THE EVEREST OF THE SPIRIT

Macmillan Brown Prize Essay for 1925

CLYDE CARR

Christchurch Press Co. Ltd., Printers

EPUB ISBN: 978-0-908328-32-1

PDF ISBN: 978-0-908331-28-4

The original publication details are as follows:

Title: The Everest of the spirit

Author: Carr, Clyde

Published: Christchurch Press, Christchurch, N.Z., 1926

THE EVEREST OF THE SPIRIT

By the Rev. Clyde Carr

[The following is the winning essay in the competition for the Macmillan Brown Prize.]

First a word or two concerning the Himalayan peak itself. The very title of this essay suggests by its symbolism how large a part is played by analogy not only in the terms we employ, but in our thought processes as well. It will be necessary, therefore, to touch briefly upon the significance of the term "Everest" in the literal sense before extending its use to the spiritual realm.

Doubtless every schoolboy is familiar with the geography of the subject. But it is, of course, the records of attempts men have made to climb the mountain that are of prime value to our present study. These records were interrupted by the Great War; but they have no more interesting chapters than those recording the expeditions of Bury, Bruce, and Norton.

In 1921, the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club organised an expedition, with the consent of the Tibetan Government, to discover the best route to the summit. In 1922, the first attempt to conquer the mountain was made under the leadership of General Bruce. On May 20th, four members of the party gained an altitude of 25,000 feet, and three of them reached 26,800 feet, without artificial aid. Captain Geoffrey Bruce and Finch, with the help of oxygen, climbed to the 27,300 feet level, only 1700 feet from the summit Then, owing to the monsoon, the effort was abandoned.

In 1924, a second attempt was made, with Colonel Norton in command. Blizzards and very low temperatures were encountered, the thermometer registering 56 degrees of frost on May 22nd-23rd. Setting out for the summit on June 6th, Colonel Norton and Dr. Somervell, without artificial aids to respiration, were forced to turn back exhausted at a height of about 28,000 feet. Four days later, Mallory and Irvine, with oxygen, made the final attempt, which ended tragically. They were last seen, climbing steadily, at over 28,200 feet. On June 10th, no trace of them could be found.

Whether or not they succeeded in their heroic endeavour, may never be known. With the exception of Odell, who was the

last to see them, the other members of the expedition inclined to the belief that their companions had failed.

And now, before discussing what may be our understanding here of the term "spirit," which discussion would naturally conclude our exegesis of the text, it may be well to quote briefly from Sir Francis Younghusband's introduction to the official records of the expeditions referred to above. These passages should serve to illustrate something of the intimate connexion between mountaineering and the struggle upward of the inner self, between "Everest" and "the Spirit."

Sir Francis writes of "high enjoyment, the spice of battle and pride of conquest," of how "the spirit within us is forced to prevail against material obstacles." He says again, "wrestling with the mountain makes us love the mountain. . . . She has forced our utmost out of us, lifted us just for one precious moment high above our ordinary life and shown us beauty of an austerity, power, and purity which we should have never known if we had not faced the mountain squarely and battled strongly with her. . . . Our standard of achievement rises. . . . By testing their capacities, men actually increase them."

We have here an expansion as it were of the doctrine and principle of psychophysical parallelism. Just as Oliver Wendell Holmes, in his skiff on the Charles river, felt that his personality was enlarged by the exercise, his nervous system extended to the very tips of his sculls, so is the soul of man disciplined and developed by physical exploits of any worthy sort. This impingement upon the spirit is, however, distinctly of the nature of reaction, since it is the spirit itself that prompts to all such voluntary effort.

The spirit—is it not, for our present purpose, that which creates a divine discontent within us and demands the putting forth of our best efforts to assuage if not to satisfy that ardent purpose and desire? Is it not that which inspires and nourishes lofty and seemingly impossible ideals that lift us above the brute and stamp us men? . . . "Thou hast set the universe in their heart," says the *Preacher. And, as we have seen, the material universe, the stuff with which and upon which the human spirit works, reacts upon the spirit, forging and tempering it to other and ever higher tasks. For

" . . . Life is not as idle ore,

"But iron dug from central gloom,
And heated hot with burning fears,
And dipped in baths of hissing tears,
And battered with the shocks of doom

"To shape and use . . ."

