

## What Does a Modernist Mountain Mean? Auden and Isherwood's *The Ascent of F6*

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In 1936, W. H. Auden arrived in Sintra, Portugal to spend a month living and writing with his close friend, occasional lover, and literary collaborator Christopher Isherwood. They had agreed in advance that their work would focus upon the creation of a new play for London's Group Theatre troupe under Rupert Doone. While playwriting in tandem had become, as Isherwood puts it, 'a function of their friendship', this piece was also part of a concerted effort to re-imagine the verse drama form; or, as Patrick Query has expressed it, 'to rejuvenate ritual drama within a European cultural context'.<sup>2</sup> This work had been begun in Auden's *The Orators* (1932) and *The Dance of Death* (1933), and in the previous Auden/Isherwood collaboration *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935). Originally intended to be entitled *The Summit*, over the course of the month this new work came to be known as *The Ascent of F6: A Tragedy in Two Acts*.<sup>3</sup> The play's central protagonist, Michael Forbes Ransom, is a mountaineer chivvied, for ill-sketched political reasons, into the spurious ascent of F6, a mountain in contested territory within the fictional country of Sudoland. F6 sits on the border between 'British Sudoland' and 'Ostnian Sudoland', and has hitherto remained unclimbed by the native inhabitants, due to a local belief that it is guarded by a demon. However, the Ostnians have launched an expedition to scale the peak, and rumours are circulating that he that first sets foot on the summit will rule the region for a thousand years. Filled with misgivings, Ransom is compelled to lead a rival expedition by a combination of government-imposed patriotism, media pressure and personal pride. He and four fellow climbers attempt the ascent and, following the deaths of his companions, Ransom finds himself at the summit, confronting the demon of the mountain alone. In a piece of overt Freudianism which greatly troubled the critics, this demon takes the form of his mother. Ransom collapses. The British government, and the sensation-hungry public, pay tribute to his allegedly noble death.<sup>4</sup>

While the composition process in Sintra was intensive, time was found for extracurricular activities. 'Some memories of the visit', Isherwood later wrote, '[include] Wystan [Auden] insisting on scrambling up a steep part of the Sintra hills, saying that they must get themselves into the mood of the mountaineers in their play; this was accompanied by laughter, lost footings, slitherings and screams'.<sup>5</sup> Isherwood and Auden had spent two weeks together in the Harz Mountains of Germany in July 1929, but Isherwood was clearly not cut out for life at altitude.<sup>6</sup> In a later interview, he admitted to 'suffer[ing] acutely from vertigo', and Auden's fascination with mountains is, as will be seen, an intellectual rather than a sporting one.<sup>7</sup> Despite distractions, the writing of *F6* moved swiftly, leaving Isherwood, in later reminiscences, to presume that initial meetings had taken place about which he had subsequently forgotten.<sup>8</sup> Critics have suggested that much of Auden's verse, interpolated with prose for the most part written by Isherwood, had been created in previous months and years and simply came to find a home in the play.<sup>9</sup> Certainly the result of this month of work, whilst speedily

achieved, could not be called coherent. The final scene, in particular, caused problems, with Auden later lamenting that ‘we never did get that ending right’.<sup>10</sup> In Isherwood’s own account, ‘[t]he only scene on which we really collaborated was the last’, a claim whose implication of a patchwork process of creation goes a long way to explain the uneven tone and uncertain aims of the work as a whole.<sup>11</sup> While Faber published the play in book form on 24 September 1936, Doone had already begun to make alterations in preparation for the staged version. The Group Theatre production appeared, one week late, on 26 February 1937, at London’s Mercury Theatre, with William Devlin in the lead role.<sup>12</sup> Musical settings were composed by Benjamin Britten for two pianos and percussion.<sup>13</sup> With Auden away on a short trip to Spain, Isherwood and Doone had been free to make further adjustments to the play’s unsettled closing moments. The first performance was somewhat marred by the repatriated Auden’s turning to Isherwood, at the dramatic climax, and asking in an imperious stage whisper: ‘*My dear, what have you done to it?*’<sup>14</sup>

Critical treatments of *F6* have been dominated by Edward Mendelson’s suggestion that the play is at root a self-exploration on the part of Auden, an allegory for his ambivalent feelings about literary fame.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary appraisals were written in the lee of E. M. Forster’s review of the 1936 published text, in which he declares that ‘at least four pairs of spectacles are necessary before we can examine [the play] properly.’ The ‘heroic pair’ enables us to view Ransom as ‘a gifted, sensitive, ascetic, altruistic mountaineer, who crowns a noble life with a glorious death’. Meanwhile, ‘politico-economic’ spectacles will encourage us to foreground the status of the expedition as a ‘political ramp’. The pair which focuses ‘upon Ransom himself’ makes possible the perception that ‘he suffers from the last infirmity of noble minds [ ... ]. Thinking he pursues virtue and knowledge, he really pursues power’. Lastly, Forster suggests that ‘our final pair of spectacles is provided by Freud’, and in the last analysis – the Freudian analysis of this dramatically imperfect final scene – ‘motherlove, usually sacrosanct, becomes a very nasty customer in this exciting play’.<sup>16</sup> In touch with Isherwood by letter at this time, Forster was comparatively supportive and engaged, despite the function of his ‘four spectacles’ in highlighting the incoherent nature of the play. Others were less forgiving. F. R. Leavis, in a review rather sarcastically entitled ‘Mr. Auden’s Talent’, bemoans the habit of both *F6*’s writers of cleaving to public school notions of the daring hero, writing ‘we are unmistakably expected to feel towards the school hero (the school, of course, being of the class in which mountaineering is a normal interest) the respect and due felt by his school-fellow followers’. Leavis also complains of the play’s ‘mystic-psychological hocus-pocus’ in its treatment of the monks of a Sudolandian monastery, which provides both Auden/Isherwood’s most floridly theatrical and most heavy-handed scenes.<sup>17</sup>

Subsequent reviews, tackling *F6* in performance, praised the ‘ambitious project, to stage the highest mountain in the world, and the highest passions of man, on a platform hardly bigger than a good-sized double-bed’ and commended the bravery (or possibly hubris) of the company in ‘stag[ing] big stuff in a kind of pantry’.<sup>18</sup> We should remember here that the Mercury held a maximum of 150 spectators, and that its resources were limited.<sup>19</sup> The effect of an avalanche that wipes out one of

Ransom's climbing party was, for example, achieved by placing a microphone next to the backstage toilet, and flushing at the vital moment.<sup>20</sup> The alterations to which Auden so amusingly objected are traceable in these Group Theatre reviews, where we learn that 'at the end of the play – after the death of Ransome [sic] – there is a symbolic purgatory scene, in which Michael, gibbering like a spiritualist, creeps back into the womb'.<sup>21</sup> Whatever the mystifications produced by this re-worked ending, reviewers are for the most part convinced that the play is ultimately a 'parable about power'.<sup>22</sup> Doubts are however raised as to the ability of Devlin to carry this story of psychological struggle, with Julian Symons noting that 'the part of Ransom is played appallingly badly by William Devlin who gets, very early in the evening, the idea that he is acting in *Hamlet*, and does not abandon it'.<sup>23</sup> One contemporary review swerves away from the path of the majority in referring to the act of ascending F6 as a 'splendid example of modern heroism'; such a credulous reading may well be explained by the fact that the reviewer was watching the 1938 production at Charterhouse, a school with climbing credentials, given George Leigh Mallory's role as master there between 1910 and 1916.<sup>24</sup>

