

The Haptic Sublime and the 'cold stony reality' of Mountaineering

Alan McNee

The middle of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a new leisure activity — mountain climbing. From the 1850s, an increasing number of Britons made their way to the Alps, and began to treat its peaks as a playground for adventure and physical challenge. Mountaineering quickly became one of the characteristic hobbies of the Victorian commercial and intellectual elite, and while the absolute numbers involved in Alpine climbing were relatively small, the new genre of mountaineering literature that emerged almost contemporaneously with the activity enjoyed a readership well beyond the population of active mountaineers.¹

The formation of the Alpine Club in 1857 gave shape to this new activity and propelled it into the public consciousness, and a burst of climbing activity saw the first ascents of numerous peaks. By 1800, only about twenty-two major Alpine mountains had been scaled; by 1865, at the end of what became known as the 'Alpine Golden Age', a total of 140 first ascents of Alpine summits had been made.² The Alpine Club's series of publications, which began life as *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers* in 1859 and became the *Alpine Journal* in 1863, were soon supplemented by climbing memoirs and later by guidebooks to the Alps and to mountainous regions of Britain. The literature of mountaineering allowed the culture and sensibility of this new activity to be discussed and debated, and it is in these texts

¹ Membership of the Alpine Club, the main organization of British climbing until the formation of new clubs in the 1880s, stood at less than nine hundred by 1890: see Peter H. Hansen, 'Albert Smith, the Alpine Club, and the Invention of Mountaineering in mid-Victorian Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 34 (1995), 300–24 (p. 310). Yet the first edition of *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers*, first published by the Alpine Club in 1859, went into a second edition just six weeks after publication, suggesting a readership much wider than the population of active mountaineers.

² Walt Unsworth, *Hold the Heights: The Foundations of Mountaineering* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), p. 70.

that we can trace how developments in the wider culture influenced the practice of Victorian mountaineering.

Mountaineering, in the sense of exploring and ascending mountain peaks, was not in itself a wholly new activity. Scientists had been ascending mountains since at least the late eighteenth century, when Horace Benedict de Saussure had sponsored the first ascent of Mont Blanc, and the first half of the nineteenth century had seen extensive fieldwork on the structure and movement of Alpine glaciers. The influence of Romantic writing, meanwhile, had combined with the legacy of the Grand Tour to stimulate aesthetic interest in mountains. A number of Romantic poets had ascended mountains and subsequently written about their experiences, among the most famous examples being Wordsworth's crossing of the Alps in *The Prelude* (1799, 1805, and 1850), Coleridge's 1802 walking tour of the Lake District, and Keats's plan on his 1818 tour of northern England and Scotland to 'clamber through Clouds and exist'.³

From around the early 1850s, however, a new and distinctively Victorian approach to mountain climbing emerged, in which a self-conscious community of climbers tended to downplay both Romantic and scientific motives for climbing mountains — or, as the historian of mountaineering William Augustus Brevoort Coolidge put it in 1908, 'Englishmen were waking up to the fact that "mountaineering" is a pastime that combines many advantages, and is worth pursuing as an end in itself, without any regard to any thought of the advancement of natural science.'⁴ A new generation of middle-class Victorians began to approach the Alps (and later in the century the mountains of Britain) with the same hearty sporting zeal that characterized participants in the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race or public school cricket matches. Their attitude has accurately been described as one of 'self testing and challenge seeking' rather than Romantic questing or disinterested scientific enquiry, and this would come to be the dominant mode of writing and talking about mountaineering in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵

³ John Keats, 'Letter to B. R. Haydon, 8 April, 1818', in *Selected Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Grant F. Scott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 111–13 (p. 111). For a more comprehensive discussion of Romantic mountain climbing, see Simon Bainbridge, 'Romantic Writers and Mountaineering', *Romanticism*, 18 (2012), 1–15.

⁴ W. A. B. Coolidge, *The Alps in Nature and History* (London: Methuen, 1908), p. 231.

⁵ John Murdoch, *The Discovery of the Lake District: A Northern Arcadia and its Uses* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1984), p. 137.

To describe this new pursuit purely as sport or leisure would be to oversimplify an activity with a complex set of conventions and motivations. Mountaineering in its mid-Victorian form has variously been theorized as an extension of or proxy for imperialism; as a symptom of changing class relations, and in particular the emergence of a new self-confident middle class, keen to acquire its own distinctive and appropriate leisure activities; and as a manifestation of a new approach to risk.⁶ What is not really in doubt, however, is that the new approach was characterized by a more robust and seemingly less-reflective ethos, in which the physical challenge of a climb was allocated more importance than any claim to transcendent spiritual experience to be gained from one's proximity to mountain scenery.

However, this seemingly narrow interest in physical activity can obscure the fact that mountaineering narratives in this period actually reflect quite faithfully some of the debates that were taking place in wider society — among them a deep interest in the relationship of the physical to the visual and a new concern with materiality. It also risks disguising the ways in which the aesthetic of the sublime — which, on the face of it, would seem to have been consigned to history by this stage — begins to reappear in mountaineering texts, stimulated and rejuvenated by this very connection between physicality and perception. In this article I argue that a new sense of what I call the 'haptic sublime' characterizes Victorian writing about mountaineering, reinvigorating the aesthetic of the sublime with an infusion of direct physical contact and exposure to real — as opposed to perceived — danger.