When we speak of the "Everest of the Spirit," therefore, the association of terms and of ideas bears us above the local and geographical to the universal and spiritual, beyond topography to metaphysics; from that which, as we have already suggested, merely assuages to that which begins, at

*Dr. Samual Cox's Translation.

least, to satisfy the hunger of the soul. We see, then, that some understanding of the term "spirit" begins to sublimate for us our use here of the term "Everest." It is the ideal, that ever recedes as we approach it. For the mountaineer himself, there is ever more or less of this spiritual element present. Younghusband, in the passage quoted above, begins to enunciate, indeed, certain cardinal principles of religion and ethics. With him, one would judge, the ideal is not so much pleasure as culture, development, perfection. Without special pleading, one would wish for the moment to emphasise the inestimable value and virtue of stern physical tasks willingly and gladly undertaken, if only as a wholesome corrective of a resurgent hedonism and utilitarianism. But our main contention for the present is that to the mountaineer, as to the man who embarks upon any similar heroic task or quest, there comes "a sense of something far more deeply interfused," albeit transcendent, "the emotion of an ideal" that is supernal. The ideal is, so much the more, "a glimmering limit far withdrawn," with all the lure of the seemingly unattainable. Whether the task be set in high altitudes or in high latitudes—wherever and however it be set—arduous, perilous though it be, that task is from the first or soon becomes a mere subterfuge, a lame excuse at best for the real, unnamed ambition, fired by an invisible flame. There comes a realisation that no test of lungs, nerves, muscles, exhibits, though it may suggest, the utmost or the highest of which brave men are capable.

The Everest of the Spirit is not something done or surmounted only, or in the outward sense gained, but something gained within, something we have become. The view of mountains, the view from mountains, like any other vision of beauty, or grandeur, may verily open to us avenues of approach to the heavenly places, even the secret place of the Most High.

Edmund Spenser states the truth fairly when he sings,

"The hearts of men which fondly here admire
Fair-seeming shows, and feed on vain delight,
Transported with celestial desire
Of those fair forms, may lift themselves up higher
And learn to love, with zealous, humble duty,
Th' Eternal Fountain of that heavenly Beauty."

As we proceed, it will become necessary to show that there be many ways and means of approach to the vision and the ideal, many Pisgah views of the Promised Land, with devious journeyings through the wilderness. For some it may be the human countenance that proves the open sesame to the unseen —the look of gratitude, gladness, love. For other some, it may be the word or deed of truth. At all moments of such revelation, indeed, the spirit is mountains high, the outlook vivid and serene. Something is achieved, attained, something seen and

known, something realised or for the first time desired, that was theretofore undreamt of or "impossible."

But we do well to reiterate that mountains and mountain climbing are a sure means to this; or at least, the man who, in such an environment, "does not habitually wonder and worship, is but a pair of spectacles behind which there is no eye."

Carlyle himself, you will remember, is an apostle and a prophet of the heights. In "Sartor," for example, he makes his "Wanderer" look out upon "a world of mountains, the diadem and centre of (a certain) mountain region." In language that is like a solemn music he proceeds: "And, as the ruddy glow was fading into clearness in the sky, and the sun had now departed, a murmur of Eternity and of Immensity, or Death and of Life, stole through his soul; and he felt as if Death and Life were one, as if the Earth were not dead, as if the Spirit of the Earth had its throne in that splendour, and his own spirit were therewith holding communion."

The Soul of Beauty is the very Spirit Divine and one with the spirit of man. Such moments of exaltation and of ecstasy may come to all, though to most of us but rarely; yet are they never forgotten. They are probably followed by a desolating sense of impotence and futility: one cannot hope to remain ever upon the high peaks of sensibility and adoration; but recalled in tranquillity the emotion may deeply and abidingly reassert itself. It may be for us, as for the prophet of old, that revelation is not in the fire, wind, earthquake of spiritual experience, but in the "voice of gentle stillness" that follows at length.

At such times a man may, perchance, endeavour worthily to answer for the faith that is in him:

But now the master-painted hues
Paler and rarer grow: the earth
Has intercepted cloud and sun.
And, thus eclipsed, gaunt vapours rear
Great, rugged shapes aloft, to o'erpeer
Their wide horizon's sunward girth
And learn the secret of his flight.
Awhile, faint gleams of lingering light
Their snow-cold crests with pink suffuse;
Then, back recoiling, each embues
His drooping head in umbrage dun.