We might, then, euphemistically refer to reviews of the play, in both page and stage incarnations, as 'mixed'. The inconsistently collaborative nature of the project, the inclusion on Auden's part of material not written for the purpose, and the problematic final scene, all create a sense of fragmentation; 'the play is a phrase of morse' observed one reviewer.<sup>25</sup> Tim Youngs has suggested that these problems, and in particular those of the final scene, stem from the fact that 'Auden and Isherwood cannot easily contain the mountain experience', a problem whose scope goes far beyond the practicalities of staging.<sup>26</sup> The ambivalent response of the contemporary critics, together with the genuinely diffuse meaning of the play, has led to critical neglect in the years following its first appearance. Its scathingly sarcastic funeral dirge for the politician James Ransom, beginning with the phrase 'stop all the clocks', has become perhaps Auden's best known work, yet the origins of that work are rarely brought to light; a fact that explains its frequent misreading as a sincere eulogy.<sup>27</sup> Thus while *F6* is considered in overviews of Auden's dramatic writing, or in accounts of verse trends of the 1930s, and while it has been restaged – a 1939 Group Theatre revival was the troupe's last; a 1945 production bid farewell to Auden as he left Swarthmore College – it has not been afforded a sustained critical assessment.<sup>28</sup> Such neglect has resulted in partial readings, too much under the sway of Isherwood's retrospective explanations of the authors' aims and procedures. Yet one of Isherwood's claims is that while Auden 'found it amusing to be obscure', in addition 'he insisted that he always provided clues to his meaning which the reader could find if he looked carefully enough'.<sup>29</sup> This article aims to complete a small part of that careful looking, and contends that the key that unlocks this play is the identification of Ransom's real life correlate and, consequently, of *F6*'s Romantic poetic intertext. Thereafter, following Forster's lead, we will see that a fifth set of interpretative spectacles proves crucial in analysing this work: those which allow a focus upon the history of British mountaineering as both practice and philosophical exercise, and which enable us to

view *F6* as a kind of elegy for Romantic notions of spiritual ascent, now lost or perverted in the modernist era.<sup>30</sup>

### Who's Who?

It may seem a tautological business, insisting upon the relevance of British mountaineering history to a play that overtly tackles the story of a British climber. Yet the most prominent statements of the authors, along with the vast majority of contemporary and subsequent reviews, have been at pains to establish interpretations for *F6* that either sideline the mountain-related aspects of the text, or address such mountainous concerns as primarily allegorical – mere catalysts for a story of fundamental human struggle which might have taken place in any challenging location. To do so is to remain credulous toward the very notion with which *F6* takes issue: that mountaineering and heroism might be straightforwardly conflated. Most commonly, as noted above, contemporary reviewers spotted a power parable. Others discerned in the play a Leftist critique of European government, of Fascism, or of the rotten state of contemporary drama.<sup>31</sup> Several later readings of the play and its place in Auden and/or Isherwood's oeuvre concur with Mendelson's suggestion of self-exploration on the part of Auden. As the poet's literary executor, Mendelson has greatly influenced later twentieth-century readings of the play, with his most plausible explanation for *F6*'s mountaineering theme being that while 'there is nothing obviously dramatic about sitting at a desk with pencil and paper [ ... ] the mountaineer's ascent clothes the poet's struggle in visible action and gives it palpable suspense'.<sup>32</sup> Many critics of the 1930s sidelined the autobiographical reading, donned Forster's 'heroic pair' of spectacles, and identified figures not primarily known for their climbing prowess – Robert Falcon Scott, 'Titus' Oates, or T. E. Lawrence.<sup>33</sup> Isherwood's subsequent writings seem to commend the latter interpretation. His *Lions and Shadows* delineates 'the truly strong man, calm, balanced, aware of his strength [ ... ] it is not necessary for him to try and prove to himself that he is not afraid, by joining the Foreign Legion...[or] leaving his comfortable home in a snowstorm to climb the impossible glacier'.<sup>34</sup> Isherwood and Auden, the former avers, considered that 'the Truly Weak Man was represented by Lawrence of Arabia, and hence by their character Michael Ransom in *F.6*'; both are men whose quest to prove themselves *as* men leads them to endanger their own lives.<sup>35</sup> The suggestion that the play was inspired by the life of Lawrence, explorer, adventurer, military man, and alleged sado-masochist, has been repeated in the criticism since the play's publication and production, leading to a trans-generational complicity of reading which claims Ransom as simply a Lawrence cipher, shutting down further resonances that would accrue to a primarily climbing-associated figure.

The Lawrence theory is, however, difficult to dismantle. In his correspondence with Forster, covering the time of writing *F6*, Isherwood indeed confirms that the play is 'chiefly about our conception of T. E. Shaw' (one of Lawrence's alternative monikers, due to his friendship with the (George Bernard) Shaws).<sup>36</sup> Forster had by this point been burdened with the job of editing a selected letters of Lawrence, and despaired of success: 'but how is it to be done? [ ... ] Dear me what an odd

chap. [ ... ] I don't really get behind him'.<sup>37</sup> However, pushed for assistance in this way, Isherwood posts a disclaimer: 'Please don't expect our "F.6" to cast a dazzling light on the subject. I only say the play's about him for shorthand-descriptive purposes'.<sup>38</sup> Just what the name 'Lawrence' is shorthand *for* remains unstated. In his aforementioned review, Forster hedges his bets, describing Ransom as 'a national hero, akin to Colonel Lawrence in temperament and to Captain Scott in fate'.<sup>39</sup> With Lawrence dying in a motorcycle accident on 19 May 1935, he would have been foremost in the public consciousness at the time of *F6*'s conception, following statements of national consolation from Winston Churchill, widely published in the press. Declaring a friendship with Lawrence, Churchill stated: 'In Colonel [sic] Lawrence we have lost one of the greatest beings of our time. [ ... ] No such blow has befallen the Empire for many years as his untimely death. The personal sorrow which all who knew him will feel is deepened by national impoverishment'.<sup>40</sup> Such eulogising rhetorical formulations are echoed in those spoken by media magnate Lord Stagmantle following Ransom's fictional death: 'When the aeroplane flew over F6 and came back with the news that Ransom's body had been seen on the summit, the whole of England was plunged into mourning for one of her greatest sons; but it is a sorrow tempered with pride, that once again Englishmen have been weighed in the balance and not found wanting'.<sup>41</sup> Auden certainly considered Lawrence to be an intriguing figure worthy of literary exploration. In his sonnet commonly known as 'Who's Who', the poet writes: 'A shilling life will give you all the facts:/ How Father beat him, how he ran away,/ What were the struggles of his youth, what acts/ Made him the greatest figure of his day'.<sup>42</sup> It is a treatment both of Lawrence himself, and of the inadequacy of conventional biography to capture any 'great' yet complicated man. Both Auden and Isherwood might plausibly have read Lawrence's own attempt at such capture, his autobiographical *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, the first public edition of which appeared in 1926. They could also have got hold of Robert Graves's *Lawrence and the Arabs* (1927), or perhaps Lowell Thomas's *With Lawrence in Arabia* (1924), before embarking upon the *F6* project. The Forster connection gave them privileged glimpses of the letters as they were edited. Lawrence, then, with a touch of Scott, perhaps a dash of the personal sacrifice of Oates, seems to constitute our Ransom.

