beyond apprehension function by reduction. Kant writes, “A tree judged by the height of a man gives, at all events, a standard for a mountain; and supposing this is, say, a mile high, it can serve as a unit for the number expressing the earth’s diameter, so as to make it intuitable” (105). However, this intuition of the earth’s diameter is only one conception of its size and does not include either its mass or its volume, to stay only within the realm of weights and measures. To conceptualize things in one way necessarily excludes others. For Boardman this involves constructing his identity as unified around the idea of his ability to comprehend the world by climbing mountains, even though his powers of apprehension are imperfect. However, this comprehension of the world, which posits him as a unified subject, as one whose “eyes passively look out and possess” (7) to borrow Pratt’s phrasing, or, perhaps more accurately, passively look out and know, simultaneously excludes the possibility of his existence as a cyborg. However, by Haraway’s definition, he clearly is a cyborg.

For cyborgs, “Identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic” (Haraway 197). Climbing a mountain as a cyborg to attain a state of grace is a process in contradiction. The identity of the mountaineer is hybrid, as it is for everyone else. While we should be cautious about generalizing from the example of *The Shining Mountain*, the contradiction that it raises remains a central problem for climbing literature. Boardman feels that his experience on Everest was tainted by the presence of a regimented organizational pyramid: culture imposed itself on nature. In fact, as seen in his representation of his experience on Changabang, what he wanted, rather than a mere escape from culture, was to be at the top of that pyramid. This does not mean the top of the mountain; rather, it involves being in a position from which *his* subjective reason can order the world, in which *he* embodies the entelechial tendency as he both embodies the entire “idea” of liberal subjectivity and mystifies the hierarchy on which that is based. On Changabang, culture is still transported to the mountain,

and organizational hierarchy still pertains to the climb as a means of exerting dominance over both human and non-human nature (the Sherpas are conspicuous by their reduction in the text). Today, when satellite phones, helicopter trips to base camp, clienting (the practice of paying guides to organize and lead “clients” on expeditions), and garbage from previous expeditions (not to mention bodies of unsuccessful climbers) are norms on the biggest mountains, the impression of “purity,” both in terms of technology and motivation, is increasingly difficult to create.

There seem to be two ways that appeals to purity continue to be made, both of which are part of Boardman’s justification for climbing. In one instance, the push toward purity of means goes to greater extremes, as in the case of Göran Kropp who traveled from sea level in Sweden to the top of Everest with “no external assistance” (a common mountaineering phrase to describe a particularly “pure” style). Undoubtedly this is an amazing feat, but one which does not account, in the term “external assistance,” for either the labour located within the technology that was used in the journey or the money that financed it. The other means by which climbing is explained follows Boardman’s claim that “only the mountaineer’s inner self remains uncharted” (19). Separating the mind from the body, this discourse depends to a larger extent on purity of motives, with less of a strict connection to means. That is, an impurity of means, the fact of climbing as a cyborg, is acknowledged, but the motives for climbing are separated from that impurity. Jamling Tenzing Norgay bases his reason for climbing on such a subjective authorization in *Touching My Father’s Soul: A Sherpa’s Journey to the Top of Everest*. He writes, “I probably could have climbed the mountain without it [bottled oxygen], but it wasn’t a goal I had set for myself” (244). He judges his achievement based on his ability to accomplish the goals he has previously, and arbitrarily, set for himself. This serves to establish his means as “fair” even if Messner would not agree.

Norgay’s book is particularly interesting in terms of purity discourse. Locating himself between Eastern and Western traditions, Norgay seems to suggest the possibility of genuine acceptance of a hybrid state of being:

I could not have climbed Everest without help from both the East and the West, and neither could my father. Even Sherpas rely on modern technology, such as the lightweight down pants and jackets, bottled oxygen, and front-point crampons that make climbing possible. We also need financing from foreign sponsors. But just as important, we depend on the support of our extended families and the guidance of the three gems—the Buddha and protective deities, the religious teachings, and our community of lamas and devout believers. (278)

Such a juxtaposition, of Buddhist faith and foreign capital seems a potentially useful position from which to undertake mountaineering, one that suggests acceptance of the cyborg identity as both partial and hybrid. However, he goes on to claim that

