

Bolts, Climbing and the Aesthetics of Wilderness Experience

(*Gripped Off Me Scone*, 1994)

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The cliffs are no longer parts of the natural environment. They are 'climbing sites'. Getting away to some little bit of 'wilderness' has always been an important part of climbing for me, as I am sure it is for thousands of other outdoor users, not just climbers. Bolts immediately destroy any wilderness concept for the climber. (Pat Littlejohn, *Mountain 138*, p.30)

Adventure and survival no longer described rockclimbing. Leading had been sanitized, urbanized, commonized and trivialized. (Mark Wilford *Mountain 138*, p.31)

Perish the thought of placing a bolt in the rock. That is to sully and corrupt this lofty place. That is to leave a human trace - nay even worse, an industrial trace - where no trace whatsoever should appear. Let us forget that we have driven to within easy walk of here, that we have depended upon the trace of roads and the trace of exhaust fumes to reach this place. Let us forget about the trace of bleached or unbleached toilet paper we have left in the nearby bush. Let us forget about the trace of hours that has enabled us to afford everything that makes this pristine weekend possible. Let us indeed forget all the traces linking our climbing activity to the industrial and postindustrial society which we now, through our condemnation of bolts, symbolically and very conveniently reject. Let us then continue to pillory these inconspicuous metallic signs of our manifest bad faith.

This is not to suggest that greater honesty would necessitate the thorough environmental devastation of cliff areas, simply that we cannot continue with this pretence that climbing involves a pure engagement with wilderness. However tempting it is to regard climbing as a free encounter with the natural world beyond the constraints of contemporary society this ignores how climbing arises from, is implicated within and ultimately depends upon the larger social world. Climbing is linked to the world of leisure, of freedom cast in the image of consumption. We require ropes and boots and all manner of manufactured things to discover little windows of freedom on sunny weekends. And our spaces of freedom - our cliffs - are themselves subject to cultural determination. They are small sites of otherness preserved and constructed through all sorts of theatrical means - the stagecraft, for instance, of national parks and wilderness reserves - within convenient driving distance of major centres. The notion of the pristine wilderness encounter is a fiction that we fetishize in an increasingly shrill, sentimental and unconvincing manner. Just when there is a need to recognize our society's emplacement within nature and the necessity of active human intervention in environmental management we take refuge in comforting romantic dreams of traceless wilderness epiphany. We become obsessed with bolts rather than focusing on broader issues of how the climbing environment can viably be maintained in the face of the growing popularity of the sport.

The opposition between traditional free-climbing and contemporary sport climbing tends to be placed under the heading of "ethical debate." But what motivates the different ethical positions adopted? Why should bolts be regarded as "good" or "bad"? Listen to

the arguments closely and you'll find that something else is at stake beyond questions of right and wrong. Consider the typical arguments, for instance, of the 'traditionalist': "Bolts destroy the wilderness value of the cliff environment"; "Bolts are ugly"; "Bolts diminish climbing - they lead to a narrow emphasis on the gymnastic, rather than the adventurous, aspects of the sport." What is asserted and preferred is a specific aesthetically-guided conception of climbing - one in which risk and the wilderness encounter are viewed as central. Sport climbing emerges as a contrary aesthetic stance - one in which delight in danger is replaced by delight in difficulty and cliffs become gymnastic gardens rather than symbols of wild nature.

...those who rely on bolts are not climbers at all, but really cliff gymnasts. Let's start calling them that and let's start calling sports climbing 'cliff gymnastics'. The term 'climbing' carries too great a status for this shallow activity. (Ken Wilson, Redpoint., Dec. 1993, p.29)

Here we go again. Nostalgia for the good old days - days of natural lines and boldness. Condemn the Euro-peril that threatens to extinguish the true and authentic spirit of British climbing. But like all nostalgia, it is governed by sentiment rather than any sense of historical perspective. Indeed it seems just a tad ironic that just over a century ago A.F. Mummery, one of the greatest British mountaineers, found himself subject to very similar accusations.

