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# Above it All

## Pierre-Henry Frangne, *De l'alpinisme*, Presses universitaires de Rennes

***By Claude Reichler***

**Mountaineering combines surpassing oneself, taking things to excess, and achieving practical wisdom. The philosopher P.-H. Frangne explains that this activity is an important exercise in the decentering of the self, which allows for the perception of the incomparably sublime landscapes provided by mountain peaks.**

> 'The wise, or those regarded as such, repeat in vain that it is sheer madness to overcome so much fatigue and to risk one's life to visit these solitary places; a mysterious attraction draws us there, and there will always be men who will embark on this pilgrimage in search of the unknown. Despite the fatigue and the hardships, many undertake this pilgrimage time and time again, driven by their passion, as analogous to a passion for gambling. […]
> We meet them down in the valley, preoccupied. They devour books describing the higher reaches, enquire about the best guides, consult their barometers, don the clothes of mountain dwellers, and rise in the middle of the night to set off… Do they stop when they conquer some summit or other? Do they seem overawed by the spectacle unfolding at their feet? No. They go back down as quickly as possible in order to scale another peak the very next day.
> I have often had the opportunity to observe those afflicted by this mountaineering mania and I have to admit that I am very sincerely fond of them.' [1]

At the beginning of a book in which he proposed to trace the original contours of the Mont Blanc massif, Viollet-le-Duc sang the praises of these heroes of a new age, among whom Leslie Stephen and Edward Whymper were the most well-known at a time when the English were pioneering the conquest of the highest peaks. His

[1] Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *Le Massif du Mont Blanc*, Paris, 1876, 'Introduction', p. VI.

descriptions are not very different to the portrait that Pierre-Henry Frangne paints of himself as a mountaineer. Every January, this incredibly active academic—a professor of philosophy and aesthetics, who lives in Rennes and is the author of books on Mallarmé, photography, music, and symbolism—begins training rigorously and without compromise with a view to spending a week after Bastille Day climbing up to 13,000 feet in the Mont Blanc massif, before returning to his Breton plains and their temperate climes. Viollet-le-Duc also anticipated Frangne's conception of mountaineering: 'an entirely useless and gratuitous concept and activity, in which adversity is sought out as an end in itself'. However, while the great restorer of Gothic architecture seems to have focused only on the almost pathological heroism of the young climbers, Frangne on the other hand pays particular attention to other aspects of their pastime: "the challenge it implies, […] the universal symbol it represents, […] the sublime nature of the contemplation it offers, with a view only to the pleasure it provides.' [2]

Before further enlarging on these aspects, which will provide the framework for my review, it is important to specify that the book is organised in such a way as to alternate narrative and reflexive chapters. Four Grandes Courses are recounted (Mont Blanc, Mont Velan, Aiguille de Bionnassay, and Mont Dolen) in narratives brimming with the intensity of the experience, its concrete embodied nature, the harshness and hostility of the elements, but also the splendour of the mountain peaks and the fervent joy they provide. While these narratives are among the book's most appealing features, I will set them aside here for the purposes of this review and focus instead on the 'philosophy of mountaineering' that it is the author's main ambition to outline.

## What is Mountaineering?

Although Pierre-Henry Frangne's aim is not to retrace the history of mountaineering but instead to identify the factors that led to its emergence so as to draw out its essential features, he nevertheless gives two major historical points of reference, which he labels the 'Petrarchian moment' (the ascent of Mont Ventoux in April 1336) and the 'Saussurian moment' (the ascent of Mont Blanc on 2 August 1787). What is interesting here is not this reminder of well-known facts, but the way they are mentioned precisely so that they can be dismissed. Contrary to what has sometimes

[2] *De l'alpinisme*, Chap. 2 'L'esprit de la montagne', p. 96.

been suggested, Frangne explains that neither Petrarch nor Horace-Benedict de Saussure were the founders of mountaineering: the first was hoping to find God by experiencing high altitudes, while the second was seeking to further knowledge in natural history by carrying out a number of observations and experiments. As Leslie Stephen, one of the pioneers of modern mountaineering[3] stated, if the mountaineer climbs only in order to climb, it is no doubt because he is defying a hostile environment and above all his own body. Faster, higher, further according to the motto of the sport.