Some climbers are driven by personal achievement and the desire for a trophy. Others are drawn to the mountains by something more mysterious, something more deeply personal. Perhaps they are motivated by *a need for understanding*, by *a desire to gain freedom* from the Wheel of Life, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. I feel that these climbers are nedrogs; they are sharing my pilgrimage. (304; emphasis added)

While rejecting climbing for personal glory, as a desire with impure motives, Norgay posits the alternative as transcendence, setting out to achieve understanding. Although Norgay may suggest that this transcendence can be achieved within a state of hybridity, it still posits a hierarchical structuring of nature and culture through which transcendence is achieved, not to mention the hierarchy of motives apparent in the people who attempt to climb Everest. Norgay is able to reach the top of Everest, and a mysterious state of understanding, because of a large support structure that enables him, but his supporters do not share in his transcendence, even if they vicariously share the victory of his ascent. Furthermore, his motives are seen to be pure because he is not seeking a trophy.

He desires to “gain freedom from the Wheel of Life.” Norgay suggests that such a freedom can be attained through human actions, directed by pure motives, in opposition to the natural cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The claim of transcendence comes from a chapter entitled “Freedom from Desire,” although clearly the language of “motivation” suggests that the reason for climbing remains one of desire. This chapter comes after his successful climb on Everest, and may suggest that now his desire has been sated. However, he writes, “I intend to keep my promise to Soyang [his wife] to not climb any more large Himalayan peaks. Nonetheless, I still wistfully recall sitting alone in the Western Cwm and looking up, drawn to the jagged Nuptse-Lhotse Ridge, wondering whether it might be possible to do a full traverse along that ridgeline” (305). If “freedom from desire” was achieved on Everest, it was only temporary, like Boardman’s experience of omniscience on Changabang. And, like Boardman, returning dissatisfied from Everest, Norgay desires another moment of consolidation on the mountain.

Kenneth Burke argues that “The hierarchic principle is inevitable in systematic thought” (141). Donna Haraway’s articulation of cyborg identity seems to suggest that this hierarchy can be overcome. The brief examples from mountaineering literature outlined here suggest that mere existence as a cyborg, despite the contradictions inherent in such an identity, does not prevent the tendency towards hierarchy. Existence as a cyborg, as a “hybrid of machine and organism,” does not resolve the impulse toward subjective domination. This is the result of a misrecognition characteristic of the use of reason.

Giambattista Vico writes of the creation of language amongst the first peoples: “It is noteworthy that in all languages the greater part of the expressions relating to inanimate things are formed by metaphor from the human body and its parts and from the human senses and passions” (129). He concludes from this that “man in his ignorance makes himself the rule

of the universe, for in examples cited he has made of himself an entire world” (129). However, as we have seen in Kant, this misrecognition of the self as embodying the entire world is characteristic of the use of human reason to allow for comprehension of that which is beyond apprehension. That is to say, comprehension of the world is achieved by reducing it to human scale, as in Kant’s example of measuring the mountain by its relation to one’s height. For Vico, we make sense of the world through a process of extending ourselves, through metaphor, into the world and then re-appropriating ourselves, and, along with ourselves, we appropriate a reduced version of the world. Through this process we acquire the means to order the world. Vico offers a litany of examples, such as “head for top or beginning; the brow or shoulders of a hill; the eyes of needles and potatoes; mouth for any opening; the lip of a cup or pitcher; the teeth of a rake, a saw, a comb . . .” (129), all of which utilize bodily metaphors to explain the world, and in so doing offer the human body as the paradigm for the world. This leads to a perceived dominance of culture (in this case the technology of language) over nature.

The cyborg, however, is supposed to offer the possibility of a situation in which “nature and culture are reworked” (Haraway 192). This hybrid reworking does not merely occur, however. Indeed, the condition of being cyborgs is really nothing new; as Derrick de Kerchove writes, “we have been entertaining quasi-bionic relations with our inventions all along. Jean-Jacques Rousseau notwithstanding there has never been such a thing as a ‘natural man’” (175). The boundaries between “nature” and “culture” have always been porous: we have always been hybrid. Haraway suggests that “the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden, that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and a cosmos . . . The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden” (192).

