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The Slippery Slope: Ideals and Ethical Issues in High Altitude Climbing Narratives

Overview: Mountain Vistas, from Romance to Realism. Narratives of climbing Mt. Everest, the world's highest mountain (29,029') and Annapurna (26,545') are not straightforward stories of an arduous trek up and down. No mountain climbing story, full of switchbacks and surprises and rife with the potential for symbolism and metaphor, can be that simple, especially for readers in competitive Western cultures, with high stakes for getting to the top. Our imaginations feast on long distance views of this magnificent mountain, pristine, white, cold, remote. Invisible to romantic viewers is the detritus—20,000 pounds generated in this year's climbing season, "crowds jostling for pictures," ten deaths during the May 2019 traffic jam at the peak, and other dead bodies emerging as the ice melts at twenty inches a year (Schultz; Sharma and Schultz).

After discussing the Romantic background of high altitude climbing narratives, I will focus on three distinguished, canonical, utterly enthralling twentieth century climbing stories. These works reflect the ethos of white, Western, largely male literature of adventure and conquest, often with political under/overtones, such as the wildly popular polar exploration literature by and about James Clark Ross, Ernest Shackleton, and Robert Falcon Scott. Although all three mountaineering narratives are so thoroughly infused with white Western male values that the native Sherpa ethos and culture are virtually invisible, even in their own territory, they are very different from one another, reflective of the author's national identity, personality, and the ethos of their time. On the ascendant is Edmund Hillary's pathbreaking *High Adventure: The True Story of the First Ascent of Everest* (1955), the epitome of an expert climber's lofty athleticism abetted by powerful competitive energy to "conquer" the mountain itself, thereby to win the

race to the top for the British Royal Geographical Society team and redeem the diminished empire's international standing after World War II.¹ On the cusp between ascent and descent is Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna: The First Conquest of An 8,000 Meter Peak* (1952), an excruciating tale of spiritual exaltation, hubris, mistakes, and physical agony but hailed by the French as "saintly heroism, the essential truth" (Devies x). On the descent into entropy, disaster, and multiple deaths is American author Jon Krakauer's cautionary tale, *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster* (1997), a gripping, sharp-edged polemic against the commercial climbing and consequent overcrowding that occurred fifty years after the ascents of Hillary and Herzog, but inspired by their accounts.

These works bear heavy ethical freight that may be subsumed under four general questions, which in turn incorporate a host of others: 1) Who owns the mountain and what does ownership entail? 2) Who has the right to climb the mountain? 3) What are the stories and who has the right to tell them? If only expert climbers or expert writers can tell the stories, where are the narratives of the Sherpas and porters or those who have died in climbing? And their relatives? 4) And, a salient issue since major climate change has begun, what constitutes ethical stewardship of this remote and now vulnerable terrain?

Although these questions may have been implicit in Hillary's bright, triumphant tale, they were of little concern to either mountaineers or readers until the first climber guided by a commercial Western guide (Dick Bass) reached the summit on April 30, 1985. Beginning in 1986, the steady increase of amateur climbers combined with climate change have generated a host of ethical issues that reflect the increasing degradation of the country, the culture, the climbing experience, and the environment. Because ethical awareness is intertwined with issues of psychology, politics, ethnicity, religion, economics, and ecology, to avoid redundancy I will discuss each of the questions in connection with the climbing narrative

¹ In fact, the news of Hillary's "victory" reached Great Britain "by happy conjunction" on the coronation day of Elizabeth II, hailed as an auspicious omen indeed (Venables, quoting James Morris, 183).

where it seems most appropriate. Since 1985, that fateful year of the first commercial climb, visions and values have changed.

Today, as many more have summited Everest, the physical route of the narrative masterplot remains unchanged (climb, experience hardships and danger, summit, return, experiencing hardships and danger en route) but the concept of self-transcendence has been largely supplanted by the climber's competitive ego and hubristic machismo. *Conquest* is the mountaineers' mantra. Even well-spoken Hillary remarked after summiting, "We knocked the bastard off." Scott Fischer, whose Mountain Madness guided expedition was scaling Everest at the same time Krakauer was climbing with Rob Hall's Adventure Consultants, boasted, "We've got the Big E figured out, we've got it totally wired. . . . We've built a yellow brick road to the summit," a road that he anticipated would be paved with gold. Mountaineers declare "victory," as if Everest were their enemy. And when people die, these commentators blame the mountain itself—"I knew that Everest had killed"—for deaths that are the result of human arrogance and human error. In Fischer's unrealistic optimism, "Experience is overrated. It's not the altitude that's important, it's your attitude, bro" (66).

In stark contrast to Hillary's classic, ethically transparent *High Adventure*, other twentieth century narratives of high altitude and other risky climbing raise a mountain of ethical issues, profound and complex either overtly or implicitly. The slippery slope has supplanted the sublime. As attested by the avalanche of popular books for adults and children, trekkers and armchair athletes, readers remain eager for thrilling stories of danger, disaster, and (near) death experiences—the more dramatic and scary, the better. In the process of telling thrilling, bone-chilling tales, the authors are largely self-focused and essentially unconcerned with significant ethical issues of importance in the wider world, such as those related to ethnicity, class, religion, gender, working conditions, economics, or the environment.