Surpassing oneself can lead to excess, to hubris, but also to a process of self-invention by means of intellectual and physical effort; the ideal of self-realisation through the overcoming of challenges, in echo of Ancient values of combat (athlon) and regulated exercise (askesis), liable to giving humans 'the sense of their freedom and of their responsibility, quite openly so' (p. 158).

More fundamentally, if mountaineering provides an education in which one learns 'what it is to be human', this is because danger and death are ever present and immediately perceptible. Over the space of many profound and beautiful pages, beneath the title 'Ethics and mortality', Frangne presents mountaineering as a school of life, linked to an awareness of one's own mortality, which gives rise to 'the manifestation of a sense of human significance, necessarily unstable, partial, and in the process of becoming' (p. 165). When mountaineering is stripped of any quest for transcendence or knowledge, it becomes a practice and a means of experiencing life that is devoid of any externally assigned goal, aimed solely at human affirmation in 'the irreparable loss of all foundation' (Nietzsche is quoted on several occasions). 'The self and the value ascribed to it relate to each other in a simple equilibrium, that is necessarily fluctuating, approximate, and requiring of constant adjustment, given the ever-present and always to be avoided risk of its being lost' (p. 173).

## The Mountain, Verticality, and the Sublime

This school of life constitutes a unique 'exercise in decentering' because it takes place in an extremely strange environment, where humans do not have their place; a

[3] Leslie Stephen (1832-1904) was a professor, author, and journalist, and one of the founders of the Alpine Club before becoming its president. He made many first ascents in the Swiss Alps. He also authored several books including the famous *The Playground of Europe* (1871), an expression he used to refer to the Alps.

place of uncontrollable chaos in which matter repulses them and inflicts wounds; a place with a brutal and ever-changing climate. Mountaineers do not simply claim the right to slip into this place, to find pathways through it; they wish to conquer it, by means of its most characteristic feature: its verticality. They confront and overcome gravity to conquer its summits. Polar opposites reverse and what was once high and far, in the realm of the clouds, proves not only close but at their feet, as though gravity and weightlessness had exchanged their properties, as though rising and falling had switched places, as though under the pull of 'the attractive force that pulls you ever upwards'[4] (p. 94). The summit is a trophy earned thanks to fatigue, danger, and the immense difficulty its approach. It condenses in one point in space and time everything of the mountain experience and of the symbolism of human life. Despite their smallness and fragility, humans thus reach beyond 'the material greatness of the summit through the true greatness of consciousness and thought' (p. 95).

Unlike other mountain writers (starting with Horace-Benedict de Saussure) Frangne's account of the view from the summit does not focus on the vast panoramas, the endlessly unfolding distance, or the understanding of how mountain chains and valleys connect to each other, but rather on the emotion generated by this landscape and the internal commotion to which it gives rise. All these emotions are contained in a single word: the sublime. More than any other location, the landscapes formed of mountain peaks provide an experience of the sublime, in which contemplation is anxious and 'agitated', at once exhilarating and painful. They provide humans with a measure of their strength and weakness, or even impotence, by means of their sense of 'delicious horror'. Frangne follows the very similar definitions, by Burke and Kant, of the sublime, which radically transformed the aesthetics that emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century: 'The sublime is neither beautiful nor ugly: faced with the tortured landscape of the summit, it serves to torment those who tremble at the sight of what is at once admirable […] and terrifying on account of its similarity to "a piece of the moon"'(p. 95).