...I may, perhaps, be permitted to ask whether the love of rock-climbing is so heinous and debasing sin that its votaries are no longer worthy to be ranked as mountaineers, but are to be relegated to a despised and special class of 'mere gymnasts.' (Unsworth, 1982, p.88)

Mummery's defence of the 'gymnastic turn' constitutes one of the seminal statements in the development of modern climbing. Of course the issues back then were a bit different. Nobody had even thought of sticking bolts into rock. The debate centred around the propriety of climbing itself as an activity. The main Alpine peaks had been ascended. Many questioned the need to repeat those ascents. They argued that the only justification for climbing was to further scientific knowledge. Pursued as a practice in itself it was nothing more than vanity and madness. Indeed some condemned 'sport-climbing' as an irreverent affront to the sublimity of the Alps. The famous Victorian art critic, John Ruskin, had described the Alps as "the cathedrals of the earth." In his view 'sport-climbers' were a noisy rabble who treated the Alpine summits as "greased poles". The only proper place to appreciate the Alps was in the valleys.

The real beauty of the Alps is to be seen, and seen only, where all may see it, the child, the cripple and the man of grey hairs. (Engel, 1965)

If climbing was justifiable at all, Ruskin insisted, it was once again only as an incidental aspect of scientific research. Even amongst those who loved mountaineering, science remained the traditional alibi. Mummery was one of the first to suggest that climbing had value apart from science - not instrumental, social value but value as an aesthetically guided sport. He directly rejected Ruskin's position, arguing that climbing is entirely consistent with the aesthetic appreciation of the Alps. Moreover he regarded the pursuit of difficulty as a means of enhancing the aesthetic experience. Exposure and extremity

heighten the aesthetic appeal of a climb.

...the most difficult way up the most difficult peaks is, from an artistic point of view, always the right thing to attempt, whilst the easy slopes of ugly screes may with propriety be left to the scientists. (Unsworth, 1982, p.90)

Mummery was a vanguard climber, pushing technical limits, searching for increasingly difficult lines up already climbed peaks. The more traditional scientist-mountaineers accused him of 'stunting', of pursuing artificial difficulties. In a sense, Mummery less resists these criticisms than embraces them. 'Stunting' - the worthless pursuit of difficulty - becomes a guiding principle, separating climbing from science and linking it to the non-instrumental realms of sport and art. 'Artifice' becomes creative, aesthetically inspired vision - focusing no longer on the summit but on the sublime extremity of the route. Very ironic then that Mummery should come to define the modern notion of climbing precisely in terms that now, according to our self-proclaimed defender of the traditional faith, former editor of Mountain, Mr. Ken Wilson, are better associated with everything that most threatens the pure flame of 'genuine climbing.' To attempt to rigorously distinguish 'cliff gymnastics' from 'proper climbing' is to wilfully neglect the history of the sport.

These days it is bolts that suggest the dangerous incursion of modern society within the wilderness cliff environment. But there have been many other symbols of our corruption. As we've seen, some early critics such as Ruskin even questioned the propriety of climbing itself, regarding it as an affront to the sublimity of alpine wilderness. Later it was guidebooks which gave offence.

I have said very little about our climbing Wales. For my own part, I heartily wish that the climbs there were unnamed. But there are hundreds of men who have little chance of going to the Alps, and for who rockclimbing is a sport in itself; and if it helps them to have a graduated course that they can work through, and to have every ridge and gully labelled, we more fortunate ones must not grumble. Yet I do sometimes wish I could put the clock back, and return to the days when there was said to be good climbing on Lliwedd. (R.L.G. Irving, 1909, in Unsworth, 1982, p. 162)

Great disdain currently for the beta-junkies. Yet how many of us have any qualms about consulting a guidebook? The deliberately minimal descriptions offered in guidebooks are of course very different from, "Grab that pocket, get that kneebar - c'mon you can onsight this sucker!" The contemporary issue relates to maintaining the distinction between onsight and red-point ascents. In the past though the issue was more of maintaining the mystery and uncertainty of the mountaineering experience. Guidebooks ran the risk of providing maps for mapless adventure.