And, now, from o'er the darkling hills,
Night-breathings of the slumbering earth
Fall frigid on thy naked head,
And chill thy cheek, and chill thy heart,
And tell thy reverie its worth,
And tell thee thine, till grief instills
The venom of an aching smart
That stings and numbs and leaves thee dead—

Dead to the night that settles down,
The raven night—and folds her wings—
Thy mother night—and covers thee:
Dead, yet self-conscious, finite, lone;
Dull yearnings, too, are still thine own:
But ocean depths of darkness drown
The hopes fond meditation brings. . .

Forbear! when sod shall fall to sod,
Thy soul shall mount aloft and free,
The day shall dawn that is to be,
And thou shalt know the mind of God.

We must return to the valley. . . How often it is the valley of humiliation! But sojourning there, we may still have our memories and our visions. Comes, at length, sunrise to the valley, and the mountains, lo! the mountains are visible again; yea, more is visible than the mountains.

So was it with the elder Coleridge in the Vale of Chamouni:

"O dread and silent Mount! I gazed upon thee,
Till thou, still present to the bodily sense,
Didst vanish from my thought: entranced in prayer
I worshipped the invisible alone. . . .

"Awake, my soul! not only passive praise
Thou owest! not alone these swelling tears,
Mute thanks and secret ecstasy! Awake,
Voice of sweet song! Awake, my heart, awake!
Green vales and icy cliffs, all join my Hymn! . . .

"Thou, too, hoar Mount! with thy sky-pointing peaks,
. . . . . Rise, O ever rise,
Rise like a cloud of incense from the earth!
Thou kingly Spirit throned among the hills,
Thou dread ambassador from Earth to Heaven. . . ."

The Everest of his spirit was infinitely higher than any earthly eminence, though 'twas Mont Blanc that led his clambering vision—"dim eyes suffused with tears"—upward to the zenith and beyond.

There are, assuredly, limits to physical endurance and achievement. So far as mountaineering is concerned, once Everest is put under foot, no higher ground remains to be trodden. Yet every mountain is a Jacob's ladder, beckoning upward. Dazzling peaks and even lowlier heights have ever offered stimulus and allurement. Every respectable eminence woos the aspiring soul. It tends to draw the vision heavenward, though from afar. Even rolling downs and foothills present atmospheric conditions, a variety of contour and configuration at once inviting and inspiriting to the denizen—for we are all but denizens—of the plains. And the greater the elevation, the ruggedness, the escape from the monotony and conventionality of the lowlands, the greater the exaltation and exultation of the soul. Escaping, though but in thought, to a region scarped and scarred or even gently undulating, where "the little hills rejoice on every side," there comes a disturbance of ordinary levels of thought and feeling. The sight of snowy ramparts, of sky piercing peaks, lends zest, imagination, enthusiasm to life; to dwell or sojourn amid rocky fastnesses, encircling sierras, where the vision finds no escape save upward, a little nearer the meridian blue or the empyreal height of night's galaxy of stars, is to stimulate desire and effort after what is lofty and arduous; but to tread the upward and the downward slope, to pierce the glooming forest belt, to come upon the holy place of edelweiss and gentian, to glimpse and to gain the height that is higher, is for the flesh to become the slave of the imperious will, itself the

slave of the imperial deities. The rarefied atmosphere, the crevasse, the avalanche, the sudden storm, all fail to daunt the climbing instinct, which is the homing instinct, of the adventurous spirit. . . .

"The face of God is a rock:
But the face of the rock is fair."

And, as we have seen already, the high places of the earth, though calling upon us to surmount its lower levels, though providing some measure of foothold for the hardy climber, though themselves sanctuaries of spiritual devotion, of themselves set no limits to divine emprise. The aeroplane has already soared high above the height of the Himalayas' topmost summit; and the utmost limits upward for the aeronaut are not yet determined, though limits there must be. But "that which drew from out the boundless deep" knows no such edict as "Thus far shalt thou come, and no farther!"

Every man is at heart something of a pioneer: at his best, he responds to the welcome challenge of the unknown, and cries:

"I do not follow the beaten path;
I do not follow any path:
I will go where there is no path,
And leave a trail."

And again:

"I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul."

Not for him then are the vales of ease, the golden grove, the populous plains, the broad highway. Alone, or with a chosen few, he must break new ground. In the last resort, he will go in solitary quest. The customary and the commonplace are anathema to him. He must ever on, "On and Up!"