High Altitude Narratives: Sacred, Aesthetic, Athletic. Tales of high altitude climbing do not spring out of thin air. Christian Pilgrim, the hero of *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) who treks from his hometown, the “City of Destruction” (“this world”), to the “Celestial City” (“that which is to come”) atop Mt. Zion, may be the best-known mountain climber in western literature next to Dante in the *Divine Comedy* (1308-1320) who, as a character in the *Inferno*, had to descend before he could ascend to either the *Purgatorio* or the *Paradiso*. Bunyan’s allegory makes explicit the ascending path of the spiritual autobiography, beset with doubts, difficulties, distractions, and deterrents, before the climber attains the top of the mountain, where absolution and enlightenment await. Before the publication of *Into Thin Air* in 1996, the dominant English language accounts of high altitude Everest hiking (Peter Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard* (1978)) and climbing (Edmund Hillary’s *High Adventure* (1955)) incorporated conspicuously sacred elements, as befits the mountain whose Nepali name Sagarmatha means “peak of heaven.”

Travel, addressing the “need for mental and spiritual renewal,” “has in it something sacred,” says Rockwell Gray, affirming Ortega y Gasset’s claim that “Man is a substantial emigrant on a pilgrimage of being” (40, 49). Readers embarking on this arduous path are expected to use Pilgrim, like Everyman before him, as their guide to salvation, a state where they remain in eternal bliss. But they have to die—or in the case of mountaineering narratives, risk death—to get there. Such is the arc of Christian narrative, where the climbing the magic mountain serves as the spiritual metaphor for “disciplining the self to accomplish some very difficult task (such as climbing Mount Everest) so that one could rise above, transcend, previously assumed barriers and limitations” (Ortner 38). Whether or not real-life climbers carry these works in their backpacks, ethical concerns remain a significant part of western authors’ literary baggage—as well as what they overlook. The ideals of what makes an ethical life do not—or should not, anyway—be abandoned at Base Camp.

In *Life and Death on Mt. Everest*, Ortner, who lived intermittently among the Sherpas for thirty years, offers an incisive analysis of Sherpa culture not found in the mountaineering accounts. Ortner’s

interpretation of the Sherpa religious beliefs about the Himalayas illuminates the disparity between Sherpa and Western religions. “The mountains are the abode of the gods,” who “must be kept happy if things are to go well for humanity.” The gods become angry when the mountains are polluted or profaned, which can be done in a myriad of ways: “going high on the mountain or stepping on the summit; killing animals . . . ; dropping human excretions on the mountain; burning garbage on the mountain or otherwise creating bad smells,” having women (or menstruating women) on the mountain, or “having people engage in sexual relations on the mountain.” When the sacred mountains are profaned, warn the lamas, the gods are unhappy and flee, after which “all human endeavors will go badly” and end in mountaineering accidents and deaths (127).

Romantic visions of pristine, remote, awe-inspiring Himalayas loom mightily in photographs and accounts of mountaineering before the 1980s, particularly in Hillary’s path-breaking narratives of discovery and conquest. These are analogues to nineteenth century paintings of majestic mountains by Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt, J.M.W. Turner, and Caspar David Friedrich. Friedrich’s “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog” is typical of his visions of the sublime. A man, alone, with his back to the viewer, auburn hair blowing in the wind, wearing a flowing frock coat and puttees above soft shoes, carrying a slender walking stick (but no rucksack), stands erect on a rocky outcrop, a privileged gentleman with the means and the leisure to escape to this location of inspiring solitude. He gazes across layers of fog, more outcrops with tree silhouettes, beyond them a smear of green ridges, toward taller peaks in the distance—infinite vision, infinite possibilities open to both subject and viewers.

. The romantic imagination prevails in the wealth of creative nonfiction accounts of expeditions up actual mountains, both sacred and secular, in which climbers have chosen to flirt with death in many manifestations. Challenging natural phenomena loom large in such stories, from variations on the Valley of the Shadow of Death to awesome mountains worldwide. In Western mountaineering literature from the Alps to the Rockies to the Himalayas, sheer rock faces, gale force winds, sub-zero temperatures, blizzards,

avalanches, and blinding glare prevail.² Gasping for breath in the Death Zone's oxygen-depleted "thin air" above 8000 meters is of a different order from the romantic opera heroine's tubercular gasps (think Violetta and Mimi) at sea level, and is gendered in this way. Male climbers—they are never women—dizzy and disoriented, risk coughing fits severe enough to crack ribs and tear lungs, crippling headaches, fluid buildup in the brain or lungs (cerebral or pulmonary edema), in addition to the possibilities of frostbite and broken limbs anywhere on the climb. Far away from medical help, they can—and do—die. Nature, perforce, is a central character in all these narratives, to be feared, admired, and—as title after title advertises, conquered by Man, who has been given dominion over the earth.