Yet hidden within Kenneth Allott's 1937 review for *New Verse* is a more promising indication of the figure truly haunting *F6*'s central protagonist. In an otherwise negative piece, Allott attempts to praise the innovative nature of this move into verse drama: "'The familiar stories of our generation" are not yet myths. [ ... ] The search for an heir, and the Everest expedition, are only in the process of becoming myths *in* the plays. We cannot foresee the endings. We can only guess them. It is new wine'.<sup>43</sup> For Allott, then, the strength of the Auden/Isherwood collaboration is its intention to allow contemporary theatre the flexibility to mythologise. Drawing in recent nation-defining events, the plays themselves both reflect and *create* the significance of the stories they tell. For *F6*, an Everest climb is one such era-defining story. Everest expeditions had been mounted by the Everest Committee (an unprecedented collaboration between the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society (RGS))

in 1921, '22 and '24; a major attempt to fly over the summit was made in '33, and ascents on foot were again attempted in '33 and '36. Allott's reference to 'the Everest expedition', in the singular, points toward the most famous expedition in this 'Everest era' – that of 1924, when lead climbers George Mallory and Andrew 'Sandy' Irvine lost their lives climbing the 'final step' of the peak. Noel Odell, geologist of that expedition, was the last to see the two men alive and, in a dispatch republished around the world, recounts that:

At 12.50, just after I had emerged in a state of jubilation at finding the first definite fossils on Everest, there was a sudden clearing of the atmosphere, and the entire summit ridge and final peak of Everest were unveiled. My eyes became fixed on one tiny black spot silhouetted on a small snowcrest beneath a rock-step in the ridge, and the black spot moved. Another black spot became apparent and moved up the snow to join the other on the crest. The first then approached the great rock-step and shortly emerged at the top; the second did likewise. Then the whole fascinating vision vanished, enveloped in cloud once more.<sup>44</sup>

Towards the summit of *F6* Ransom, having discovered the skull of a perished climber, relates a potted history of mountaineering, the most contemporary element of which is a reference to 'that pair also whom Odell saw on the step of Everest before the cloud hid them forever' (84). The word 'Mallory' is never uttered, an indication that the audience of the 1930s would be sufficiently familiar with Odell's widely disseminated dispatch to fill in the names for themselves. Auden's 'Manifesto on the Theatre' of 1935 declares that 'the drama is not suited to the analysis of character, which is the province of the novel. Dramatic characters are simplified, *easily recognisable* and over life-size' (my emphasis).<sup>45</sup> Written the following year, *F6* certainly conforms to such prescriptions and, as Isherwood later noted, 'the characters [of the play] are like figures in cartoons'.<sup>46</sup> The simplification of character foregrounds the political and ideological machinations of the protagonists, as Ransom is pushed towards the climb. The play's status as power parable, or political lesson ('I know that this play is didactic, is intended to make the spectator uncomfortable' stated one reviewer) is more starkly visible if the majority of characters are restricted to exaggerated traits belonging to their role in life, and/or to a plot-driving function.<sup>47</sup> Ransom's Hamletian self-analysis is an exception, and the play offers a study of his psyche, and the work of several interlinking external forces (military, political, media-connected, familial, sexual) upon him. Considering Auden's 'Manifesto', we can presume that the authors intended this more carefully-drawn Ransom to be as 'easily recognisable' as his 'simplified' or 'cartoon' fellow characters. Resemblance to a known figure would allow the audience access to a set of further implications, gleaned from a surrounding aurora of literary and journalistic accounts. In this Everest era might that figure be, not Lawrence, but Mallory?

The parallels between *F6* and the Mallory story are numerous. The name 'F6' itself recalls the original designation of Everest, by the Great Trigonometric Survey of India, as 'Peak XV' before the imposition of its English name.<sup>48</sup> *F6*'s local name is given as 'Chormopuloda', recalling the Tibetan 'Chomolungma' or 'Goddess Mother of the Earth' of Everest. Both expeditions, real and imagined,

are marked by a knotty combination of motivations: political expediency, imperial greed, media frenzy, post-War patriotism and a yearning for spiritual experience.<sup>49</sup> In both cases, it is the lead climber, Mallory/Ransom, who comes to bear the burden of the expectations of a nation. If it is Mallory who is the inspiration for Ransom, then it is the history of British mountaineering that forms the proper context in which this play must be understood. The determination of Auden and Isherwood to overcome the afore-mentioned difficulties brought about by putting a mountain on a (pantry-sized) stage surely indicates that they were committed to tackling this particular sport at this particular time. Therefore identifying Ransom's place not just within the ranks of British heroes, but within a lineage of real-life British *mountaineers*, is essential. It enables a clearer reading of this frequently bewildering text, as well as placing *F6* more squarely within a surprisingly broad canon of modernist mountain literature.<sup>50</sup> Auden's fellow poet Louis MacNeice, writing to Doone on 8 February 1936, notes: 'I hear Wystan's [Auden's] new play is going to be all about mountaineering. A grand subject for him'.<sup>51</sup> MacNeice, a member of the Auden circle, clearly sees a promising connection between poet and stated topic, without feeling compelled to claim that mountaineering will stand in for some other practice or sentiment.<sup>52</sup> Speaking on the BBC in 1938, Isherwood recalls that 'we wanted to contrast mountain-climbing for climbing's sake and mountain-climbing used for political ends'.<sup>53</sup> The corruption of a joyfully purposeless sporting endeavour seems to be the dramatic lynchpin; this is, despite statements to the contrary, a play about a mountaineer. That mountaineer is, in many meaningful ways, George Mallory.<sup>54</sup> Mallory is a particularly 'grand subject' for Auden, since both climber and writer can be considered, to redeploy a phrase of Alexandra Harris's, 'Romantic moderns', men fascinated by descriptions of mountaineering as a practice, philosophy, identity and literary engine in the work of the Romantic poets.<sup>55</sup> And it is the Romantic model of mountaineering, of a climb as an end in itself and/or as a provocation to poetry, which provides a marked contrast with the morally attenuated summit attempts of Ransom/Mallory/Auden's modernist moment. If Ransom is Mallory, and *F6*'s intertexts are Romantic, the play can be seen to track from positive associations between bodily elevation and spiritual revelation, to a 1930s context in which physical ascent is in fact tied to moral declination.

### On Pillar Rock

The dedication of Auden's *Poems*, published in 1930, reads: 'Let us honour if we can/ The vertical man/ Though we value none/ But the horizontal one'.<sup>56</sup> Such an injunction might relate to post-First World War cultures of memorialisation, and British debates surrounding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in particular. It might form part of Auden's musings on posthumous fame, later to contribute to his poem 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' (1939), or perhaps his more general interest in the 'man of action' figure. The lines may even be read as containing a smutty joke, with the implication of an erection that must be honoured. With *F6* in mind, though, we can read these lines as encouraging the conferral of honour upon those with an orientation towards the vertical, i.e. those who climb. *F6*

charts Ransom's journey from vertical climber to horizontal or prostrate corpse, and in doing so concerns itself with the 'vertical m[e]n' of British climbing, Mallory chief amongst them. The play opens by establishing Auden/Isherwood's fascination not only with the history of climbing, but with the history of attempts to capture in writing the lure of a mountainous landscape.