Oh easy virtue of a well paved way!
Oh smug sufficiency of ends attained!
None such for me, 'twould seem, in this cross-grained
And complex heart and world of mine to-day:
All unsurveyed the realms wherein I stray
With palpitating pulse and vision strained—
Still striving for the heights the strong have gained,
Still blazing tracks erstwhile untrod, as they.

And rougher, denselier wooded, find I still
These lower levels of the steep mount's slope
As on and up I clamber with a will;
Nor can I dream of better than to grope,
As ever, on and up, till last, the thrill
Of summits gained, and still the thrill of hope!

The human mind requires, indeed, no material aids or hindrances—either may prove inducements—to aspire, achieve, attain! Utterly apart from trigonometry, barometry, hob-nailed boots, and alpinstocks, apart from challenging gradients or perilous declivities, the immortal spirit soars within itself to altitudes loftier than Godwin Austen, Everest, the Pole Star, or the Pleiades. It sweeps in its own lone and dizzy orbit beyond space and time to the very Throne of God. For the soul itself is "true Shekinah."

The history of Judaism and Christianity is closely associated with mountains and hills. Sinai, Pisgah, Hermon, Calvary, Olivet, Patmos—each prefigures a phase of life, a stage in man's evolution. Each represents a certain substantive state, as it were, between the transitive states, the aspiring flights of the wistful and intrepid spirit, as of an eagle in the eye of the sun. And as each is of itself a resting-place, so is it typical of the ultimate rest, the Ever-rest, the repose and equipoise that mark human character at its best, human experience richest, deepest, and most real. If we may be pardoned a further paragram—"Silent upon a peak in Darien," one beholds the vast Pacific. The greater the height, the wider and truer the view. Though man's self be ever active, unsatisfied, there abides for the wise, the mature, the devout, an inward and an outward peace born of courage, confidence and accomplishment. "There remaineth, therefore, a rest to the people of God."

A vast difference appears, be it remarked, between man unsatisfied and man dissatisfied. Better dissatisfied than satisfied, but better still and best of all—forever unsatisfied! For the spirit within us, the only real rest is to be found in ceaseless but well directed activity. Infinite mobility and motivity alone can ensure eternal repose for us in the economy of God.

"And I smiled to think His greatness
Flowed about our incompleteness,
Round our restlessness His rest."

Standing in the power-house of a great mine battery, one has marked the base of a turbine shaft revolving with such incredible velocity that it appeared as if motionless: there was no friction, no vibration; but there was tremendous activity and the utmost efficiency. In the battery itself, one stood upon a flimsy platform with the immense quartz crushers thundering on every side. There was something titanic and awe-inspiring about it all; yet was the effect as of majestic organ music; one's soul "swelled vast to heaven."

Many and various are the desiderata that inspire ambition, providing means to its exercise and imagined satisfaction. Urgent and insatiable is the vital ego within us; our hopes and aims, born with us or of us, or adopted by us, may appear worthy or not to others. Thank God! there are peaks and paths for all. Following each our own genius, we find our inalienable media of self-realisation. If we are wise, we shall prove obedient to our heavenly vision. Or be it but a gleam we follow, and be that gleam an ignis-fatuus or a light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day—this need trouble us little if, by persistence and sincerity, soon or late we come upon a path that leads upward—by the Hill of Difficulty home to our mountains, the delectable mountains of heart's desire.

Science, philosophy, religion, the humdrum task we have set ourselves, music, literature, art, service for the common weal—all that therein is precious and indestructible is the worthiness of motive, the temper, persistence, charity with which we pursue it. All is—

"Machinery just meant
To give thy soul its bent,
Try thee, and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed."

We may seem to fail miserably; or we may be left long in doubt—the world may be left in doubt—as to the measure of our success or failure. But true it is that—

"Not on the vulgar mass
Called 'work' must sentence pass—
Things done, that took the eye and had the price:
All that the world's coarse thumb
And finger failed to plumb,
So passed in making up the main account:
All instincts immature,
All purposes unsure,
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's amount:
Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped:
All I could never be,
All men ignored in me—
This was I worth to God, whose hand the pitcher shaped."

Mystery surrounds the fame and fate of the heroic Mallory and Irvine. It is mostly so. In all attempts, indeed, to surmount the Everest of the Spirit, the ultimate issue is with God; and in His keeping it is safe and sure. In His keeping is the record and the verdict, the prize beyond the quest. And ever for the soul remains "the glory of going on and still to be."

Christchurch Press Co. Ltd., Printers