Unfortunately, Haraway is overlooking the connection between the hybrid nature of the cyborg and the Edenic origin myth and subsequent Fall. The cyborg was born with the Fall when Adam and Eve “knew that they were naked; and . . . sewed fig leaves together and made loin clothes for themselves” (Genesis 3:7) as extensions of their skin. The cyborg does not escape the myth of original unity if only because every new technology is being created from within that myth. Technologies function to supplement a perceived lack, but the process of supplementarity always involves both an addition and a subtraction. Mountaineers climb to supplement a subjective lack, but this process is never complete: summing subtracts as it adds.

Because the state of being hybrid does not automatically result in an overturning of hierarchies, we need to ask how those hierarchies continue to function despite the recognition of their function as domination. Homi Bhabha writes in another context that

colonial hybridity is not a *problem* of genealogy or identity between two *different* cultures which can then be resolved as an issue of cultural relativism. Hybridity is a

problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other “denied” knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority. (114)

Furthermore, “Hybridity has no . . . perspective of depth or truth to provide: it is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures . . . in a dialectical play of ‘recognition’” (113). For our purposes, hybridity similarly does not synthesize a dialectic of nature and culture, as Haraway’s cyborg may seem to suggest. Hybridity is not a “modern” condition, but, rather, a human one. The danger lies in attempts to transcend, and, in so doing, deny this hybridity: such a program is always one of domination. That is, appeals to transcendence maintain the colonialist disavowal, and prevent the possibility for other knowledges to enter upon dominant discourse.

Where then does this leave mountaineering literature? Operating within a discourse predicated on the foundational assumption that obstacles can be overcome, this issue of hybridity sits as an unacknowledged, impure, origin that frustrates attempts to achieve transcendence. That is, the origins of mountaineering are hybrid, and the act of climbing mountains, and the discourse surrounding that act, continues to be hybrid regardless of claims to “purity.” The use of technology to facilitate climbing is evidence of a lack of “purity,” and the disavowal of this technology, as an impediment to accessing the transcendent, is representative of an exercise of reason that functions as domination. Similarly, acceptance of the impurity of technology does not escape the realm of domination. Simply acknowledging hybrid nature is, at best, only part of a solution.

Reflecting on the 1996 Everest tragedy, of which he was a part, Jon Krakauer writes, “Four of my teammates died not so much because Rob Hall’s systems were faulty—indeed, nobody’s were better—but because on Everest it is the nature of systems to break down with a vengeance” (275). Of course Krakauer’s book shows that Hall’s systems were indeed faulty: he ignored his own predetermined turn-around time to put one more client on the summit. What the breakdown of the system shows is that human beings are willing to put themselves, and others, in danger to achieve “something like a state of grace.” Krakauer continues,

In the midst of all the postmortem ratiocination, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that climbing mountains will never be a safe, predictable, rule-bound enterprise. This is an activity that idealizes risk-taking; the sport’s most celebrated figures have always been those who stick their necks out the farthest and manage to get away with it. Climbers, as a species, are simply not distinguished by an excess of prudence. And that holds especially true for Everest climbers: when presented with a chance to reach the planet’s highest summit, history shows, people are surprisingly quick to abandon good judgment. (275)

However, rather than simply dismissing climbing as the domain of a small portion of society with bad judgment, as Krakauer seems to be doing here, it is important to confront the question of why. Why are people willing to

abandon good judgment to reach the planet's highest summit? The answer is that this is not the abandonment of good judgment, but, rather, the exercise of it. At least in Kantian terms, it is the means to "something like a state of grace," the position at the top of the hierarchy. Kant writes, "that, too, which we call sublime in external nature, or even internal nature (e.g. certain affections) is only represented as a might of the mind enabling it to overcome this or that hindrance of sensibility by means of moral principles, and it is from this that it derives its interest" (124). Here is the reason for climbing mountains: the exertion of the mind in overcoming hindrances that are either part of external nature (overcoming physical obstacles) or internal nature (charting the subjective).