The 'experienced eye'

Among the most influential exponents of the new genre was the eminent man of letters Leslie Stephen who, in 1871, published a memoir of Alpine climbing, called *The Playground of Europe*. In this book, now considered a classic text of nineteenth-century mountain literature, Stephen sets out in

⁶ See, for example, Peter H. Hansen, 'British Mountaineering, 1850–1914' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1991); Reuben Ellis, *Vertical Margins: Mountaineering and the Landscapes of Neo-Imperialism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001); Elaine Freedgood, *Victorians Writing about Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); R. D. Eaton, 'In the "World of Death and Beauty": Risk, Control, and John Tyndall as Alpinist', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 41 (2013), 55–73.

considerable detail his philosophy of mountaineering. He describes how the climber who looks at a particular feature of a mountain ‘measures the size, not by the vague abstract term of so many thousand feet, but by the hours of labour, divided into minutes — each separately felt — of strenuous muscular exertion’. Stephen goes on to describe how the steepness of a slope, for example,

is not expressed by degrees, but by the memory of the sensation produced when a snow-slope seems to be rising up and smiting you in the face; when, far away from all human help, you are clinging like a fly to the slippery side of a mighty pinnacle in mid-air.⁷

Stephen’s comments represent one of the first attempts to articulate a new approach that had come into being with the new sport of mountaineering — an approach in which the human subject’s physical contact with the material reality of mountain landscapes was regarded as validating and supplementing visual evidence. To see how ubiquitous this set of assumptions would become by the end of the century, compare this quotation from politician and art critic Martin Conway’s 1895 book, *The Alps from End to End*:

It is a well-recognised fact that the size of mountains can only be appreciated by an experienced eye. Newcomers to the hills always under-estimate, sometimes absurdly under-estimate, magnitudes and distances. It is only when a man has climbed peaks and learned by close inspection the actual dimensions of such details as bergschrunds, couloirs, cornices, and the like, that he is enabled to see them from afar off for what they are. The beginner has to learn size by disappointment and fatigue.⁸

Conway’s assumptions about the necessity for an ‘experienced eye’, and about a process of education through ‘disappointment and fatigue’, suggest just how widely disseminated and accepted this new approach had become by the *fin de siècle*. Both Stephen and Conway asserted that sight alone was insufficient to fully understand and appreciate mountains. It had to be supplemented by evidence gleaned from the physical experi-

⁷ Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe* (London: Longmans, Green, 1871), p. 281.

⁸ Martin Conway, *The Alps from End to End* (London: Constable, 1895), p. 11.

ence of what Conway, elsewhere in *The Alps from End to End*, called ‘contact with cold stony reality’ (p. 174). Such assertions were made again and again by those mountaineers who wrote about their hobby from the early 1870s onwards.

From around this point, the new genre of mountaineering literature began to promote mountain climbing as a superior form of experience — superior, for example, to that of the tourist who visits the mountains as part of one of Thomas Cook’s tours, or the artist who remains in the valleys and sketches the mountains from a distance. This was partly a reflection of the predominantly upper-middle-class nature of mountaineering and the desire of its participants to maintain its exclusivity. But in their preoccupation with the heightened form of experience to be gained by climbing, these late-Victorian mountaineers were also reflecting the wider cultural and scientific milieu in which they operated. A whole range of developments in this period, from the rise of experimental physiology and psychophysiology through to theories of physiological aesthetics, created an environment in which the human body and the way it experienced the world was part of the intellectual conversation of the time.

The claim that sight needs to be supplemented by tactile experience also fits into a much longer tradition of discussions about the relationship of vision to touch, stretching back at least as far as John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), in which Locke posed William Molyneux’s question about the ability of a blind person whose sight is restored to visually recognize shapes that had previously been understood only through touch.⁹ Published in a period when issues of optics, perception, and the physiology of the eye were already being widely discussed, Locke and Molyneux’s question fuelled debate both in Britain and on Continental Europe about the reliability of visual data and the need for physical confirmation of optical sensations.¹⁰ In the eighteenth century, while vision was often privileged as the ‘noblest sense’ — in contrast to

⁹ The question is discussed in the second (1694) edition of the *Essay*: John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Kenneth P. Winkler (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996), p. 58. Michael J. Morgan summarizes its significance as follows: ‘Are the perceptions of the blind at all like our own, and what would the blind see if their vision were restored?’. See Michael J. Morgan, *Molyneux’s Question: Vision, Touch and the Philosophy of Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 1.