But, sublimity aside, poor countries needs the cash that climbing brings in, and Everest is Nepal's most productive cash yak. Legally, in Nepal anyone who has a permit can climb. After World War II the Nepalese government began issuing limited permission to westerners and the race was on between French, Swiss, and British teams to be the first to summit Everest. In contrast to the pre-World War II climbers, who traveled relatively light, these endeavors were "expeditions . . . modeled on army campaigns, in which camps were set up and stocked with supplies at successively higher altitudes, thus forming a supply chain that would support the climbers making the final 'assault' on the summit," with success invariably being labeled as a "conquest." This style of climbing required an astonishing amount of equipment transported by "an enormous train of men carrying . . . [it] up to the mountains." On the French 1950 Annapurna expedition, "four and a half tons of equipment, one and a half tons of food" were carried by two hundred porters. (Ortner). British 1953 expedition, meticulously planned by Sir John Hunt, involved "350 porters, 20 Sherpas, and 13,000 pounds of supplies to support a vanguard of only ten climbers" (Roberts, "Everest 1953"). In 1963 the American National Geographic expedition surpassed them all, with 29 tons of equipment, much of it for scientific research, was "carried by a stunning nine

² See Pratt on Alexander von Humboldt's depiction of "wild and gigantic nature" in the Americas, as depicted in his Romantic natural history, *Views of Nature, Or, Contemplations on the Sublime Phenomena of Creation (Imperial Eyes, 120-27)*.

hundred and nine porters” (Ortner 161). Although the climbing teams after the 60s are much leaner, the vastly greater number of climbers in recent years takes up the slack.

Because of such vastly enhanced employment opportunities, “In general,” says Ortner, all Sherpas, whatever their feelings, have had to overcome most of their concerns about making the gods unhappy in order to do their job” for foreign climbers either unaware of or indifferent to their culture. Nevertheless, they remain anxious “about every kind of disrespect for the mountains . . . [and] very scrupulous about keeping up religious practices” (128), including giving “a joyful turn” to the prayer wheels passed during climbs (Herzog 18).

Tenzing, himself enthralled with climbing, “scoffed at these warnings” (Ortner 128), and set the pace for cultural assimilation. In his second autobiography, *Tenzing After Everest*, which is as candid, modest, and charming as Hillary’s *High Adventure*, Tenzing—eloquent although illiterate—utters a universal lament for a lost culture: “Is it good that we Sherpas are deserting our traditional ways, that we have come to accept the ways of the West, that we are forgetting our own religion and even our own language?” Despite the benefits of “medical help where none was ever available before . . . a higher standard of living, a good education and opportunities to move about,” he is uneasy. Although “with or without the conquest of Everest the older ways are breaking down all over the world [and] . . . the Sherpas could not have stayed apart from the rest of the world for ever . . . a special way of life is dying, and with it a language and a culture, and that cannot be a good thing.” Be careful what you wish for: “In the days gone by no Sherpa child would go begging; now the cry of ‘baksheesh’ is heard where the tourists pass by” (42-3). In 2018 an even more flagrant breach of ethics which Tenzing could never have foreseen was exposed, “a far-reaching conspiracy among guides, helicopter companies and hospitals to bilk millions of dollars from insurance companies by evacuating trekkers with minor signs of altitude sickness” (Schultz et al).

The Romantic Rationale for High Altitude Climbing. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many westerners aimed “to transcend the limits of the self,” says anthropologist Sherry Ortner in *Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering* (1999), through the discipline of accomplishing some very difficult task (such as climbing Mount Everest) so that one could rise above, transcend previously assumed barriers and limitations. It could take various forms: moral, mystical, ascetic (39). Mountaineer Lucien Devies’ preface to Maurice Herzog’s *Annapurna* articulates the romantic rationale for high altitude climbing that prevailed throughout much of the twentieth century, less spiritual and more psychological than in the nineteenth century, but equally sanctifying: “That wonderful world of high mountains, dazzling in their rock and ice, acts as a catalyst” between the universe and humanity. . . . Climbing is a means of self-expression. Its justification lies in the men it develops, its heroes and its saints.” Climbers are exalted in this sanctifying athletic feat. “Man [the only gender acknowledged] overcomes himself, affirms himself, and realizes himself in the struggle towards the summit, toward the absolute in the extreme tension of the struggle, on the frontier of death, the universe disappears and drops away beneath us. Space, time, fear, suffering, no longer exist,” says Devies, “[I]here is something indestructible in us” (x).

The backbone of these romantic accounts is the struggle of humans’ indomitable spirit to conquer the powerful elements of implacable nature, often personified as wreaking vengeance on humankind through presenting challenge after challenge which the protagonists must overcome to find, as Devies concludes, infinity, “the fulfillment of oneself—is that the true end, the final answer?” (x). The successful climber must possess essential survival skills—supreme strength, energy, intelligence, resourcefulness, resilience, and nerve—a measure of daring, hopefully reined in by common sense. Although the quest per se requires a powerful sense of self, the climber must be a good team player because high altitude climbing is generally done in teams; this ethical stance implies respect for others, though not—until the twenty first century—of the environment. The climber has a chance to attain nobility, even transcendence, through

dedication, bravery, and sheer endurance (aka grace under pressure) and thus to become an ethical paragon, as well. Above all, climbers must have a passion for what they're doing, an appreciation of high adventure, and be willing to die in pursuit of the goal, as is true of both Hillary and Herzog.

Among the ethical questions epitomized in Ortner's analysis but unanswered in the climbing stories are the following. What, if any, obligations do authors have to represent the perspectives, values, actions, and motives of others involved in the events they're narrating? How much emphasis should these receive? Is it possible for Western authors to understand another culture well enough to speak for subalterns—Sherpa guides and porters—in ways that reflect values other than, as Michael Elms and Bob Frame explain in "Into Hot Air: A Critical Perspective on Everest," "notions of western hyper-masculinity (courage, strength)" (225)? Do subalterns ever get a chance to tell their own stories in Western accounts? Moreover, in a question applicable to every stakeholder in every story, how—if at all—should other participants in this or any risky endeavor be represented in telling their tale, interpreting it, analyzing it, and making a profit from it? Potential commentators include fellow climbers (guides, Sherpas, porters, clients), high altitude physicians, and film crews, government officials from the sited countries, and more. To date, no single author has been intrepid enough to give voice to this potential cacophony.