Our introduction to Ransom, in Act 1 Scene 1, sees him speak of high places as haunted by their generations of dead. *In situ* at 'The Summit of Pillar Rock, above Wastdale. Late afternoon',<sup>57</sup> he is reading from the twenty-sixth canto of Dante's *Inferno*: "'Oh brothers!" I said, "who through a hundred thousand dangers have reached the West [ ... ]. Consider your origin: ye were not formed to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge"' (13). Declaring that Ulysses was 'a crook speaking to crooks', and that his audience might be considered 'seedy adventurers', Ransom goes on to ask: 'who was Dante, to speak of Virtue and Knowledge?' and to state that the poet really sought 'Power' and literary revenge on his enemies (13-14). These considerations of the corruption of virtue, and the perversion of the search for knowledge into the quest for power foreshadow, of course, Ransom's own story.<sup>58</sup> Reading Dante puts the mountaineer in grandiloquent mood:

Here is no knowledge, no communication, no possession; nothing that a bishop could justify, a stockbroker purchase or an elderly scientist devote years to explaining – only the voluntary homage paid by the living to the unqualified and dangerous dead. Let me pay it, then; pay it now, before I descend to the valley and all its varieties of desperation (15)

Such a soliloquy gives poor Devlin some excuse for his Hamletian performance. It also establishes a sense of the literally and metaphorically rarefied air of the mountaintop, contrasted with the desperate valleys; an opposition much explored in the poetry of Auden and his circle, and, in fact, in the writing of William Wordsworth, whose *Prelude* includes the claim that he has 'retraced my life/ Up to an eminence', and the statement: 'Enough, for now into a populous plain/ We must descend'.<sup>59</sup> Simon Bainbridge has identified Wordsworth's 'To the Same', one of the 'Odes to Lycoris', as the moment when the poet betrays greatest ambivalence about mountaineering practices, since it includes the claim that 'each weary step [ ... ]/ Induces [ ... ]/ Unacceptable feelings of contempt,/ With wonder mixed – that Man could e'er be tied,/ In anxious bondage, to such nice array/ And formal fellowship of petty things!'<sup>60</sup> Yet the Pillar Rock scene of *F6* is also interesting because it evokes the language used by Mallory and then-President of the RGS Sir Francis Younghusband, when they spoke of the glorious purposelessness of the attempt to summit Everest. Addressing the anniversary meeting of the RGS in 1920, Younghusband opined: 'If I am asked, What is the use of climbing this highest mountain? I reply, No use at all [ ... ] there will be no *use* in climbing Mount Everest'.<sup>61</sup> In 1922, Mallory was quoted in the press offering an extrapolation upon those sentiments:

We shall not bring back a single bit of gold or silver, not a gem, nor any coal or iron. We shall not find a single foot of earth that can be planted with crops to raise food. It's no use. So, if you cannot understand that there is something in many which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself upward and



forever upward, then you won't see why we go.

Ransom's evocation of such a commitment to the purposeless endeavour is carried rather further; there is something about the 'sullen rock' which escapes the ken of religious, economic or scientific figures, although all of these disciplines are in some way involved in the later F6 summit attempt. For Ransom at Pillar Rock, the mountain operates as a memorial stone or site of pilgrimage, testament to the 'dangerous dead' – a phrase which may indicate those whose lack of climbing experience brought about their demise, or those whose haunting presence is in itself a posthumous danger.<sup>62</sup> This climb, recreational or devotional rather than spurred by the concerns of the desperate valleys, is undertaken in tribute to lost climbers and to Lakeland poets, both conjured up by the power of place.

Literary references swirl, then, in this opening sequence, as Auden and Isherwood seek to establish not only Ransom's character, but also his position within a mountaineering tradition. Shakespeare, Dante, perhaps a dash of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* or *Manfred* – all are here. Ransom's opening words – 'Oh brothers!' – operate beyond the mere quotation of Dante, however, and hint at the role which Ransom's own brother, Sir James Ransom of the Colonial Office, will play in encouraging his fatal climb. In the Faber printed edition of 1936 they are also, of course, the words immediately following the dedication, addressed to Auden's brother, the geologist and expeditioner John Bicknell Auden.<sup>63</sup> This dedication is accompanied by another fragment of Dante, drawn from the thirteenth canto of the *Inferno*, referring to 'ghosts whom Honour never paid,/ In the foolish battle made', a phrase which conjures up Auden's injunction to honour the vertical man, as well as returning us to the notion of 'foolish battle' or the purposeless danger of a major summit attempt (7). The immediate mention of a fraternal relationship also has one further, crucial meaning: it establishes as an intertext Wordsworth's 'The Brothers' (1800). This lengthy poem, hitherto neglected by critics as a source for Auden and Isherwood's play, sheds considerable light on its concerns. The action of the poem occurs in a village close to Ransom's own location: 'You see yon precipice [ ... ]/ Whence by our shepherds it is called, THE PILLAR'.<sup>64</sup> Wordsworth's introductory note states that the poem 'was composed in a grove at the north-eastern end of Grasmere lake', and was inspired by a story heard at Ennerdale.<sup>65</sup> It begins with the thoughts of the local Priest: 'THESE Tourists, heaven preserve us! [ ... ]/ some [ ... ]/ Upon the forehead of a jutting crag/ Sit perched with book and pencil on their knee,/ And look and scribble, scribble on and look'.<sup>66</sup> Aside from describing Ransom's physical attitude in *F6*'s opening scene, the Priest's interest in tourist activity in the Ennerdale area is also reflected in Ransom's lines regarding Wastdale, when the latter refers to 'all those hungry and cheerful persons whom the holiday now discharges into these lake-filled valleys radiating from the rocky hub on which I sit' (15). The poem outlines the relationship between two brothers, Leonard and James (that name again). The former has gone to sea to seek manly adventure, only to discover that the mountainous landscape of his Ennerdale youth has followed him: 'He, thus by feverish passion overcome,/ Even with the organs of his bodily eye,/ Below him, in the bosom of the deep,/ Saw mountains.'<sup>67</sup> Returning to his native village, Leonard falls into conversation with the Priest, who, in ignorance of

the identity of this stranger, relates to him the story of his younger self, and the life and tragic death of his beloved brother. The Priest, on first encountering him, immediately perceives Leonard as a man apart, a product of his mountainous homeland: ‘Ay, thought the Vicar, smiling to himself;/ ‘Tis one of those who needs must leave the path/ Of the world’s business to go wild alone’.<sup>68</sup> We learn that James, ‘though not sickly, yet was delicate;/ [ ... ] the spirit of a mountain-boy/ In him was somewhat checked’.<sup>69</sup> The contrast between the dispositions of the brothers might for Auden have recalled his own fraternal relationship – while John and Wystan were both intellectually distinguished, the latter lacked the physical prowess of his geologist/climber brother.<sup>70</sup>

For Wordsworth, the story of the brothers facilitates musings not only upon such familial ties – the poet’s own brother John was lost in a shipwreck<sup>71</sup> – but also upon the spirit and attitudes of mountain people, the operation of folk memory, and the maintenance of a sense of generations of loss within a specific pastoral landscape. ‘The thought of death sits easy on the man/ Who has been born and dies among the mountains’, states the Priest, going on to note that ‘we have no need of names and epitaphs;/ We talk about the dead by our fire-sides’.<sup>72</sup> Wordsworth’s own footnote remarks upon the oral tradition by which the dead of the area are remembered: ‘There is not anything more worthy of remark in the manners of the inhabitants of these mountains than the tranquillity, I might say indifference, with which they think and talk upon the subject of death. Some of the country churchyards, as here described, do not contain a single tombstone’.<sup>73</sup> Ransom’s evocation of the ‘dangerous dead’ is best read in this context. The later scene in which he offers his skull-clutching rehearsal of mountaineering history sees him ask that skull/*memento mori* which he has found near F6’s summit (and *Hamlet* resurfaces here, of course):

Well, Master; the novices are here. Have your dry bones no rustle of advice to give them? Or are you done with climbing? But that’s improbable. Imagination sees the ranges in the Country of the Dead, where those to whom a mountain is a mother find an eternal playground. [ ... ]/[ ... ] Whymper goes climbing with his friends again and Hadow, who made the slip of inexperience, has no faults. While, on the strictest buttresses, the younger shadows look for fresher routes [ ... ] and that pair also whom Odell saw on the step of Everest before the cloud hid them for ever, in the gigantic shadow of whose achievement we pitch our miserable tent (84)