¹⁰ Martha Brandt Bolton, ‘The Taxonomy of Ideas in Locke’s *Essay*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke’s ‘Essay on Human Understanding’*, ed. by Lex Newman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 67–100 (p. 82).

what Goethe called ‘the baser, coarser sense of touch’ — there was also a contrary strand of thought concerning what were known as ‘errors of sight’ or ‘visual illusions’, suggesting that ‘the faculty of sight alone was untrustworthy in providing information about objects and in guiding our actions in relation to them’, as Nicholas Pastore puts it.¹¹ From the early nineteenth century, the coordination and cooperation of touch and vision were increasingly emphasized in both medical and philosophical discourses, leading for instance to Hermann von Helmholtz’s theory that children learn vision through touch in the first instance, as well as to the various theories of artistic perception to be discussed below (Olin, p. 133). In the first half of the century, experimental work on optical science had led to what Jonathan Crary terms ‘a new science of vision’ in which ‘the physiological makeup of the human subject, rather than the mechanics of light and optical transmission’ was the most important field of investigation.¹² It was against this background — of, on the one hand, a new understanding of the physiological (and thus sometimes unreliable) nature of sight, and on the other of a longstanding interest in the relative value and reliability of tactile and visual sense impressions — that Conway and his fellow mountaineers wrote about their experiences.

The climbing body

Meanwhile, experimental work taking place during this period in physiology and psychophysiology, particularly in the fields of muscular exertion and response to external stimuli, had started to configure the human body as a kind of engine or motor, capable of harnessing energy for productive work but also prone to fatigue. In the same period, there was widespread discussion in artistic circles about the role of physiology in the response of human beings to aesthetic experiences, notably manifested in the concept of physiological aesthetics. The research of the Italian scientist Angelo Mosso, whose work on fatigue was published as *La Fatica* in 1891, was particularly important and had obvious relevance to the activ-

¹¹ Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl’s Theory of Art* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1992), p. 133; Nicholas Pastore, *Selective History of Theories of Visual Perception, 1650–1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 4.

¹² Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 70.

ity of mountain climbing.¹³ Even before that, however, there had been a growing body of research on the nature of human responses to tiredness, pain, and external stimuli, building on the work of Ernst Heinrich Weber in Leipzig in the 1820s. Weber had carried out work on tactile stimuli that laid the foundations for the development later in the century of instruments to measure human reactions to such stimuli, in the form of the polygraph, the electrocardiograph, the mercury thermometer, and the myograph.¹⁴ In Britain, which lagged behind Continental Europe in this field, the first specialist physiological laboratories were established in the late 1860s, and the Physiological Society was founded in 1876.¹⁵

I am not proposing that mountaineering literature was necessarily directly or knowingly influenced by physiological or psychophysiological research, but rather that the attitudes expressed by mountaineers were symptomatic of a milieu in which physical sensation was allotted an increasingly important role. On a prosaic level, many of the individuals who participated in mountaineering were from scientific or medical backgrounds, and would have been well aware of these developments. One of the founders of the Physiological Society had been Francis Maitland Balfour, whose work on animal morphology was cut short in 1882 by his death in an Alpine climbing accident.¹⁶ The prominent mountaineering author Clinton Dent was appointed to the Society in 1893, after a career as Demonstrator in Physiology at St George's Hospital in London from the 1870s (O'Connor, p. 227). In the wider European context, too, many mountaineers were also involved in physiological research. Adolf Fick and Johannes Wislicenus had climbed the Faulhorn in Switzerland in 1865 to record the chemical changes that took place in their own muscles, while Mosso was a keen climber who would later publish on the *Physiology of Man in the High Alps* (1898).¹⁷

¹³ Angelo Mosso, *Fatigue*, trans. by Margaret and W. B. Drummond (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1904).

¹⁴ Robert G. Frank, 'The Telltale Heart: Physiological Instruments, Graphic Methods, and Clinical Hopes', in *The Investigative Enterprise: Experimental Physiology in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by William Coleman and Frederic L. Holmes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 211–90 (p. 213).

¹⁵ Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 71.

¹⁶ W. J. O'Connor, *Founders of British Physiology: A Biographical Dictionary, 1820–1885* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 248.

¹⁷ Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 125.

However, many climbers who had no professional connection to physiology or other medical disciplines nonetheless seem to share the wider contemporary interest in the relation of movement to perception. Nor was the interest in human physical response to stimuli confined to the medico-scientific sphere. In the arts, too, the link between aesthetic appreciation and physical sensation was increasingly being emphasized and explored by writers, artists, and theorists as diverse as Bernard Berenson, Alois Riegl, and Grant Allen, as well as by aestheticians Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson, and poets Edith Cooper and Katharine Bradley, writing as 'Michael Field'. What Hilary Fraser has described as the 'conceptualization of touch in the visual field' was a key issue for many writers and artists in the late nineteenth century, concerned as they were with the relation of physical movement to perception, the physiological basis of pleasure, and the centrality of embodiment in human experience.¹⁸ It is surely no coincidence that these same concerns emerge in mountaineering texts of the same period.