This may also account for the proliferation of mountaineering discourse. The sublime cannot really be dealt with in the moment of danger, but is, rather, confronted later, through its representation. Kant claims that, "we must see ourselves safe in order to feel this soul-stirring delight" (112). As we have seen, however, the representation of the sublime is always hierarchical. Mountaineering discourse glorifies those who stick their necks out the farthest and return alive because they are at the top of this discursive hierarchy. They embody the entelechial tendency of hierarchy, and are, therefore, in a position from which to determine what is below. Put another way, returning from a near-death experience and writing a book about it allows you, through the act of representation, to determine how the overcoming of hindrances will be structured according to "moral" principles.

The hindrances explored in *Into Thin Air* have far less to do with external nature than internal. The book's subtitle, "A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster," suggests this focus on the subjective. Krakauer states that he writes the book to "purge Everest from [his] life" (xii). He also states that "attempting to climb Everest is an intrinsically irrational act—a triumph of desire over sensibility. Any person who would seriously consider it is almost by definition beyond the sway of reasonable argument" (xiii). However, as author of "the definitive account of the deadliest season in the history of Everest," as the dust jacket declares, Krakauer positions himself both inside and outside the realm of "irrational" mountaineers. Differently hybrid than either Boardman or Norgay, Krakauer still structures his narrative as being motivated by the principle of transcendence. His desire to "purge Everest," to overcome the disaster that haunts him, is a search for grace, as much as the others' desire to climb mountains is. Whereas the other two climbing narratives discussed here make use of the same motives in both the act of climbing and the act of writing, Krakauer's stated intentions are different in each instance. He writes the book to deal with the guilt he feels over the death of his fellow climbers, while he was climbing Everest to fulfill a boyhood dream. He acknowledges that his motives for climbing the mountain were not as pure as they should have been, but his motives in writing are pure. Nonetheless, both acts are structured as a search for grace. Like

Boardman's and Norgay's narratives, Krakauer's functions as an act of the rational will structuring the supersensible terror of the sublime.

Krakauer calls into question all motives for climbing Everest. By positing the position of the climber as one of irrationality, Krakauer, sitting at the top of the representational hierarchy, suggests that perhaps subject consolidation through confrontation with the sublime is not enough. Immediately following the suggestion of seeking a state of grace, with which I opened this essay, Krakauer writes, "Of course for some Everesters myriad other, less virtuous, motives came into play as well: minor celebrity, career advancement, ego massage, ordinary bragging rights, filthy lucre" (136). He does not outline who, among his fellow climbers, might have which of these impure motives, but the hierarchy, as he constructs it, becomes more or less clear throughout the book. He introduces these impure motives here, however, merely to dismiss them: "such ignoble enticements were less a factor than many critics presume" (136). All of these "ignoble enticements" are ones to which Krakauer himself, on assignment for *Outside* magazine, could be accused of. However, he neatly displaces them and re-inscribes the "state of grace" hypothesis. That is, people's motives for climbing are basically pure, despite what the press might say. These motives, however, involve a search for transcendence that is, though ultimately impossible, structured upon principles of hierarchy and domination.

Why do people climb mountains? Mallory's answer, "because it is there," avoids the question of motives. In a discourse where a purity of motives is linked to a purity of style, in which money is always both a determining factor and an impure hindrance, the mystification of impure aspects through a focus on subject consolidation through contact with the sublime is necessary. This mystification is always already a hierarchical project. The contradiction between purity and hybridity enables climbers by allowing transcendence to remain a goal that is always unattainable because of the impure nature of the hierarchy on which the endeavor is built. The contradiction within the discourse of climbing, surrounding the issue of technology as one of impure means, serves to supplement a lack surrounding the question of "why climb?" There is an answer to this question, and it involves the consolidation of the liberal subject, but, because the motivations for this consolidation are themselves impure, there is a need to affirm a purity of motives to mystify the impure. This can be done by a conflation of purity of motives with a purity of means, as in *The Shining Mountain*; through a suggestion that hybridity can function as a synthesis of contradictory claims, as in *Touching My Father's Soul*; or through a displacement of the motives for climbing onto the motives for writing, as in *Into Thin Air*. In all three cases, however, the avowed motives serve to mystify the hierarchy implicit in the process of subject consolidation.

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