Ransom’s claim is that the ‘dangerous dead’ will continue to climb in the mountain ranges of the afterlife, while their names live on as climbers’ incantations, their successes and failures casting a shadow on fresh attempts to summit. The reference to Edward Whymper recalls the Matterhorn disaster of 1865, with Douglas Robert Hadow being one of four climbers who died in the attempt – a quartet of deaths which anticipates those of Ransom’s own four fellow climbers.<sup>74</sup> The reference to Hadow’s ‘slip of inexperience’ hints toward ‘that pair’ as well, since the young Sandy Irvine’s lack of experience was mooted as one possible cause of their mysterious end.<sup>75</sup> Ultimately, Wordsworth’s Priest relates to Leonard the story of his brother’s demise (allying him with Ransom’s dangerous

dead) about which he has hitherto been ignorant: ‘They found him at the foot of that same [Pillar] Rock/ Dead, and with mangled limbs. The third day after/ I buried him, poor lad, and there he lies!’<sup>76</sup> Speculations about the precise circumstances of James’s death have occupied the local people, in a way which to Auden and Isherwood would have recalled those press debates as to Mallory and Irvine’s fate, subsequent to Odell’s famous final sighting. The Priest states: ‘at the time,/ We guess, that in his hands he must have had/ His Shepherd’s staff; for midway in the cliff/ It had been caught, and there for many years/ It hung – and moulder’d there’, a situation which provides James with a strange memorial in addition to the unmarked grave arranged by the Priest.<sup>77</sup> Ransom’s own descent from Pillar Rock is less dramatic, with his fellow climber Gunn calling to him ‘when you’ve finished saying your prayers, we should like to go down’, a phrasing that suggests Ransom is partial to mountain worship, with generations of fallen climbers as his guiding spirits (16).<sup>78</sup> Auden/Isherwood were likely to have read the ‘The Brothers’ in William Knight’s 1882 edition, the most recent attempt to present Wordsworth’s poetic works in full.<sup>79</sup> An annotation of Knight’s suggests that Wordsworth has, while alert to particularities of landscape, made use of poetic license in suggesting the location of James’s death as ‘Pillar Rock’. The poet in fact conflates the substantial size of Pillar Mountain with the precipice of Pillar Rock, which is instead ‘a characteristic spur, half-way up the mountain on its northern side’.<sup>80</sup> Knight states that Pillar Rock is an unlikely location for a sickly shepherd to have reached, because it is ‘a crag somewhat difficult to ascend except by practised climbers, and which has only been accessible since mountaineering became an art and passion to Englishmen’.<sup>81</sup> The explicit reference to the challenging nature of the climb would have indicated to Auden that Pillar Rock was an ideal location in which to introduce his audience to a group of experienced artists of the climbing world. The fact that the writers left for the Lake District shortly after the first performance of *F6* may explain Auden’s renewed investigations into Wordsworth’s oeuvre; although of course the latter may explain the former.<sup>82</sup> If those investigations did take place in Knight’s edition, then the fact that ‘The Brothers’ is immediately followed by the poem ‘Michael’, relating the tale of another man of the mountains, might offer one source for Ransom’s first name (the other likely namesake being Michael Roberts, inveterate mountaineer and anthologist of the poetic Left).<sup>83</sup>

Wordsworth’s poem and *F6*’s opening scene share, then, not only a location but also a range of preoccupations regarding climbing, tourism, landscape, death and memorialisation. In both works, a conversation runs between generations of climbers, living and dead, while in *F6* an additional interlocution occurs between Auden and a past generation of mountain poets. In its latter stages, ‘The Brothers’ breaks into a dramatic dialogue between Leonard and the Priest, a stylistic structure that would have proved interesting to Auden in his quest to explore new shapes and possibilities within the verse drama form (‘from hill to hill, from rock to rock,/ Still craving combinations of new forms’ as *The Prelude* has it).<sup>84</sup> *F6*’s later scene between Ransom and the ‘Abbot’ of a Sudolandian monastery is the closest structural match to Wordsworth’s efforts, and again the subject is, at root, death. The spiritual aspects of mountaintop contemplation seem lost on Wordsworth’s Priest, however, who

suggests that while tourists waste time perching on the crags, ‘a man might travel twelve stout miles,/ Or reap an acre of his neighbour’s corn’.<sup>85</sup> Yet the Romantic poets themselves were of course, while perhaps equally sceptical of tourist activities, much concerned with the importance of mountainous landscapes as locations of spiritual revelation. In the modernist period, the work of the Romantic era directly tackling mountain experiences was anthologised alongside more recent technical accounts, in volumes such as Arnold Lunn’s *The Englishman in the Alps...* (1913), whose small print and portable size made it a possible pocket book for the active mountaineer.<sup>86</sup> While Ransom finds it appropriate to bring Dante to the mountaintop, Mallory for his part professed a great love of Percy Shelley, writing to Marjorie Holmes *en route* to his final Everest attempt: ‘My reading on board has so far been chiefly [André] Maurois’ *Life of Shelley*, or *Ariel*, as he calls it. [ ... ] Do you know Shelley? One of the greatest spirits that have appeared on earth & a man of such moral beauty that I feel dazzled in his presence – I can’t tell you how profound a feeling I have for Shelley; he has influenced my life more than any one’.<sup>87</sup> Robert Bridges’s anthology *The Spirit of Man* (1916) was taken on the final Everest expedition, and would have pleased Mallory with its generous dose of Shelley – 9.6% of the entries are written by the author.<sup>88</sup> Thus while Dante appears to throw us off the scent of the Ransom/Mallory correlation, the unacknowledged presence of Wordsworth’s ‘The Brothers’ in *F6*’s opening scene instantiates a Romantic mountain heritage of interest to both Auden and to Ransom’s correlate Mallory, as well as introducing the audience to Ransom’s ghostly climbers, overshadowed (as that later scene reveals) by the Mallory and Irvine pairing.

### Modernist Mountaineering

For Ransom, the self-selected summiting of Pillar Rock allows a connection with the Romantic poets, and with Wordsworth most importantly, not only because it occurs in a Lakeland setting, but also because it retains a purity of purpose, or rather a protected purposelessness, as a recreational and contemplative climb; he is ‘saying [his] prayers’. This ascent therefore contrasts with his later attempt upon *F6*, prompted as it is by the political manoeuvrings of the men of the desperate valleys, including his own devious brother James. In their opening scene, Auden and Isherwood therefore allow Ransom to climb once in the Romantic spirit, ascending only later in the tenor of the 1930s. Using the shift of location from the Lakes, associated with that initial coining of the mountaineer identity (the development of climbing as ‘an art and passion’, as Knight has it), to a Sudoland of Himalayan proportions which therefore relates most conspicuously to the 1920s/30s ‘Everest era’, allows the authors to underscore the changes that so many decades of mountaineering have wrought. It is the press magnate Lord Stagmantle who states in most explicit terms the motivating factors behind the proposed attempt of *F6*: ‘Between ourselves, this expedition’s nothing more or less than a political racket. You know that. So do I. Well, who cares! Leave the dirty work to your brother and me: we’re used to it’ (44). Yet it is the magnate himself who has most to gain from adhering to the fundamentally Romantic notion of pure summiting, given the increased newspaper sales that will