This manifested itself in an interest in the experience of the human body while climbing, and in the way it would respond to the stress of exhaustion, freezing conditions, altitude, and other challenges. While these questions were investigated by physiologists and other medical researchers, they were also discussed in climbing books and journals of the period, with articles and chapters on frostbite, sunburn, altitude sickness, and the proper diet and training regime for mountaineers.¹⁹ It also gave rise to a new prose style which increasingly emphasized the embodied experience of the climber, and the physical sensations that climbing involves, just as much as the things climbers see on their expeditions. Here, for example, is the scientist John Tyndall describing an ascent of the Weisshorn in his *Hours of Exercise in the Alps* (1871):

We find the rocks hewn into fantastic turrets and obelisks, while the loose chips of this sculpture are strewn confusedly on the ridge. Amid these we cautiously pick our way, winding round the towers or scaling them amain. The work was heavy

¹⁸ Hilary Fraser, 'Foreword', in *Illustrations, Optics and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Literary and Visual Cultures*, ed. by Luisa Calè and Patrizia Di Bello (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. ix–xv (p. ix).

¹⁹ See, for example, T. Clifford Allbutt, 'On the Health and Training of Mountaineers', *Alpine Journal*, 8 (1876–78), 30–40; F. Craufurd Grove, 'Alpine Training Diet', *Alpine Journal*, 12 (1884–86), 149–56; R. L. Bowles, MD, 'Sunburn', *Alpine Journal*, 14 (1888–89), 122–27; C. G. Monro, 'Mountain Sickness', *Alpine Journal*, 16 (1892–93), 446–55.

from the first, the bending, twisting, reaching, and drawing up calling upon all the muscles of the frame.²⁰

Note how Tyndall's prose shifts seamlessly from the impressions gained by sight to the sensations gained by moving through the landscape; this is an experience characterized and defined by movement and contact as much as by sight. Writing in the same year, Douglas Freshfield recalled his group's first reaction upon coming across an unclimbed peak in the Italian Dolomites:

The mountaineers amongst us pulled up opera-glasses, and began at once to dissect the peak; decide this couloir was snow and available, that rib of rock broken and useless — in short, to converse in that Alpine jargon which marks the race considered by Mr Ruskin capable of treating the Alps only as greased poles.²¹

This was partly a reference to John Ruskin's accusation, made six years earlier, that mountaineers treated the Alps 'as soaped poles in bear gardens', but it also indicates how the first instinct of Freshfield and his companions was to examine the mountain closely for places where it was feasible for the climbing body to ascend.²² While this is ostensibly a description of visual appraisal, the appraisal they are making is about the physical practicability of the mountain for the human frame. The rock is 'useless' because it will not bear the climber's weight; the snow is 'available' because the angle on which it is lying seems unlikely to avalanche when the mountaineer steps on to it. This is an instrumental approach to mountain scenery in which the aesthetic response of the viewer is linked directly to the anticipation of the physical sensation of climbing it.

These are early examples of how the climbing body started to be placed in the foreground of the mountain scene. Later in the century, the focus in mountaineering literature on the climber's corporeal interaction with the landscape became far more pronounced and frequent. By 1890, when Conway was writing his account of an ascent of the Dom, the third highest summit in the Alps, it was implicit that perception — and in this

²⁰ John Tyndall, *Hours of Exercise in the Alps* (London: Longmans, Green, 1871), p. 98.

²¹ Douglas Freshfield, 'The Dolomites of Val Rendena', *Alpine Journal*, 5 (1870–72), 249–59 (p. 249).

²² John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. by Deborah Epstein Nord (London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 53.

case, memory — was closely linked to physical experience. Conway noted how certain moments of this particularly gruelling climb were imprinted in his memory, not only because of their visual impact but also from the physical sensations he had undergone:

Two or three very nasty places remain photographed in my memory — one where there was a kind of elbow in the ridge, and we had to jump from an oval-topped ice-covered block across a gap of no particular width, landing on a knife-edge of rock, from which we had instantly to step again on to firm footing. The thing would have been easy enough without the glazing and the gale, but the memory of the moment before that flying step comes back to me sometimes like a cold horror.²³

Conway is writing with the implicit assumption that the physical sensation of mountain climbing is central to the experience, and that this will be recalled afterwards just as clearly as any visual impressions. This belief that physical sensation can provide sense impressions as reliable and accurate as those afforded by sight became a consistent theme in mountaineering writing. Writing in 1892 about a winter trip to north Wales undertaken some fourteen years earlier, Henry George Willink recalled how the evidence of the eyes could be misleading, and had to be verified by direct physical experience:

We could see that the windward flank of Crib-y-ddysgl ahead of us was of a dull grey, and we floundered slowly towards the nearest part of this, cheering ourselves with the thought of the good progress we should make when we reached it.