## Introspection, Quotations, and Photographs

Many other aspects of this very rich book would also warrant description. For example, the climber's introspective observations, making his body – his inextricably

[4] Quotation from Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind. Adventures in Reaching the Summit,* Vintage, 2004, p. 262.

linked mind and body – into the locus for reflexivity, focusing both on the world and on a questioning of his own self. Or his praise of guides, admirably expert when it comes to the terrain and highly reliable when it comes to initiating novices in the arcane art of climbing or the mastery of a few essential tools (ice axes, crampons, and ropes). Or for that matter his remarks on being roped together, which lies at the heart of the shared existence decreed by the mountain, governed neither by affection nor hierarchy, but by the rigorous procedures observed by all and which are the only thing ensuring that care is taken of others and that danger is met with solidarity. The very many philosophical and literary quotations used to bolster his arguments also deserve consideration: they open up new perspectives and give even broader import to his ideas. The reader goes from peak to peak in the company of Montaigne and Mallarmé, but also Nietzsche, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.

Finally, I do not have the space to go into detail about the book's iconography and its many black and white photographs. Pierre-Henry Frangne is a specialist in the history of mountain photography5 and he provides his reader with a superb gallery of images: the first photographs of the Mont Blanc massif taken by the Bisson brothers in the 1860s; striking images of ascents taken between 1880 and 1930 approximately; spectacular photographs of landscapes—faraway summits, rocks and ice—taken by the author himself. Whether historical, anonymous, or personal, these photographs function as vestiges recovered from the mountains themselves, inscribing in the pages of this book something of the reality of the places explored, the things seen, and the intensity experienced. In addition, a full chapter is devoted to mountaineering photography.

## Nothing but a Game?

I would like to end the brief presentation of this book, which will serve as a landmark in the history of mountaineering and the literature reflecting on human relations with the mountain, by raising a question about the author's central argument—raising a question in a way that does not raise objections but rather positions it in relation to philosophy and history.

[5] Two books, in particular, can be cited: *Alpinisme et photographie (1870-1940)*, with M. Jullien, Paris, Les Éditions de l'amateur, 2006; *Les inventions photographiques du paysage*, with P. Limido, Rennes, PUR, 2016.

At the same time as asserting that mountaineering finds its essence in its very gratuitousness, Pierre-Henry Frangne is keen to examine its uniqueness in this regard at an existential level: he brings out the symbolic values attached to the situation in which humans finds themselves when they take on a mountain at the risk of their life; they turn this activity into a metaphor for the human condition in the modern world, characterised as it is by decentering, rootlessness, and the absence of any predetermined goal, as well as by the full acceptance of both uncertainty and freedom. One might ask, however, whether this argument, based on a kind of phenomenological analogy, remarkably well transposed at the levels of both narrative and emotion, does indeed fully correspond to mountaineering's history and recent development.

Historical research shows that the history of mountaineering was unsuccessfully made by Pétrarque and Saussure (by their texts) but rather by a succession of ascents and excursions undertaken as much for pleasure as for science (of rocks, crystals, plants, water, and ice). These continued without interruption from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, even though few written testimonies have been left behind from before the mid eighteenth century, aside from the works of scholars, enthusiastic observers, and some very personal forms of writing still being dicovered today. Do we not, therefore, run the risk of impoverishing our sense of the past, of reducing its complexity and its enigmas, of summarising it in order to emphasise only one dimension, even if this dimension is central? Run the risk also of failing fully to take into account all the various characteristics of the 'Stephenian moment' (p. 148), by setting aside the overwhelming desire for power of Victorian and colonial England? Once again, here, historians (and in fact the authors of the time) have shown how the English bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century invaded all the picturesque places in Europe through tourism, reducing their inhabitants to the role of lackeys and chauffeurs. Could mountaineers not also be said to have exerted a form of libido dominandi, by means not of war or commerce, but of sport and symbolism, in their fantastical conquering of peaks, marking a form of territorial occupation of their own?

As for the present day, now that mountain climbing has become commonplace (the author flees the overflowing refuges and congested ascent routes full of badly prepared hikers), would it not be a good idea to establish once again a libido sciendi of climbing? To train amateurs properly, teaching them about the potential consequences of the game they are playing? In short, breathing back into their sport a science of nature that has been all too forgotten. Can we really continue today to

consider the backdrop for our leisure activities as nothing but a playground without asking ourselves: what is this doing to our planet?

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