Who owns the mountain naturally has territorial and thus economic and cultural implications. The countries or other geographic locations where the mountains (or challenging monoliths, such as El Capitan) are located of course control physical access and thereby exert legal control over who has the right to climb, as well. A profound conflict is embedded in the very existence of the Himalayas, between the desires of the natives who worship them and the foreigners who would climb them. As analyses of Sherpa culture by Tenzing Norgay and Ortner demonstrate, a country that allows foreigners in, for whatever reasons, risks corruption and destruction of its culture. Likewise, harrumphed Sir Edmund Hillary, New Zealand's "living national treasure," the phenomenon of novices "escorted to the top for a fee" profanes a sacred endeavor and engenders "disrespect for the mountain (Krakauer 34).

The Nepal Mountaineering website specifies that permits are for “Anyone with appropriate fitness and skills,” but there are no formal criteria for either fitness or prior experience. If climbing companies in fact screen and reject some prospective clients, this selection process, mundane and undramatic, does not appear in the mountaineering accounts. Ideally, all climbers would embody the superlative physical, intellectual, temperamental, and psychological characteristics of Hillary and Tenzing. Climbing narratives would reflect the ethics of this distinguished pair, ensuring that they were true equal partners with their teammates in the climb, but in fact in most of the tales the Sherpas may have names but are otherwise undifferentiated.

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Slippery Slope: The Ascent. Edmund Hillary, the Ideal Climber. Although this job description is fit for a demigod, it also applies to Edmund Hillary, the ideal person to accomplish the Western world’s supreme feat of intelligence, athleticism, and exploration. At 33 he was in superb physical condition from years of high altitude climbing, and steady as a rock. His own writings, confirmed by others’ commentary, present an inspiring portrait of a man who engaged body, mind, and soul, to attain the summit of Everest. Hillary embodies the essence of fair play and egalitarianism. “The New Zealand beekeeper turned Himalayan explorer” and expedition climbing partner Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, “the Tibetan yak herder

turned Sherpa role model,” are equals throughout, not master and servant, both “brimming with ambition, energy, confidence in their own abilities” and enormous respect and affection for one another. Both consistently assume responsibility for doing more than their share; indeed, when the rest carry fifty pounds above 27,000 feet, Hillary insists on carrying sixty—because he can (Venables 163, 173).

For an optimist like Hillary, either the skies are bright blue, as in the cloudless iconic photographs of the magic mountain, or shrouded in temporary snow squalls that will soon blow away. His approach to the Khumbu icefall at 18,000 feet, utterly daunting in photographs, is joyous: “We [six mountaineers, five “high-altitude Sherpas and thirty-nine Sherpa coolies, of whom about half were women”] walked up the valley into a cold fairy-land of shimmering snow crystals. In a childlike exuberance of spirits I threw handfuls of the feathery snow into the air, just to see it twinkle in the sun” (120). Although above 26,000 feet Hillary observes, “Work at these altitudes can rarely if ever be a pleasure—every step demands so much conscious physical and mental effort,” he says, “When I could look back and see the South Col tents dwindling beneath us, I experienced a glow of achievement that made all this effort seem worth while” (194). Throughout the climb, romantic though he is in conquering one challenge after another, he is having the time of his life.

High Adventure is also characterized by Hillary’s meticulous problem solving, every arduous step of the way, adapting to continually changing configurations of snow and extreme weather. Hillary’s analysis of a problem in crossing the Khumbu icefall is characteristic: “We resumed the familiar pattern through the crevasses ahead—a cautious examination and then a wild leap if it wasn’t too wide, or for the big ones an anxious search for a bridge that would hold our weight. And although we were often stopped, we always managed to find a way around,” even when confronting steep slopes “formed of great unstable blocks of ice stacked insecurely on top of each other . . . We started off up with a rush, stumbling over old avalanche debris, whacking steps up ice-slopes, and plugging on as hard as our straining lungs would let us” (128).

In *Everest: Summit of Achievement*, Stephen Venables, an expert mountaineer, assesses Hillary's unflinching technical and mechanical expertise: "High-altitude climbing is as much about domestic organization as it is about climbing ability." Painstakingly thorough, Hillary spent "much of the day with a spanner, checking cylinders, calculating oxygen flow rates, leaving nothing to chance." Even after a day of arduous climbing, at 27,900 feet Hillary and Tenzing produced a "precarious," two-tier six-foot sleeping platform for their tent, their labors abetted by Hillary's "impressive" ability at that altitude to work out by "mental arithmetic [the] precise oxygen rations for the night to help them rest and sleep a little, while leaving enough for the morning." Moreover, at -16° F he was able "to get his paraffin primus stove functioning perfectly even at this extreme altitude, melting enough snow to give both of them copious drinks of soup and lemonade, accompanied by biscuits, sardines, jam, honey, dates, and tined apricots" (171, 173-4)—a cuisine far superior to that of most expeditions (Ortner 33), which fortified them well for the ascent the next morning.