In Wales especially...a tradition of almost romantic reticence had already been established. The mystery of the cliffs should, in their view, be preserved, so that others might enjoy their discovery equally. The clearer the description written of them, the more complete must be the disappearance of the fun of finding and of the mountaineering value of working out one's own route. (G.W.Young in Kretschmer, 1946, p.4)

If Young ultimately accepts the need for guidebooks, it is for safety reasons. The lack of current guidebooks had produced in his view not a reverently silent climbing practice but

instead a cacaphony of hearsay and misleading information. Novices were being misled. Accidents had increased. Regularly up-dated guidebooks emerged then as a particular administrative response to the growing popularity of the sport. A level of aesthetic compromise was required in order to facilitate broader social participation in climbing. Mystery was still maintained but through other means - no longer through a literal absence of maps and written descriptions but rather stylistically, through strategies of brevity and understatement. The resistance to guidebooks was a late romantic mountaineering stance. It was linked to a desire to insulate the climbing experience from the spread of modernity. Silence - an absence of representation - seemed more in harmony with the wilderness encounter than the verbosity of earlier romantics. The editor of the 1946 Lliwedd guidebook distinguishes between the 1939 and the 1909 guides in precisely these terms.

The new guide was in some ways the antithesis of the old one. Picturesque imagery was replaced by an accuracy of description no less original in its simplicity. The sombre blast of fanfares which had proclaimed the Avalanche climb - now only a 'medium very difficult' - 'the most exposed climb in England and Wales...Only for a thoroughly expert party' gave way to...understatement. (Ibid)

Who remembers any of this debate about the appropriateness of guidebooks? Areas of contention shift. Lines drawn in the sand provide the basis for fierce struggle and then are erased. Pitons, chalk, friends, bolts - always this struggle to eliminate all trace of human activity and modern technology. But interestingly it is less the fact of this human activity or modern technology that offends than their image. They offend as symbols (which again suggests how aesthetically-driven much of the current ethical debate is). The concern is less to literally safeguard cliff ecosystems than to defend a particular aesthetic ideal of wilderness engagement. That clipping bolts may cause less environmental impact than stuffing bits of natural gear into every available plant and creature-filled crevice of rock is never even considered. I'm not suggesting that bolts are always the best solution or that bolters always have the best interests of the environment at heart but simply that the debate needs to gain a more environmentally substantive dimension.

Whereas art once imitated or was modeled upon nature now the reverse seems to be the case. Wilderness is appreciated now precisely as that marginal sphere of the end-in-itself that art has traditionally represented. Wilderness is no longer to be explored, or claimed, or exploited. It is to be left alone as some lingering reminder and consoling spectacle of natural continuity, spiritual purity and untrammelled freedom. Of course it gains these meanings through its symbolic opposition to the increasingly regulated, mediated, commercialized modern and postmodern world. Yet - again like art - this opposition is ambivalent. It functions only on the unspoken assumption that wilderness, as a figure of opposition, remain a token place apart. Nostalgia and consolation yes, but wilderness is not to prompt any genuine transformation of society. It manages to leave everything that it implicitly criticizes intact. Indeed the very notion of wilderness guarantees that it can never do more than constitute a safely exterior figure of resistance. Once wilderness is touched it disappears. There is no way of re-claiming 'fallen land' (that is always merely a form of cultivation). Wilderness is appreciated then only in its notional purity as something not yet ruined - thus in a form inevitably tied to loss and nostalgia. Wilderness becomes a kind of museum (the conventional distribution mechanism of modern art),

seldom visited and full of living things preserved as though dead.

All of this is to suggest that wilderness has come to fulfill a similar ideological role to that of art. It has become a vital symbol of values that can no longer be experienced actually, and so have meaning only in terms of imaginary life - specifically to an increasingly problematic interior terrain which maintains its hopes of freedom, continuity and harmony precisely on the condition that they never be realized in the wider social world. This is why the bourgeoisie can so love wilderness and yet insist that nobody go there. Their own residual sense of individual identity is really what is at stake in their calls to preserve wilderness. Wilderness exists as a mirror of their own unfulfilled aspirations. Were people to go there, were it to cease to be utterly wild, then wilderness would lose all its value as a fragile proof of interior sanctity. Funny though that values that were once linked to Utopian dreams of social transformation are now associated with the absence of the human. It is as though the only consoling horizon which remains is the disappearance of human society altogether.