The dull grey tone had led his party to expect that this side of the mountain — part of the Snowdon range — comprised exposed rock rather than ice and was therefore possible to climb. Physical engagement with the mountain would soon prove otherwise:

To our surprise, however, when we did set foot on this promised land, we found that it was neither more nor less than a coating of granulated snow-ice some inches thick, not rough enough to give foot-hold even at the moderate angle of thirty degrees, or thereabouts, at which it was set, and too hard to

²³ Martin Conway, 'The Dom from Domjoch', *Alpine Journal*, 15 (1890–91), 104–11 (p. 106).

stamp the feet into. There was nothing for it but cold steel, so the axe went to the front, and for twenty minutes it was necessary to enjoy the pleasure of making the back ache with cutting steps.²⁴

Eyesight has here proven inadequate to assess the mountain landscape; only the act of setting foot on the mountain can provide an accurate measure of its suitability for the mountaineer. In the same year we find Albert Mummery, one of the most famous Victorian mountaineers, writing about his sensations on the Grepon, one of the peaks above Chamonix: 'It was certainly one of the most forbidding rocks I have ever set eyes on. Unlike the rest of the peak, it was smooth to the touch, and its square-cut edges offered no hold or grip of any sort.'²⁵ Mummery uses the phrase 'set eyes on', but what he is describing here is an ostensibly visual experience that is actually transformed into something tactile — the smooth touch of the rock and its failure to offer any grip to his hand are more immediately relevant to Mummery than any visual impression it offers.

The relative paucity of accounts by women climbers can make this conception of bodily experience seem axiomatically male. What is interesting, however, is that when women's narratives were published, they often echoed the preoccupations with physical contact that male climbers exhibited. So Mummery's wife, Mary, also an accomplished Alpine climber, gave this description of a Swiss peak in a chapter she contributed to her husband's 1895 book *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus*:

[As] the snow was in excellent condition, we were able to make good pace. This was soon succeeded by queer, slabby, stratified rocks, piled at a steep angle, like rows of huge slates, one on the other. Their sharp edges, however, offered good hold for hands and feet. After a short time these broken rocks were interspersed with an occasional bold, precipitous turret, forcing our leader to show his metal [*sic*].²⁶

Once again, she is describing the landscape not simply in terms of what she and her fellow climbers see, but in terms of how they interact with it

²⁴ H. G. Willink, 'Snowdon at Christmas, 1878', *Alpine Journal*, 16 (1892–93), 33–42 (p. 37).

²⁵ Albert Mummery, 'The Aiguilles des Charmoz and de Grepon', *Alpine Journal*, 16 (1892–93), 159–73 (p. 162).

²⁶ Mary Mummery, 'Der Teufelsrat', in Albert Mummery, *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1895), pp. 66–95 (p. 73).

physically — by what Conway called ‘close inspection’, the validation of visual impressions by physical experience. The images are visual, of course, but their significance lies in how the climber engages with them in order to move upwards — the holds that the sharp edges offer, the firmness of the snow that allows them to walk on it, the steep turrets that force the lead climber to demonstrate gymnastic prowess.

In all these texts, the writers are implying that the experiences that constitute consciousness in their particular field of expertise are primarily embodied, physical ones, gained through the act of climbing rather than the act of pure seeing that Ruskin, for example, had emphasized. Ruskin, who criticized the ethos of mountaineering on a number of occasions, believed that the person who truly understood mountain scenery was not the mountaineer but the observer who could look long and hard at the landscape. The ‘educated eye’ for Ruskin was not that of the mountaineer who had suffered and struggled to reach a summit, but that of the sensitive observer who could examine a fragment of gneiss rock and recognize the way it was, as Ruskin put it, ‘all touched and troubled, like waves by a summer breeze; rippled far more delicately than seas or lakes are rippled’.²⁷ Ruskin was calling here not simply for a geological understanding of the structure of mountains, but for an aesthetic that proceeded from careful viewing and which expressly dissociated itself from the personal, physical, and deeply subjective experience claimed by the mountaineers in favour of a more formal, impersonal, and primarily visual understanding. Given this ethos, the mountaineering writers of the 1850s onwards were setting themselves in direct opposition to Ruskin’s principles, implicitly denying his claims for the primacy of sight in favour of their own direct physical experience of ‘cold stony reality’.²⁸

²⁷ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 5 vols (London: Dent, 1843–60), IV (1856), 113.

²⁸ Ruskin was arguably out of step with other writers and critics of the period in his insistence on the primacy and discreteness of the visual. William Cohen has shown how a striking feature of many Victorian literary texts, for example, is their ‘insistence that perception, interaction, and communication are irreducibly corporeal: the world enters human subjects through bodily orifices, of which the eyes are but two’. See William A. Cohen, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 28. Nor was Ruskin consistent throughout his career in this insistence on the superiority of sight to embodied experience. Ann Colley has attempted to reclaim Ruskin’s own ‘physical and kinetic relationship to the mountains’ and to show how his ‘strenuous experiences influenced his way of seeing the mountain landscape he admired’, although her analysis is mostly based on his own drawings rather than on his prose, and relates to his record of mountain ascents in the late 1840s, before the period under

The 'haptic sublime'

Mountaineering narratives, then, seem to take a rather instrumental, un-sentimental approach to mountain landscapes, owing little to Romantic notions of transcendent experience or to the aesthetic of the sublime that had figured so heavily in earlier discourses about human interactions with mountains. The sublime is, of course, a heterogeneous concept, whose precise nature remains contested and which had by the Victorian period been filtered through the sensibility of Romantic poets and writers.²⁹ Victorian mountaineers were neither reacting against nor conforming to a single, stable tradition of the sublime, but rather were climbing and writing with a very mixed legacy behind them. It is also the case that accounts from the late-Victorian period rarely explicitly mention the sublime, potentially giving the impression that the concept has been banished from

discussion. See Ann C. Colley, 'John Ruskin: Climbing and the Vulnerable Eye', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 37 (2009), 43–66 (p. 43).

