

“But there is Art and ART’: George Leigh Mallory, positional deixis and the aesthetics of mountaineering”

In his essay ‘The Mountaineer as Artist’, George Leigh Mallory outlined his aesthetic theory of mountaineering, likening it to the emotional experience of the sublime comparable to the experience of music and art and clearly differentiating it from the merely ludic. This paper explores the influence of the aesthetic movement on Mallory’s mountaineering and mountain theory, in particular the influence of the works of Walter Pater on the values of the Cambridge Apostles and their valorisation of ‘certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects’. Pater’s injunction ‘To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy’ of transient aesthetic experience influenced generations of undergraduates and shaped elite homosocial and homosexual subcultures around mountaineering. Mallory’s tutor at Magdalene College, Cambridge, was Pater’s biographer, A. C. Benson. Benson’s thought and writing shaped Mallory’s aesthetic vocabulary. Mallory’s famous statement about his reason for climbing Everest, ‘Because it is there’, usually explained as an ontic statement about the nature of physical reality, is analysed in this paper in the context of the language and theory of aestheticism, where being ‘there’ denotes the Paterian ecstatic moment comparable to the classical Greek notion of the *aretic* ecstasy fusing art and athletic experience. Elite philhellenism in bourgeois mountaineering circles enabled Mallory to conceptualize mountaineering as one of the plastic arts, shaping the fit male body, forming character via fugitive emotional experience, creating the very image of beauty through mountaineering.

Dr. Jonathan Westaway, University of Central Lancashire