Contemporary responses to wilderness are of course more varied than I have suggested. The response I have sketched is perhaps more indicative of modernism than of postmodernism; wilderness cast - like art - as a figure of alienation and negation. Is there then a postmodern response to wilderness? Once the institutional homology between the spheres of wilderness and art is acknowledged then perhaps such a response is evident. Consider, for instance, how the distinction between traditional climbing and sport climbing aligns with the distinction between modern and postmodern cultural tendencies. Traditional climbing positions the cliff environment as radically opposed and other to the modern industrial, commercialized social world. Climbing is cast as a form of privileged encounter with the wildness of nature. Ideally no traces should be left whatsoever. Sport climbing on the other hand unsettles the opposition between nature and culture. It transforms the cliffs into gymnasiums, places of leisure and sport rather than of solitary wilderness encounter. But this is also to transform the notion of gymnasium, to soften it, to shift it away from 'fitness factory' towards a space in which the lines between nature and culture are confused and partly overcome. Sport climbing has far less difficulty with leaving traces upon the rock. Bolts are placed, chains are hung, chalk marks reveal every hold. Traditional climbing can only regard this as the desecration of the cliff environment - and in terms of their iconography and myths it certainly is - but it is possible to regard it more positively as a means of opening up a new, less purist, dialogue with nature.

Could the growing popularity of extreme wilderness sports, such as mountain biking, rock-climbing, base-jumping - suggest that new modes of relating to nature are developing? These sports work to upset the "aura" of wilderness. They bring it close. An earlier attitude cast wilderness as other and maintained a respectful distance. Wilderness only had any meaning in its opposition to the modern world. But now in a whirl of environmentally-friendly interactivity, the lines have become blurred. Wilderness appears only residually other. Much more now it appears as terrain of intense experience. Nostalgia has been replaced by hyper-engagement. Contemplative distance is erased. Wilderness no longer quite represents an autonomous and pure place of self-discovery. It can no longer quite motivate *mimesis* or *poesis*. It is experience cranked up, leisure as adrenalin. Hammer, pump and rush.

This attitude to wilderness can be seen as exploitative and destructive but at least it doesn't allow wilderness to remain simply as an empty counter-image, worshiped and

relentlessly pushed to the margins. Once the experience of 'wilderness' is denied its vivid force then it becomes only another image - something to hang up on the wall or gaze at from a lookout. The point is not to maintain wilderness as a space of exclusion but to press it into new relations with modernity, relations that bring the two together, allowing their interests to mingle. The point is not to withdraw but to ethically intervene, to engage rather than to embalm. Instituting an impoverished, distanced relation to wilderness only guarantees that our culture's imagined distance from nature will continue to increase until it becomes all too real.

What has become of the sublime?

It appears now only in the hackneyed phrase, "from the sublime to the ridiculous," which is to make the sublime itself ridiculous. And yet the notion of the sublime is vital to the history of climbing - as vital, or more so, than the impulses of scientific enquiry or European nationalism. These days climbing casts itself as an extreme sport (though increasingly 'safe' and popular) and this concern - this aesthetic regard - for extremity begins with the sublime.

But what is the sublime? It is widely evident in descriptions of the Alps from the late 17th Century through to the 19th Century.

The sense of all this [danger and beauty] produc'd different motions in me, viz. a delightful Horrour, a terrible Joy, and at the same time, that I was infinitely pleas'd, I trembled. (John Dennis (1693) in Engel, 1965)

Only the summit of the Dole and the High Alps raised their heads above this mighty veil; a bright sun was shining above the cloud, and the Alps, lit by both the rays of the sun and light reflected from the cloud, were seen in their greatest splendour a huge distance away. Yet there was something terrible and strange in that very situation; I felt as if I were alone on a rock in the middle of a stormy sea, very far from a continent edged by a long ridge of inaccessible cliffs. (H.BDe Saussure (late 18th C.) Ibid.)

The immensity of those aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of ecstatic wonder, not unallied to madness. (P.B. Shelley (1816) Ibid)

Mont Blanc, and the Valley of Chamonix, and the Mer de Glace and all the wonders of that most wonderful place are above and beyond one's wildest expectations. I cannot imagine anything in nature more stupendous or sublime. If I were to write about it now, I should quite rave - such prodigious impressions are rampant within me. (Charles Dickens (1846) Ibid.)