result, and so it falls to Stagemantle to (as we saw above) offer a hymn to Ransom and Gunn, lost somewhere on the north face, just as Mallory and Irvine had been upon Everest in the previous decade. Memorialisation in the latter case was most famously the responsibility of the Right Reverend Henry Luke Paget, Lord Bishop of Chester. Giving the solemn memorial address for Mallory and Irvine at St. Paul's Cathedral on 17 October 1926, Paget alleged that it was not simply a selfish love of the mountains that motivated these two lost men, 'but rather that with the love of mountains was the ascent of spiritual altitudes, splendid peaks of courage and unselfishness [ ... ] such as are reached [ ... ] always by the compassionate, the brotherly, and the pure in heart'.<sup>89</sup> In fact, Paget went so far as to suggest that God himself approved of such attempts to get closer to heaven, when he intoned from the Latin psalms '*ascensiones in corde suo deposuit*: He has set ascents in his heart; or, as we should phrase it, He has set his heart on ascents'.<sup>90</sup> Not only was this climb God-sanctioned, it was both heroic and as wonderfully mysterious as the Divine: 'that last ascent, with the beautiful mystery of its great enigma, stands for more than an heroic effort to climb a mountain, even though it be the highest in the world – *sic itur ad astra* [thus you shall go to the stars]'.<sup>91</sup> Paget's hyperbole, and his attempt to see two unrecovered bodies lost to their families as a holy mystery, may perhaps be forgiven since his audience contained not only RGS and Alpine Club members, but His Majesty King George V, the Prince of Wales, and the surviving expedition members themselves. Such was the media-fuelled fascination with this 1924 expedition, and with the loss of two young British men, that Paget had little choice but to weave the story of their deaths into a narrative of British nerve and noble sacrifice. By the time of *F6*, such claims to arbitrary heroism lingered only in press reports and memorial services. Auden and Isherwood's invocation of the figure of Mallory and, through him, that of Wordsworth, enables a conversation across two major periods of mountaineering history in Britain, and shows that while Wordsworth and his contemporaries could climb Pillar Rock as poetic pilgrims, Ransom is left only with their ghosts, while his *F6* attempt is hedged about by political, imperialist, unpleasantly media-savvy rhetoric, in addition to familial and psychological pressures. Ransom has no control over what a modernist mountain means.

Word count: 7277

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- <sup>2</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind: 1929-1939* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977), 179. Patrick Query, 'Crooked Europe: The Verse Drama of W. H. Auden (and Company)', *Modern Drama*, 51:4 (Winter 2008), 580.
- <sup>3</sup> Michael J. Sidnell, *Dances of Death: The Group Theatre of London in the Thirties* (London: Faber, 1984), 185.
- <sup>4</sup> W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *The Ascent of F6: A Tragedy in Two Acts* (London: Faber, 1936). All references will be to this Faber 1936 edition unless otherwise stated, henceforth given in parentheses.
- <sup>5</sup> Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 179. This brief account echoes John Ruskin's address to mountaineering in which the Alps are looked upon by the British tourist as 'soaped poles in a bear-garden, which you set yourselves to climb, and slide down again, with "shrieks of delight"'. See John Ruskin, 'Of Kings' Treasures', in *Sesame and Lilies, Works of John Ruskin*, ed. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London and New York: George Allen, 1903-12), XVIII, 89.
- <sup>6</sup> This mountain experience in a German context makes plausible the suggestion of the German *Bergfilme* or 'mountain film' as a source of inspiration for *F6*. The tradition became established in the 1920s, particularly under the influence of Arnold Fanck, whose films include *Mountain of Destiny* (1924), *The Holy Mountain* (1926) and *White Ecstasy* (1930). The titles alone indicate common interests with *F6*, a play much concerned with individual versus cosmic destiny, holiness and spirituality in relation to mountains and the climbing act, and the revelations of ecstasy, or ecstasis, the state of being beside oneself, of viewing oneself again. One further Bergfilm may provide Auden and Isherwood with the myth of the haunted mountain, *The Demon of the Himalayas* (1935). A 'Topography of the Mountain Film' can be found in Eric Rentschler, 'Mountains and Modernity: Relocating the Bergfilm', *New German Critique*, 51 (Autumn 1990), 137-61.
- <sup>7</sup> Edward Mendelson, 'The Auden-Isherwood Collaboration', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 22:3 (October 1976), 277-8. Christopher Isherwood and Stanley Poss, 'A Conversation on Tape', *The London Magazine*, 1:3 (June 1961), 51.
- <sup>8</sup> Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 179.
- <sup>9</sup> Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (London: Faber, 1981), 251.
- <sup>10</sup> Mendelson, 'The Auden-Isherwood Collaboration', 281.
- <sup>11</sup> Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 180.
- <sup>12</sup> 8 March 1937 saw the US publication of the play by Random House, incorporating changes made by the authors, even as Doone was revising for the stage. Further revisions completed in late 1936 were incorporated in the second British edition by Fabers, published March 1937. Following the Group Theatre production, *F6* is performed at Cambridge, financed by John Maynard Keynes. Two further revisions of the ending occurred in 1939, prior to the play's revival at the Old Vic in London, starring Alec Guinness. This was the final production of the Group Theatre. See Mendelson, 'The Auden-Isherwood Collaboration', 280-1.
- <sup>13</sup> For the suggestion that the 'incidental music composed by Mr. Benjamin Britten was both unnecessary and unpleasing' see Derek Verschoyle, 'The Theatre', *Spectator* 158 (5 March 1937), 403.
- <sup>14</sup> Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 201.
- <sup>15</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 249.
- <sup>16</sup> E. M. Forster, 'The Ascent of F6', *Listener*, 16, supplement 31 (14 October 1936), vii.
- <sup>17</sup> F. R. Leavis, 'Mr. Auden's Talent', *Scrutiny*, 5:3 (December 1926), 326. For the related claim that in *F6* 'literature assumes more and more the external characteristics of a boy's adventure story' see Dilys Powell, 'Heroic Tragedy', *London Mercury*, 34 (October 1936), 561.
- <sup>18</sup> Hugh G. Porteus, 'F.6', *New English Weekly*, 10 (11 March 1937), 432.
- <sup>19</sup> See Christopher Innes, 'Mercury Theatre', in *Cambridge Guide to the Theatre*, ed. Martin Banham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 313.
- <sup>20</sup> Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 200.
- <sup>21</sup> Porteus, 'F.6', 433. While the mother demon is a laughable Freudian insert, Mrs Ransom's appearance at the summit also makes reference to understandings of mountains as goddess mothers, further discussed below. Finally, Ransom's meeting with the matriarch underscores his identity as, in Wordsworth's phrase, a 'child of the mountains'. See William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (New York and London: M. H. Abrams/Stephen Gill, 1979), X, 1006.
- <sup>22</sup> Hugh G. Porteus, 'Auden Now', *Twentieth Century Verse*, 1:1 (January 1937), unpaginated. See also E. B. H. (identity unknown), 'Ascent of F6', *Cambridge Review*, 58:1428 (30 April 1937), 365.
- <sup>23</sup> Julian Symons, 'The Ascent of F6', *Twentieth Century Verse* (April/May 1937), unpaginated.
- <sup>24</sup> Unknown author, 'The Ascent of F6', *The Carthusian* (June 1938), 908. For details of Mallory's time at Charterhouse, see David Robertson, *George Mallory* (London: Faber, 1999), 64-106. This 1938 production of *F6*, under the direction of Eric Barton, takes the school by storm. *The Carthusian* notes that Ronald Millar (1919-1998, later a speech writer for Margaret Thatcher) 'threw himself with evident enjoyment into the part of Gunn' (908). We should remember here that the Carthusians are an enclosed Roman Catholic monastic order, founded by St. Bruno of Cologne in 1084, in the valley of the Chartreuse, French Alps, and that Charterhouse is

the anglicised name for a Carthusian monastery. The motto of Carthusians (monks, that is, not scholars) is '*stat crux dum volvitur orbis*' [the cross is steady while the world turns]. Ian Shawcross, Ransom's most devoted fellow climber, may be named with this association in mind.