²⁹ Until relatively recently, the prevailing view was that theories of the sublime underwent two shifts in the course of the eighteenth century: one, from being concerned with art, literature, and rhetoric to being concerned with natural objects; the second, from being associated with the sublime object to being located in the perceiving subject. The latter shift has conventionally been attributed to Kant, with his insistence that 'all we can say is that the object lends itself to the presentation of a sublimity discoverable in the mind'. However Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, writing against the tradition of teleological progress towards post-Kantian subjectivity represented by Samuel Monk, suggest that three distinct shifts take place in the discourse of the sublime through the eighteenth century. First, the sublime object is presented as the source of affect. Next, the sublime becomes identified with the perceiving subject, a position typically associated with, but by no means exclusive to Kant. Finally Ashfield and de Bolla identify what they call increased 'attention to the discursive production of the sublime', which is newly focused on 'an investigation of the mechanism or technology by which one comes to know the sublime at all'. This last approach has the effect of diminishing interest in the sublime object, and even to a certain extent in the perceiving subject, concentrating instead on the processes by which sublime affect is produced. See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 92; Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 4; Robert C. Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 13; *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 14; Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 96.

mountain literature by this stage.³⁰ I want to suggest, however, that in fact this very concern with physical challenge and with the intimate physical contact between climber and mountain gives rise to a new form of the sublime in late nineteenth-century mountaineering narratives. I call this the ‘haptic sublime’.

The haptic sublime involves an encounter with mountain landscapes in which the human subject experiences close physical contact — sometimes painful or dangerous contact, sometimes exhilarating and satisfying, but always involving some kind of transcendent experience brought about through physical proximity to a rock face, ice wall, or snow slope. It is haptic rather than tactile, because it involves not just skin contact but sensations felt through the whole body, and very often the sensation of movement through the landscape and awareness of one’s own position within that landscape. Many of these sensations and experiences were described in mountaineering literature of this period. Although the word ‘haptic’ was not in widespread use until the 1890s (when it was coined by the philosopher and aesthete Max Dessoir, and shortly afterwards used in the context of art history by Riegl in his *Late Roman Art History* of 1901), the phenomenon it describes had been observed and described considerably earlier; Dessoir was using it to discuss work carried out by Ernst Heinrich Weber in the 1820s. The *OED* cites its first use in print in an 1895 article in the journal *Mind*, in which it referred to ‘recognised sensations of simple pressure, of traction and of impact’.³¹ However, the term expanded to cover a wider field of sensations than this, including ‘the perception of position and motion (proprioception), and other tactile and kinaesthetic sensations’, the latter referring to ‘perception based on mechanoreceptors in muscles, tendons and joints’.³² This broad definition seems appropriate to the often sensuous language in which mountaineers recorded their intimate physical sensations while climbing. The climber was reliant on strength, balance, agility, and on the proprioceptive powers of his or her own body to move itself through

³⁰ Google Labs N-gram viewer, for example, records a steady decline in usage of the word ‘sublime’ in English books from around 1850: <<http://books.google.com/ngrams>> [accessed 7 September 2014].

³¹ ‘haptic, adj. (and n.)’, *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 11 August 2014].

³² Roberta L. Klatzky and Susan J. Lederman, ‘Perception, haptic’, in *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science*, ed. by Lynn Nadel, 4 vols (London: Nature Publishing, 2003), III, 508–12 (p. 508).

mountainous terrain, and all this was described in a prose style that seems to echo the wider scientific and artistic awareness of the haptic.

Like earlier versions of the sublime, the haptic sublime is to some extent an aesthetic of mastery, of overcoming a threat or difficulty, and to that extent it represents continuity with the sublime as it would have been understood in the eighteenth century. But the emphasis on the physical proximity of the human subject to the object of sublime experience, and the insistence on the privileged status of the mountain climber, represent a new type of subjectivity. Crucially, the haptic sublime involves the presence of real physical danger, rather than the potential or imagined threat that had previously been associated with the sublime. From Lucretius in first century BC Rome — with his description in the second book of *De rerum natura* of the satisfactions of watching a storm-tossed sea from the shore or warfare from a safe distance — through to Edmund Burke's dictum in the middle of the eighteenth century that terror 'produces delight when it does not press too close', and Kant's claim in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) that 'provided our own position is secure' we can gain an enhanced degree of self-possession in the face of sublime experience, the sublime had always been presented as experienced from a position of relative safety, in which the sublime object appeared threatening but did not present immediate physical danger.³³ Mountaineering in its late nineteenth-century form changed this approach for perhaps the first time, positing the sublime as a proximate, potentially dangerous force rather than an impressive but ultimately harmless spectacle.