Hillary is also a superb writer, combining thrilling, romantic descriptions with no-nonsense action scenes, as when he and Tenzing reached the summit—where "far ahead . . . the ridge dropped steeply away in a great corniced curve, and out in the distance I could see the pastel shades and fleecy clouds of the highlands of Tibet A few more whacks of the ice-axe, a few very weary steps, and we were on the summit of Everest" (226). Hillary's attitude is consistently understated, modestly acknowledging that "I felt a quiet glow of satisfaction spread through my body . . . more powerful than I had ever felt on a mountain top before." But then, in a graphic, humanizing vignette at the summit, exuberance breaks out, in grins and bear hugs: "Even beneath [Tenzing's] oxygen mask and the icicles hanging from his hair, I could see his infectious grin of sheer delight. I held out my hand, and in silence we shook in good Anglo-Saxon fashion. But . . . impulsively he threw his arm around my shoulders and we thumped each other on the back in mutual congratulations" (227). Readers, too, are shivering with delight.

Yet pursuit of this lofty goal, with its enormous personal risks and high death rate, raises a different ethical choice that even the most scrupulous climbing accounts ignore. As Francis Sanzaro asks in “Are Mountain Climbers Selfish?”: is it ethically justifiable to choose personal fulfillment in a high risk endeavor over obligations to significant family members, friends, work? Hillary, although a major member of a mountaineering team, is climbing Everest as an unmarried man. His narrative emphasizes the individual and collective skill of himself, his climbing partner Tenzing, and his team, without reference to loved ones at home, although he married Louise Mary Rose three months after the ascent. Whether their relationship inspired this brave man with “a goodly share of imagination and plenty of energy” (Hillary, Preface) or gave him pause may have existed in his heart, but there is not a word of this bond in the work itself. Sanzaro’s answer to the title’s question, “You can’t fall out of love with something,” is a vote for the love of climbing over human romance.³

According to what criteria does one balance the potential loss of life in any risky endeavor against, as Hillary says, the spirit of “adventure for the sake of a dream or the search for the pleasure of searching” no matter what the outcome (Hillary, Preface)? If climbers ever weigh the rewards of climbing—including reputation amongst climbers, fame, money—against their families’ potential trauma and distress, these considerations are not apparent in their narratives. Taking extreme physical risks can precipitate an avalanche of other losses—physical, psychological, marital, economic; should these also be deterrents? Does the equation change if the risky activity is of actual or potential benefit to society, such as that performed by first responders, among them firefighters, EMTs, police, and the military? With few climbers in the Himalayas at this time, other ethical considerations that loom so large in post-1985 narratives, such as who owns the mountain, the stories, are of little consequence here.

³ Alex Honnold’s breathtaking ropeless ascent of the 3000 foot sheer face of El Capitan—“like walking on a sheet of glass”—is dramatized in *Free Solo*, an Academy award winning National Geographic documentary. In the same time frame expert climbers Tim Klein and Jason Wells, equally passionate, have died in the attempt (see Gilliland).

Narratives of Descent: Downhill on the Slippery Slope

Teetering on the cusp of the slippery slope is Maurice Herzog's controversial, Euro-centric best-selling (11 million copies by 2000) *Annapurna: The First Conquest of An 8,000-Metre Peak* (1952). Both the ascent and the descent are riddled with death-dealing dangers: "It would be a grim night" on the way up, at 24,600 feet in a tent pitched at a 40° angle on an icy slope in "crushing snow." Its tone is noticeably darker than Hillary's enthusiastic tale. Herzog and his companion, world-class climber Louis Lachenal, feared the "ear-splitting [wind] would blow the tent away, and at each gust we clung to the poles as a drowning man clings to a plank. . . . [T]he storm howled and moaned around us. The air was fraught with terror, and in the end we became terrified too" (151-52). Reaching the summit becomes for Herzog the epitome of both the Romantic and the egotistical sublime:

A fierce and savage wind tore at us. We were on the top of Annapurna! 8,075 meters, 26,493 feet. Our hearts overflowed with an unspeakable happiness. Our mission was accomplished. But at the same time we had accomplished something infinitely greater. How wonderful life would now become! What an inconceivable experience it is to attain one's ideal and, at the very same moment, to fulfill oneself. I was stirred to the depths of my being. Never had I felt happiness like this—so intense and yet so pure." (144)

The descent is pure torture. Herzog's gloves have blown off and are irretrievable (146). His fingers freeze, yet he perseveres: "I tried to take hold of the fixed rope; both my hands were bleeding, but I had no pity to spare for myself. . . . If I let go, we should all fall to the bottom. . . . Every inch was a torture I was resolved to ignore. The sight of my hands made me feel sick; the flesh was laid bare and red, and the rope was covered with blood" (165). Yet, as veteran mountaineer and author David Roberts comments, "the euphoric trance that had seized Herzog on the summit persisted" throughout the year he dictated his story of "transcendental optimism," in the hospital recovering from the grim consequences of frostbite—