<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Allott, 'Auden in the Theatre', *New Verse*, 26:7 (November 1937), 19.

<sup>26</sup> Tim Youngs, 'Following the Progress of the Mountain Mission: The Critique of Heroism and Nationalism in Auden and Isherwood's "The Ascent of F6"', in *Mountains Figured and Disfigured in the English-Speaking World*, ed. Françoise Besson (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010), 69.

<sup>27</sup> Auden and Isherwood, *The Ascent of F6*, 113. There is a hint of 'stop all the clocks' in Matthew Arnold's 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse', which makes reference to St. Bruno's monks' precursors (see note 24, above), hermits known as the Desert Fathers: 'Fenced in early in this cloistral round/ Of reverie, of shade, of prayer,/ How should we grow in other ground?/ How can we flower in foreign air?/ -- Pass, banners, pass, and bugles, cease;/ And leave our desert to its peace'. Matthew Arnold, 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse', in *Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), 287. In scenario and in rhythmic echoes, Auden's lines are recalled: 'Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,/ Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,/ Silence the pianos and with muffled drum/ Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come' (113).

<sup>28</sup> For examples of *F6*'s role within broad literary surveys, see Sidnell, *Dances of Death*, 185-6; Mendelson, 'The Auden-Isherwood Collaboration', 280-5; Query, 'Crooked Europe', 596; Allott, 'Auden in the Theatre', 17-21; Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 181-252.

<sup>29</sup> Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 180.

<sup>30</sup> A full discussion of Romantic notions of the sublime is beyond the scope of this article. My aim here is to indicate that William Wordsworth's climbing practice, his bodily elevation, was most often tied to both spiritual revelation and literary composition. While Simon Bainbridge has suggested that mountaineering in the Romantic era was already 'a deeply ambivalent pursuit, embracing life while simultaneously fleeing from it', I suggest that Ransom's summiting is riven with personal and professional conflicts, leaving no room for sublimity of experience. See Simon Bainbridge, 'Romantic Writers and Mountaineering', *Romanticism*, 18:1 (2012), 13. For further discussion of the sublime in relation to the history of mountaineering, see Ann C. Colley, *Victorians in the Mountains: Sinking the Sublime* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010); Kevin A. Morrison, 'Embodiment and Modernity: Ruskin, Stephen, Merleau-Ponty, and the Alps', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 46:3 (2009), 498-511.

<sup>31</sup> Such readings occur in the 1930s and beyond. See Mirko Jurak, 'Commitment and Character Portrayal in the British Politico-Poetic Drama of the 1930s', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 26:3 (October 1974), 342-351; Query, 'Crooked Europe', 592; Stonier, 'The Ascent of F6', 13.

<sup>32</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 251-2. Auden therefore implies a link between mountaineering and poetic composition. In this, he finds a precursor in Wordsworth, whose writing is essential to a full understanding of *F6* as we will see. Wordsworth conflates poetic effort and physical ascent in *The Prelude*, claiming that he has 'tracked the main essential power -- Imagination -- up her way sublime'. See Bainbridge, 'Romantic Writers and Mountaineering', 7.

<sup>33</sup> Forster nominates Lawrence and Scott, see Forster, 'The Ascent of F6', vii. Verschoyle votes for Lawrence, see Verschoyle, 'The Theatre', 403. Stonier concurs, see G. W. Stonier, 'The Ascent of F6', *The New Statesman and Nation*, 23:436 (1 July 1939), 13.

<sup>34</sup> Cited Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 192.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Isherwood, 'Letter to E. M. Forster, 31 March 1936', in *Letters Between Forster and Isherwood on Homosexuality and Literature*, ed. Richard E. Zeikowitz (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008), 50.

<sup>37</sup> E. M. Forster, 'Letter to Christopher Isherwood, 20 May 1936', in Zeikowitz, *Letters Between Forster and Isherwood*, 54.

<sup>38</sup> Christopher Isherwood, 'Letter to E. M. Forster, 23 May 1936', in Zeikowitz, *Letters Between Forster and Isherwood*, 55.

<sup>39</sup> Forster, 'The Ascent of F6', vii.

<sup>40</sup> 'Lawrence of Arabia: Strategist of the Desert Dies in Military Hospital', *The Manchester Guardian* (20 May 1935), 9, 12. See also 'Mr. Churchill on T. E. Lawrence: "Might Have Been East's Conqueror"', *The Manchester Guardian* (5 October 1936), 7.

<sup>41</sup> Auden and Isherwood, *The Ascent of F6*, 120.

<sup>42</sup> W. H. Auden, 'A shilling life will give you all the facts', in *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1976), 109.

<sup>43</sup> Allott, 'Auden in the Theatre', 19.

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- <sup>44</sup> Noel Odell, 'Mr. Odell's Story', in 'The Mount Everest Dispatches', *The Geographical Journal*, 64:2 (August 1924), 164. See also Noel Odell, 'The Last Climb of Mallory and Irvine', *The Geographical Journal*, 64:6 (December 1924), 455-61.
- <sup>45</sup> W. H. Auden, 'Manifesto on the Theatre', in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1986), 273.
- <sup>46</sup> Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 181.
- <sup>47</sup> Porteus, 'F.6', 433.
- <sup>48</sup> See Andrew Waugh, 'Papers Relating to the Himalaya and Mount Everest', *Proceedings of the RGS*, 9 (April/May 1857), 345-51.
- <sup>49</sup> For a discussion of such pressures surrounding the figure of Mallory, see Wade Davis, *Into the Silence: The Great War, Mallory and the Conquest of Everest* (London: Vintage, 2012).
- <sup>50</sup> I use the term 'mountaineering literature' to denote mountaineer-authored work whose primary concern is to convey the experience of a climb. This category therefore includes technical accounts, dispatches, expedition reports, guidebooks and advice columns, climber memoirs, and biographies. I use the term 'mountain literature' to encompass both this former category and other work (whether fiction or non-fiction) which addresses mountains, mountaineers, or the practice of mountaineering, but does not do so primarily in technical terms, or with the primary aim of speaking to other mountaineers. Indeed, many works included in the latter, broader category are written by non-climbers, as was *F6*.
- <sup>51</sup> Sidnell, *Dances of Death*, 332.
- <sup>52</sup> For a discussion of the 'Auden circle' and its significance, see Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 18.
- <sup>53</sup> Christopher Isherwood, 'Speaking Personally', BBC television broadcast, 12 October 1938. Cited Sidnell, *Dances of Death*, 186.
- <sup>54</sup> Peter H. Hansen has suggested briefly that *F6* might sensibly be read as part of Mallory's legacy. See Peter H. Hansen, 'Modern Mountains: The Performative Consciousness of Modernity in Britain, 1870-1940', in *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II*, ed. Martin Daunt and Bernhard Rieger (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 196-7.
- <sup>55</sup> Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010). I somewhat abuse her terminology here.
- <sup>56</sup> W. H. Auden, *Poems* (London: Faber, 1930), unnumbered page.
- <sup>57</sup> Auden and Isherwood, *The Ascent of F6*, 13. References to this edition henceforth in parentheses.
- <sup>58</sup> Dante's rendering of the Ulysses tale was an influence upon Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 'Ulysses', which, as Hansen has pointed out, provided the 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield' motto of a generation of explorers. See Peter H. Hansen, 'Albert Smith, the Alpine Club and the Invention of Mountaineering in Mid-Victorian Britain', *The Journal of British Studies*, 34:3 (July 1995), 318.
- <sup>59</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (New York and London: M. H. Abrams/Stephen Gill, 1979), III, 168, 196. For mountain-versus-valley spatialised moral economies in the work of the Auden circle and associates see, for example, Cecil Day Lewis 'Transitional Poem' (1929) and *The Magnetic Mountain* (1932), Stephen Spender *The Temple* (1928) and 'Icarus' (1933), and Michael Roberts 'La Mije', 1937.
- <sup>60</sup> Bainbridge, 'Romantic Writers and Mountaineering', 10.
- <sup>61</sup> Francis Younghusband, 'Address at the Anniversary Meeting', *The Geographical Journal*, 56:1 (July 1920), 10.
- <sup>62</sup> We might note here that the monument afforded to Ransom's memory is an obelisk (122), a kind of stone mountain in miniature, an erection testament to the 'vertical man'. A tomb or sepulchre is of course inappropriate, since his body, and that of his partner on the summit attempt, Gunn, have not been recovered.
- <sup>63</sup> John Bicknell Auden was part of the Geological Survey of India (GSI). He had been responsible for mapping work in the Karakoram region of the Himalayas. See Eric Shipton, *Blank on the Map* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938).
- <sup>64</sup> William Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', in *Wordsworth's Poetical Works Vol. II*, ed. William Knight (Edinburgh: William Paterson, 1882), 120. While our main interest in Pillar Rock is the link it provides between Auden/Isherwood and Wordsworth, we might also note that Mallory too made the climb. In fact, his attempt to introduce his new wife Ruth to the joys of climbing included the New West Climb on Pillar Rock. See Robertson, *George Mallory*, 100.
- <sup>65</sup> Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', 106.
- <sup>66</sup> Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', 106-7.
- <sup>67</sup> Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', 108-9.
- <sup>68</sup> Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', 110.
- <sup>69</sup> Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', 119.