Generally, the sublime denoted a sphere of aesthetic pleasure inimical to the calm and urbane pleasures of classical art. The sublime functioned beyond conventional aesthetic principles and rules, valuing not harmony and proportion but extreme phenomena and experience. Contemplation of the infinite, a mingled sense of terror and pleasure, a reaching out towards the inexpressible and the impossible - these were the characteristic attitudes of the sublime. Due partly to the conventional itinerary of the Grand Tour, which crossed the Alps on the way to Italy, mountains became central symbols of the

sublime. The early travellers through the Alps found the view from their carriage window quite adequate to prompt a mingled sense of terror and pleasure. Gradually however a greater sense of proximity was required to produce an equivalent aesthetic adrenalin rush. The visual, contemplative sublime prompted a closer engagement with the terrain of pleasurable terror. Climbing enabled an active and experiential relation to the sublime landscape. In the process, climbing drifted away from the sphere of art per se towards the sphere of sport, but without losing a strong sense of aesthetic motivation. Mountaineering and traditional free-climbing still reveal a strong concern with sublime emotion - even if it tends now to be expressed in less flowery and romantic terms. Their debt to the sublime is especially evident in their devotion to an aesthetics of risk, where pleasure emerges in the overcoming of danger. Burke's classic definition of the sublime could almost serve as their explicit rationale:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling...When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful. (quoted in Monk, 1935)

Regarded in these terms, the development of mountaineering and traditional free-climbing can be seen as a constant pushing back of the threshold at which terror and pleasure may coincide. But what of sport climbing? Are there any traces of the legacy of the sublime evident in this increasingly popular sport? This is a complex question which requires a more extensive answer than I can offer here. But very briefly it could be addressed in terms of three crucial aspects of the sublime:

1. Correspondence between terror and pleasure: an element of fear remains within sport climbing but it is less actively pursued and celebrated. What sport climbing seems to do is to limit the sense of risk and yet maintain the adrenalin rush. Pleasure is no longer based upon terror but upon the intensity of effort and movement. The relation to the cliffs becomes more playful than fearful. The grand reflection on mortality and universal indifference that lies at the heart of the traditional sublime and traditional climbing is no longer evident.

- 2, Contemplation of the infinite and the impossible: Rheinhold Messner condemns contemporary sport climbing as "the murder of the impossible." But does the sport climber eliminate the impossible or simply discover it in other places? The emphasis is no longer on vast and impregnable rock and ice faces (the traditional iconography of the sublime) but upon the microscopic intricacy of the move. Infinity is associated no longer with immensity but with the relentless pushing back of physical limits. The impossible appears now in blank sections of rock where no sequence of moves seems viable. The aesthetic of pure gymnastic difficulty actively seeks out this version of the impossible. The consequences of failure are certainly less serious than in mountaineering - the amorous relation to the impossible is less linked to death - but sport climbing retains and extends the impossible rather than diminishing it. In this sense at least, the sport maintains a sublime aspect.

3. Otherness and individual autonomy: the sublime has always had a dual aspect. It is

oriented outwards to the otherness of the world - to everything that lies beyond the sphere of culture - but at the same time it also reaches inward toward the individual subject. The image of the mountain becomes a metaphor for the human soul. All that prompts a sense of the vast and the infinite also authenticates the capacity of the human subject to imaginatively overcome all limits, to conceive, even if only tentatively, the impossible. The sublime then is as much about human grandeur as it is about the grandeur of the natural world. It is a vital thread in the coat of bourgeois individualism. But what happens when the relation to otherness is negated, when a more playful and socially intimate relation to the natural world emerges? Mountaineering and traditional free-climbing tend to highlight the otherness of the cliff environment. Cover after cover of *Mountain* used to show only the pure and pristine cliff or snow-covered peak. Climbing represented an engagement with the autonomous wilderness environment. The austere separateness of the climbing landscape was precisely what guaranteed the value of climbing. But now, once again, things seem to have changed. I have attempted to argue that cliffs are no longer permitted a sense of distance. Increasingly they are becoming culturally inscribed places - crowded with people and signs of the world beyond (bolts for instance). But at the same time, sports climbers - though their photographs appear everywhere - seem less concerned to fashion the climbing experience as a psycho-drama of individual autonomy. Climbing is now much more focused on external signs of success - grade ticked, competition placing attained. Increasingly commodified, it appears as yet another specialized leisure pursuit rather than as a lofty and insane field of adventure and self-discovery. These two tendencies - the loss of a sense of the cliff environment as autonomous and the shift away from the traditional inner subjective dramaturgy of climbing - are linked. It is in this respect, perhaps even more than in terms of the abandonment of the aesthetics of risk, that contemporary sport climbing appears most distant from the traditional notion of the sublime.

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