amputation of all his fingers and toes (True Summit 21). Although readers may believe that the mountain conquered Herzog, he claimed victory—“a treasure” to live on “the rest of our days” (he died 62 years later, at 93). His Introduction asserts: “I was saved and I had won my freedom, which I shall never lose. . . . In this narrative we bear witness,” says Herzog, “to the ineffable and mystic, “Events that seem to make no sense may sometimes have a deep significance of their own” (xii). From beginning to end he proclaims the romance of the climb, “playing on the frontiers of life and death” on Annapurna, “an ideal that had been realized” which allowed the climbers to worship the mountains “with a monk’s veneration of the divine.” He concludes the book with the mystical assertion, “There are other Annapurnas in the lives of men” (223). The appeal of disaster stories is as compelling as buying a ticket for the Titanic’s maiden voyage, as we have seen from the large sales of both Herzog’s and Krakauer’s chilling narratives. In a free society, we assume that anyone who has climbed the mountain has the right to broadcast their version to the entire world. Anyone else is free to supply an alternative, although the works by the riskiest daredevils or the best writers may survive better than others in the long run.

Certainly the concept of an open market is supported by the large number of revisions and rebuttals to Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air* (see Works Cited for titles by Birkby, Bourkeev, Gammelgaard, Kasischke, Viesturs, and Weathers). So it comes as a shock to read Roberts’s *True Summit: What Really Happened on the Legendary Ascent of Annapurna*, a counter-narrative to Herzog’s lyrical account of “loyalty, teamwork, courage, and perseverance.” Roberts asserts that the true facts reveal that “*Annapurna* was nothing more than a gilded myth one man’s romantic idealization of [this] campaign”—a powerful contribution the restoration of France’s national honor after the debacle of World War II. “What had really happened in 1950,” says Roberts, “was far darker, far more complex, more nebulous than anything Herzog had written.” Team members took an oath of “unquestioning obedience to their leader” and were forbidden from publishing “anything about the expedition for five years after their return to France.” The interviews and documentary evidence are too detailed to summarize here. However, Roberts’s analysis of

a fellow climber's (Gaston Rébuffat's) "savage annotations to Herzog" is typical. They reveal "the furious frustration of a man who has had to live all his life in silent acquiescence to a sacred text and a 'number one national hero,' . . . which he knows to be profoundly false" (153). Even allowing for the revisions in memory that inevitably occur during a half-century time lapse, Roberts concludes that although the "truth" is cloaked in "layers of ambiguity," the alleged dream team "had been frequently and rancorously divided; Herzog's leadership had been capricious and at times inept; and the whole summit effort and desperate retreat lay shrouded in a central mystery" (26-27).

The Slippery Slope: The Death Spiral Descent

Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* exacerbates the grimness of Herzog's climb but without the exaltation. The best-written, best-known, and best-selling of contemporary mountaineering accounts, *Into Thin Air* raises a blizzard of ethical questions and problems, some articulated, others ignored or omitted. It thus serves as a prime example of narratives of descent. Although *Into Thin Air* was published nearly a quarter century ago, it remains chillingly relevant today, even more incendiary and controversial now than in 1997 because it has fueled more and more climbers than—as recent disasters argue—either the mountain or the Nepalese culture can bear.

Into Thin Air anatomizes the catastrophic events that occurred on Everest on May 10, 1996. On that date a surprise blizzard combined with hubris, misjudgments, errors, and exhaustion resulted in the deaths of three expert guides, two clients, and three others—the worst Everest disaster ever until sixteen Sherpas died in an avalanche in 2014, twenty two in an earthquake in 2015, and eleven climbers during the 2019 "traffic jam" near the summit. The perfect storm is thus the perfect story, an incendiary narrative that raises ethical issues about adventure travel and travel writing. Krakauer's perspective is Western, macho; his high ground as an expert climber is compromised by his role as an all-expense paid author (commissioned by *Outside* magazine) who stands to (and in fact did) capitalize mightily from this disaster).

This gritty, heart stopping jeremiad against unqualified climbers hauled up the mountain by guides putting profit over prudence sold over three million copies in its first three years. It has been translated into nineteen languages, made into a TV film, a movie, and earned over thirty five million dollars for the author.

The narrative arc of such mountaineering accounts details an attempt to scale an extreme peak and to return. The ideal would be a triumphant ascent and descent with the ease, elegance, enjoyment, harmony, and capability of Hillary and Tenzing. But after the first record-setting ascent, safe successful climbs are all alike; every disaster is dreadful in its own alluring way. Readers lust for the specter of death that adds glamor to the plot; others on a particular climb write to contradict the prevailing narrative. Joan Didion utters the mantra of alternative narrators: “Listen to me. See it my way. Change your mind.” The culture of summiting, explains Krakauer in *Into Thin Air*, feeds the “triumph of desire over sensibility” (xiii). It dictates that Everest, the highest mountain in the world, is “the most coveted” location, and that the prestige of climbing “the most unforgiving routes” is the highest, particularly for elite free soloists, “visionaries who ascended alone, without rope or hardware.” More important than “getting to the top of any particular mountain” is the process—“*how one got there.*” Climbers gain prestige “by tackling the most unforgiving routes with minimal equipment, in the boldest [i.e. riskiest] style imaginable” (20).