Once people began to climb high in the Alps, they faced some very real and specific dangers: avalanches, rockfalls, electrical storms, and simply the danger of falling off cliffs. Here is Edward Whymper, in another mountaineering book published in 1871, crossing a glacier in Switzerland and then sitting down to rest and watching the giant ice pinnacles he and his group have just walked beneath:

Without a preliminary sound, one of the largest — as high as the Monument at London Bridge — fell upon the slope below. The stately mass heeled over as if upon a hinge (holding together until it bent thirty degrees forward), then it crushed

³³ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, trans. by W. H. D. Rouse, Loeb Classical Library, 3rd edn (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), p. 85; Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by Adam Philips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 42; Kant, p. 111.

out its base and, rent into a thousand fragments, plunged vertically down upon the slope that we had crossed! Every atom of our track, that was in its course, was obliterated.³⁴

This, of course, brings to mind descriptions of sublime experience from eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century accounts of Alpine travel, where the viewer witnesses an avalanche or a waterfall and is overwhelmed by the experience. But it moves considerably beyond Burke's or Kant's claims for the delights of terror that does not press too close and is experienced from a position of security. What Whymper describes involves a real, specific physical threat, which does press close and in which the mountaineer's position is far from secure. If Whymper and his companions had crossed the glacier a few minutes later, they, too, would have been obliterated.

This new approach to the sublime, in which some of the traditional characteristics of the sublime aesthetic were melded with a new emphasis on real physical danger, would become a regular feature of climbing narratives in the decades that followed. Here, for example, is Dent writing in 1873 about the satisfaction of having mastered and overcome the fear that is a component of sublime affect:

It is a grand moment that just when the real difficulty of the expedition opens out; as you grasp the axe firmly, settle into the rope, and brace up the muscles for the effort of the hour. On a fine day, when your peak towers clear and bright above you, when you feel that at last you are on the point of deciding whether you shall achieve, or fail in achieving a long wished-for success, or what I may perhaps be allowed to call a cutting-out expedition: it is that moment which is probably the most pleasurable of the whole expedition; the excitement on getting near the top rather fades away than increases, and you clamber as calmly often on to the actual summit of a peak as on to the knifeboard of an omnibus.³⁵

³⁴ Edward Whymper, *Scrambles Amongst the Alps in the Years 1860–1869* (London: Murray, 1871), p. 258. The year 1871 was something of an *annus mirabilis* for climbing literature. In addition to Stephen's and Whymper's memoirs, it also saw the publication of John Tyndall's *Hours of Exercise in the Alps*. All three caught the public imagination and helped spread interest in the new sport of mountaineering.

³⁵ Clinton Dent, 'The Rothhorn from Zermatt', *Alpine Journal*, 6 (1872–74), 268–74 (p. 271).

On one level, this is the characteristic tone of the Victorian mountaineer, concerned with vigorous physical exercise rather than with finer aesthetic feelings. On the other hand, Dent's description of the feeling of doubt followed by calm is also consistent with Kant's proposition in *The Critique of Judgement* that the sublime involves first of all a concern about obliteration, or the mind's inability to grasp the enormity before it, then a subsequent feeling of renewed confidence in one's own rational powers (Kant, p. 106). At the same time, what Dent is describing is a much more direct and present physical threat — not simply a threat to the faculty of reason, but to the integrity of the human body — and the satisfaction that follows is consequently felt physically as much as intellectually.

Dent would return to this theme in 1885 when describing an unsuccessful attempt to climb the Aiguille du Dru, part of the Mont Blanc massif. On the way down from this climb, Dent recalled, the snow and ice had become dangerously soft, and melting ice above them caused stones to shoot down the gully his party was attempting to descend. Alarmed by this threat, Dent's group made their way down the face of the mountain instead — a route that held its own dangers:

Often, in travelling down, we were buried up to the waist in soft snow overlying rock slabs, of which we knew no more than that they were very smooth and inclined at a highly inconvenient angle. It was imperative for one only to move at a time, and the perpetual roping and unroping was most wearisome. In one place it was necessary to pay out 150 feet of rope between one position of comparative security and the one next below it, till the individual who was thus lowered looked like a bait at the end of a deep sea line. One step and the snow would crunch up in a wholesome manner and yield firm support. The next, and the leg plunged in as far as it could reach, while the submerged climber would, literally, struggle in vain to collect himself [...]. Now another step and a layer of snow not more than a foot deep would slide off with a gentle hiss, exposing bare, black ice beneath, or treacherous loose stones.³⁶

This was clearly a dangerous and unpleasant experience, which continued for much of the day as the group descended to the safety of the valley. Yet Dent then concludes his account of this episode with these words:

³⁶ Clinton Dent, *Above the Snow Line* (London: Longmans, Green, 1885), p. 194.