<sup>70</sup> John Bicknell Auden's membership of the GSI provided him, in 1934, with the opportunity to gain the first close view of Everest's southern face, while undertaking survey work in Nepal and Bihar – a possibility that could not have been dreamt of without Mallory in mind (although Mallory's ascent attempt was made, as Ransom's is, on the north face). Weather prevented a thorough visual reconnaissance, but Auden betrays a mountaineer's passions in his intention to be the first Westerner to approach Everest from the south. Other connections of brotherhood proliferate in the climbing community of this period. Eric Shipton and H. W. Tilman, perhaps the leading climbers of the 1930s, were known as the 'terrible twins' despite no literal filial bond. See Deborah Barker, 'From the Summits of Empire: The Auden Brothers and the Twilight of the Empire', *The Caravan – A Journal of Politics and Culture* (January 2013), 2. The brother of the body/brother of the mind combination with which Auden/Isherwood are working in *F6* is also present in the climber/writer pairings of Raymond and Graham Greene, and Michael and Stephen Spender.

<sup>71</sup> See William Wordsworth, note to 'Character of the Happy Warrior', in *Wordsworth's Poetical Works Vol. IV*, ed. William Knight (Edinburgh: William Paterson, 1883), 2.

<sup>72</sup> Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', 113.

<sup>73</sup> Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', 124. We might note a parallel here with the Everest expedition parties' accusations of indifference to mountain deaths on the part of the Sherpa ethnicity porters assisting on the ascent attempts; accusations which a greater familiarity with Sherpa mourning and burial traditions dispels. See Sherry B. Ortner, 'Thick Resistance: Death and the Cultural Construction of Agency in Himalayan Mountaineering', *Representations*, 59 (Summer 1997), 154.

<sup>74</sup> See 'News in Brief', *The Times* (19 July 1865), 14. The same disaster appears in another work of the modernist period, the short story 'The Symbol' of c.1941 by Virginia Woolf. Woolf's father was of course Sir Leslie Stephen who, amongst many other interests, was actively involved in the Alpine Club and its journal. See Virginia Woolf, 'The Symbol', in *A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. Susan Dick (London: Vintage, 2003), 282-4.

<sup>75</sup> See Julie Summers, *Fearless on Everest: The Quest for Sandy Irvine* (London: Iffley Press, 2010); Tom Holzel and Audrey Salkeld, *The Mystery of Mallory and Irvine* (London: Pimlico, 2010).

<sup>76</sup> Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', 121.

<sup>77</sup> Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', 122.

<sup>78</sup> For extrapolations of the phrase 'mountain worship', denoting the 'ambivalent modernity' of mountaineering, see Hansen, 'Modern Mountains: The Performative Consciousness of Modernity in Britain, 1870-1940', 188.

<sup>79</sup> Isherwood claims that Auden was responsible for this opening scene. See Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 180.

<sup>80</sup> Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', 124.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Mendelson, 'The Auden-Isherwood Collaboration', 280. Wordsworth has been described as Auden's 'first poetic mentor'. See Mendelson, 'Auden, Wystan Hugh', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Lawrence Goldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edition, Jan 2011 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30775>, accessed 3 Aug 2011].

<sup>83</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Michael: A Pastoral Poem', in *Wordsworth's Poetical Works Vol. II*, ed. William Knight (Edinburgh: William Paterson, 1882), 125-44.

<sup>84</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, XI, 190-1.

<sup>85</sup> Wordsworth, 'The Brothers', 107.

<sup>86</sup> Arnold Lunn, *The Englishman in the Alps: Being a Collection of English Prose and Poetry Relating to the Alps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1913).

<sup>87</sup> George Mallory, 'Letter to Marjorie Holmes 8 March 1924', Royal Geographical Society, LMS/M48. The tiniest dash of Shelley appears in Ransom's discourse. When the climb is first proposed to him, Ransom claims that 'since boyhood, in dreams, I have seen the huge north face' (42), with an echo of Shelley's 'I have been familiar from boyhood with mountains and lakes [ ... ]: Danger, which sports upon the brink of precipices, has been my playmate'. See Percy Shelley, 'Author's Preface to *The Revolt of Islam*', in *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 34.

<sup>88</sup> Robert Bridges, *The Spirit of Man* (London: Longmans Green & Co., 1916). For a mention of the Bridges anthology's inclusion on the 1924 expedition packing list, see Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (London: Granta, 2003), 265.

<sup>89</sup> Henry Luke Paget, 'Memorial Service at St. Paul's Cathedral', *The Geographical Journal*, 64:6 (December 1924), 464.

<sup>90</sup> From Psalm 84, Chapter 5 'In whose heart are Thy ways'. See Paget, 'Memorial Service', 463.

<sup>91</sup> See Paget, 'Memorial Service', 464. The Virgilian quotation *Sic itur ad astra* ('Thus you shall go to the stars') had become the motto of the Canadian Air Force when they formed in 1920. See Hugh A. Halliday, *Canada's Air Forces, 1914-1999* (Montreal: Editions Art Global and the Department of National Defence,

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1999). The phrase turns up in Mallory's contribution to Everest dispatches in 1924, when he records a mountain scene: 'As I headed the party trudging a little grimly across the glacier basin in the last light of day I dimly made out a party approaching. It was [J. B.] Noel and Odell, with two or three porters bearing hot soup in thermos flasks. *Sic itur ad astra*. They will deserve their thrones in Heaven'. George Mallory, 'The Mount Everest Dispatches', *The Geographical Journal*, 64:2 (August 1924), 154. Mallory may have earned his own place in heaven as far as Thermos was concerned, since the brand had sponsored the expedition. See Unknown author, 'The Mount Everest Expedition of 1924', *The Geographical Journal*, 63:4 (April 1924), 342.