Krakauer’s brilliant opening paragraph sets the scope and the tone of the tale:

Straddling the top of the world, one foot in China and the other in Nepal, I cleared the ice from my oxygen mask, hunched a shoulder against the wind, and stared absently down at the vastness of Tibet. I understood on some dim, detached level that the sweep of earth beneath my feet was a spectacular sight. I’d been fantasizing about this moment, and the release of emotion that would accompany it, for many months. But now that I was finally here, actually standing on the summit of Mount Everest, I just couldn’t summon the energy to care.” (5)

Initially, Krakauer's indifference is startling, like a letdown on a wedding night anticipated to be a peak experience. With the wide world spread before him, what's wrong? What's going to happen in this vast, indifferent universe that will negate the effort and the expense of the climbers and the expertise of their guides?

He's exhausted, he gasps. He hasn't slept in fifty seven hours; he's eaten only a bowl of soup and a handful of M&M's in three days; he's been coughing hard for weeks, which makes "ordinary breathing an excruciating trial." In this thin air so little oxygen reaches his brain that his "mental capacity [is] that of a slow child" (6). Krakauer's precarious state of health is emblematic of the devastation and disaster that are to follow and a signal of how powerless even the strongest, most capable men are to prevent natural disaster in an exposed, hostile environment. In Krakauer's grim view, even under the best of conditions high altitude climbing is "almost Calvinistic": "the ratio of misery to pleasure" is extraordinary; climbing Everest is "primarily about enduring pain," although there are "less virtuous motives . . . ego massage . . . bragging rights, filthy lucre" (135). In Krakauer's landscape, the Death Zone appears alive with hostility. Crevasses, bridgeable with ladders lashed end to end, open and close. Seracs, "huge, tottering blocks of ice," fall without warning. Precarious cliffs such as the Hillary Step, "forty feet of near-vertical rock and ice," must be scaled with axes and ropes. In the dark "any exposed flesh [is] instantly frozen" (180-93). Climbers, guides included, quickly grow exhausted; they need supplemental oxygen, and even using it they can't think straight.

With the inevitability of a Greek tragedy, *Into Thin Air* ultimately focuses on the disaster inherent in the conflict between climber and climate: "Above 26,000 feet . . . the line between appropriate zeal and reckless summit fever becomes grievously thin. Thus the slopes of Everest are littered with corpses." Before 1996, one in four climbers died in attempting to summit (25). The guides, drained from their efforts to shepherd their increasingly dysfunctional clients to the summit, ignore their own 2 pm turnaround time, necessary if all—who must ascend and descend single-file on an overcrowded trail—are

to reach safer shelter by night. As the blizzard erupts with seventy-knot winds, entropy reigns, people wander off in the dark and are buried alive in the driving snow. *Into Thin Air* becomes a diatribe against defiling the mountain—an unpredictable, implacably hostile antagonist in this narrative—by allowing the underqualified to climb, such as the “Walter Mittys with Everest dreams” and the socialite who insists on bringing an espresso maker and a fax machine—carried by Sherpas, as is the woman herself at times (see 114-19). He is less harsh on the expert climbers, the professional guides who died trying to save their clients’ lives.

Krakauer writes from anger and guilt, augmented by a sense of dread, “growing unease” (37), later fear, exhaustion, contempt for some of the affluent amateur climbers and pity for others, and grim determination to survive and help others in this beleaguered party. Like many other adventure writers, absorbed in the technical, physical, and logistical aspects of the climb, he pays little attention to natural history or to ecology. Like other climbers, he quickly learns to “pretend that these desiccated remains” of dead bodies lying along the route “weren’t real” (107). Although he writes for catharsis, for atonement, he finds neither. Nor does he offer any solution to the problems he addresses only in passing, cultural disrespect for the mountain or destruction of the environment (51). His ethical concerns are primarily confined to issues related to the integrity of the climbing experience: the guides’ expertise and rules of conduct, the climbers’ fitness, and the congestion at the peak.

Krakauer grieves for the preventable deaths of guides and clients, but does not dwell on the ethical issues, implied but unasked: What is the price of client satisfaction—summitting? Should guides risk their lives by allowing their clients to summit after a safe turnaround time has elapsed? Should climbing companies accept clients who are less than expert climbers? Like moths to a flame, daredevil adventurers are attracted to danger. The riskier the climb (and therefore the greater the chances of dying), the more

people want to do it.⁴ After Hillary and Tenzing became the first to summit in 1953 the number of Everest summiters rose steadily: 6 in the 50s, 18 in the 60s, 78 in the 70s, 180 in the 80s (with 56 dead), 900 in the 90s (with 55 dead) (List), and after 1996 the number of climbers continued to rise steadily, stimulated in part by the attention generated—however perverse—by *Into Thin Air*. Krakauer observes, “It sometimes seemed as though half the population at Base Camp was clinically delusional . . . Everest has always been a magnet for kooks, publicity seekers, hopeless romantics and others with a shaky hold on reality (87-88).

Nations do not deprive prospective climbers of their right to do damfool things—and to die. In 2018, 802 people summited, including 69-year-old Xia Boyu, a double amputee from China who summited after winning an appeal to the Nepal Supreme Court to overturn a ban against blind people, double amputees, and soloists climbing Nepal’s mountains (BBC News). As a consequence of open admissions, during the third week of May, 2019 alone, 500 people summited, causing a notorious traffic jam near the top, and ten people were killed. As hordes of inexperienced climbers have rushed in, their levels of experience and fitness are much more variable and uncertain, and the guides and Sherpas are literally run ragged (Arnette). Krakauer would not allow more climbers than a particularly narrow, vertical passage such as the Hillary Step 190 feet from the peak (but now eroding) could accommodate without creating a bottleneck. Climbers need to be able to ascend and descend the peak during daylight. But overcrowding occurs, especially if some people are too fatigued or inexperienced to climb without time-consuming assistance. If instead of a smooth, speedy ascent even experienced climbers have to wait in line, sometimes for hours, to cover the final distance to the peak, they risk hypothermia and running out of oxygen.