It was not until late in the evening that we reached Chamouni; but it would have mattered nothing to us even had we been benighted, for we had seen all that we had wanted to see, and I would have staked my existence now on the possibility of ascending the peak. (p. 195)

This is the haptic sublime in action. The human subject's sense of agency and power is reinforced rather than diminished by the experience of danger and physical suffering. Dent has been exposed not only to the impression or idea of peril, as in earlier versions of the sublime, but to real, specific danger that could have resulted in his death. Having survived this experience, he emerges with a renewed confidence in his own abilities. Mummery, writing in the 1892 account quoted above, gave a similar description of how a desperate and potentially dangerous physical struggle with a mountain could be followed by a sense of triumph, renewal, and power. His attempt to get to the top of the first of two linked summits of the Chamonix aiguilles, the Charmoz and Grepon, included the necessity for the climbers 'to worm their way up the cliff', then enter a narrow cleft 'whose smooth and precipitous walls were everywhere glazed with ice, and their parallel surfaces offered no grip or hold of any sort. It was just possible to jam one's back against one wall and one's knees against the other' ('Aiguilles des Charmoz and de Grepon', pp. 161–63). Shortly afterwards, Mummery describes how his companions

were ruefully gazing at their torn and bleeding elbows, for it appears they had only succeeded in attaching themselves to the gully by clasping their hands in front of them, and then drawing them in towards their chests, thus wedging their elbows against the opposing walls (p. 163).

Mummery's account of this physically bruising ascent concludes as follows:

Long hours of exertion urged to the utmost limit of the muscles, and the wild excitement of half-won but yet doubtful victory, are changed in an instant to a feeling of ease and security, so perfect that only the climber who has stretched himself in some sun-warmed, wind-sheltered nook, can realise the utter oblivion which lulls every suspicion of pain or care, and he learns that, however happiness may shun pursuit, it may, nevertheless be sometimes surprised basking on the weird granite crags (p. 164).

Mummery uses the word ‘happiness’, but I would contend that what he is describing is actually the haptic sublime. An overwhelming experience characterized by physical exertion and exposure to danger is followed by a renewed sense of mastery and self-possession.

The haptic sublime thus melded some characteristics of the traditional sublime with a wholly new sensibility. Here is the literary critic Ernest Baker writing in 1900 about his experience of climbing a new route on a mountain in Glencoe, in Scotland. Baker writes:

The vividest emotions of the rock-climber arise from the conflict between his rational perception of dangers overcome and eliminated, and the impression that these dangers inevitably make on the sub-consciousness; in climbing a broad and open precipice like the front of this ridge these emotions are at their keenest.³⁷

Here we have something akin to the traditional sublime — a powerful, even overwhelming emotion arising from exposure to a spectacular and intimidating natural feature, a perceived threat that is overcome or survived, and the resulting sense of mastery, as well as a lingering psychological tension between this sense of mastery and the overwhelming nature of sublime affect. All these aspects would have been familiar to a reader of Kant.³⁸ As he continues, however, Baker describes his emotional state during the climb in terms that suggest something quite new:

Here, with every part of the body, we have direct sensation of the vast space over which we are suspended; the infinite modulations of the sound of rushing water, giving perception of distances apart from sight, the touch of wind currents, glimpses of crags and of voyaging cloud-shadows far below the depth of air, all enter the soul with an intensity the merely contemplative spectator cannot know. (p. 13)

³⁷ Ernest A. Baker, ‘Buachaille Etive Mor and the Crowberry Ridge’, *Climbers’ Club Journal*, 3 (1900–01), 3–16 (p. 13).

³⁸ They would also have been familiar from the legacy of Romantic literature, which was still being read and frequently quoted in mountaineering narratives, even if the actual practice of mountain climbing was no longer indebted to Romantic precepts. Wordsworth, Byron, Walter Scott, and Shelley are regularly quoted in Victorian mountaineering narratives. See, for example, George Gilbert Ramsay, ‘Rise and Progress of Mountaineering in Scotland’, *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*, 4 (1896–97), 1–15, in which the writer quotes from Scott and the Lakes poets.

This insistence on the climber's physical immersion in the environment and consequent heightened ability to perceive his surroundings 'with every part of the body' is an explicit statement of this new assumption that the climber's engagement with the material reality of mountains leads to a heightened, unique, and incommunicable experience. The privileged status of the mountain climber (over and above the 'merely contemplative observer' of mountain scenery), and the presence of *real* danger and crucially close proximity to, even physical contact, with the mountain, are presented as leading to a new kind of transcendent experience which is akin to the sublime as traditionally understood but which is contingent on physical contact and exposure to risk. Dent, Mummery, and Baker did not use the word 'sublime', but what they are describing is at least analogous to sublime experience as Burke, for instance, would have understood it.

The Victorian mountaineer's haptic sublime, then, is a new version of the aesthetic of the sublime, reinvigorated and transformed by an infusion of physical exercise and hazardous contact with Conway's 'cold stony reality'. It not only substitutes genuine peril for the slightly contrived sense of threat that the Burkean sublime, for example, had involved. It also places relentless emphasis on what Baker termed 'direct sensation' through 'every part of the body' — the physical contact or proximity of the perceiving subject to a sublime mountain object that is specific and tangible. It is this insistence on physical contact with the mountain that above all distinguishes the haptic sublime from its precursors, and which helps give much of the literature of Victorian mountaineering its tone of distinctive modernity.