⁴ Roberts, who became infatuated with mountaineering from reading *Annapurna* as a teenager, observes: “It might seem curious that a tale fraught with near-death, with fearful trials by storm and cold, and finally with gruesome amputations of fingers and toes turned black and rotting, should encourage any reader to take up the perilous business of climbing.” But so exalted were Herzog’s ideals—“loyalty, teamwork, courage, and perseverance”—that the French climbers became “gods” to him (True 23).

The last chapters of *Into Thin Air* detail the death spiral of disaster as exhausted, disoriented clients wander in a blizzard throughout the night. With visibility less than a meter, they are in imminent danger of falling “3,000 meters straight down,” stumbling, tripping over one another, unable to locate oxygen bottles, their tents, or each other. Guide Anatoly Boukreev sees Beck, a client, mumbling “‘Hey, I’ve got this all figured out.’ Then he kind of rolls a little distance away, crouches on a big rock, and stands up facing the wind with his arms stretched out onto either side. A second later a gust comes up and just blows him over backward into the night, beyond the beams of my headlamp. And that was the last I saw of him.” Another client’s newly dead body lies amidst the maelstrom (213-14).

The Consequences of Ownership: Ethical Stewardship. What has been good for the economy has been problematic for the environment, another concern airbrushed out of all the climbing narratives, including Krakauer’s. The huge military style climbing expeditions of 1950s-60s improved the economy even as they littered the landscape. When there were few foreign climbers and vast territory, the debris may have seemed insignificant and beneath notice. Before the late 1990s nobody packed out trash, and rarely, dead bodies. But since then environmental issues have become far more severe.

Ethical stewardship would not allow climbers to degrade the environment, and in the process to contaminate the host’s terrain. Only recently have both Nepal and China begun charging waste removal fees of \$1500/climber, but removal is not strictly enforced. The average climber produces sixty pounds of excrement during a two month trek. Oxygen cylinders are abandoned. Stationary tents get shredded by the wind. Such debris turns Everest into “the world’s highest rubbish dump,” even if, as promised for 2019, volunteers remove twenty metric tons from the mountain, the equivalent weight of two dozen male yaks. Everest is also a cemetery. Of the 308 mountaineering deaths since 1927, over 200 bodies remain on the mountain—controversial presences because of incompatible religious practices related to such deaths, as

well as the cost of removal—\$35-\$80,000 for a team of six-ten Sherpas (Schultz; Schultz et al). One unidentified climber, known as Green Boots, has become a mile marker for climbers.

Into Thin Air has become the dominant disaster narrative documenting the transition from the romantic tradition of solo climbing to its commercialization, as Elmes and Frame explain in “Into Hot Air: A Critical Perspective on Everest.” Business leadership courses use *Into Thin Air* as a classic case history of bad management, poor decision making, and “the breakdown of learning in teams” (e.g. Kayes). The book may also be interpreted from the perspectives—to name only a few—of ophthalmology, biology, ecology, technology, communication, spirituality, ethics, mountaineering, adventure tourism, travel writing, ecocriticism, Foucauldism, feminism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, colonial ventriloquism, and cultural hegemony.⁵ Elmes and Frame critique Krakauer’s narrative “from the perspective of discourse, myth, and spectacle,” as being equivalent to hyper-reality TV while “devoid of contextual influences and the voices of other silent members,” such as Sherpas and other climbers (213). Castigation and cacophony notwithstanding, *Into Thin Air* has survived for nearly a quarter century as the definitive contemporary work of mountaineering adventure nonfiction, receiving an Academy Award in Letters from the American Academy of Arts and Letters for its “stylish subtlety, profound insight” and “transformative point of view.” Given readers’ voracious appetite for disaster, the book’s status will be challenged only by another tragedy of *Titanic* proportions, limned by a latter-day Euripides.

The End of the Sublime. The final story may not be a narrative written by humans, but etched in the Himalayan peaks by the consequences of worldwide climate upheaval. The glorious, dangerous, alluring cover of snow and ice that for centuries has graced the world from pole to pole, peak to shining peak, is being eaten alive. Since 1980, global warming has been devouring some 650 enormous Himalayan glaciers,

⁵ As disclosed by the seven pages of Google Scholar citations on 4 July 2019, and passim in Elmes and Frame.

whose 600-billion tons of ice have been reduced by 25%. Satellite data reports that from 1975-2000, Himalayan glaciers lost 10 inches of ice per year, a rate doubled since 2000. This annual loss of eight billion tons of water, equivalent to the “contents of 3.2 million Olympic-size swimming pools,” poses a grave threat to the 800 million who live downstream—first from flooding, then from extreme heat and drought (Sengupta; *Earth Institute*). If this continues, the Himalayas could lose two-thirds of their ice cover by 2100. The melting snows of yesteryear will wash away the romantic, sublime, sacred world that adventurers and climbers, storytellers and readers have been challenged by and have loved without end. Amen.

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