

## The Line that Binds: Climbing Narratives, Ropework and Epistolary Practice

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In 'An Inventory of Shimmers' (2010), Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg suggest that affect is 'integral to a body's perceptual *becoming*', part of a process in which that body is 'pulled beyond its seeming surface-boundedness by way of its relation to [...] forces of encounter'. Through affect, they claim, a body is 'webbed in its relations' (2010: 3). In the early twentieth century, two models suggest themselves as both allegories for and instantiations of such webbed relations: letter writing, and mountaineering. Epistolary practice, in its combination of bodily sensations (as writer or recipient) and of identity formation (in a conversational duet with one's addressee), along with its connections to others in a network facilitated by postal services, pulls individual identity and intimate bodily experience into relation with others, using the handwritten line. Mountaineering makes use of the rope strategies of the belay, tying together participants in ways both physical and emotional in a binding that 'shimmers' between the literal and the metaphorical. Using the figures of George Mallory and Virginia Woolf, mountaineer and author, this chapter explores the ways in which letter writing and mountaineering can both be considered as activities of the binding line. For Mallory, one's passage up the rock face is a form of script, while the letter sends forth the looped line of the belay to attach the addressee. For Woolf, letter writing may suffer the perilous line break of mountaineering, while climbing scenes afford the opportunity to consider the potential of epistolary practice as a literature of the moment, a temporary tie. Mountaineering and letter writing are in this way bedfellows, albeit unlikely ones, since their binding lines, on mountainside and page, generate narratives of affect.

### 1. Mallory and Marjorie

From 1923 until his death on the slopes of Everest on 8/9 June 1924 (the precise moment of his end being unconfirmed), Mallory maintained a correspondence with Eleanor Marjorie Holmes (known as Marjorie), a teacher of no official qualifications working at a private school in Bentham, Yorkshire. The correspondence was of both an intense order and a peculiar kind, since the two had never met in the flesh. As Mallory expressed it, 'I can never write to you without a delighted surprise that we should have travelled so far together without meeting' (Mallory 26/05/23: 4), a remark which draws attention to the fact that, while they kept in sympathetic step, only one of them has in fact been travelling; Marjorie's imagined companionship has been facilitated by the epistolary form. Although this appears an odd arrangement, Mallory's family responsibilities, paid work, writing and expedition assignments, alongside his shyness, kept him from wild sociability in his adult life, making expedient a liaison of the letter. The Royal Geographical Society holds copies of all missives received by Marjorie in Mallory's hand, the collection mined by those on the hunt for insights into the climber's psychological fortitude in the face of the impending summit attempt of 1924 – a service the letters supply admirably. The rest of the Mallory archive contains items retrieved from his body when discovered during a 1999 expedition, among which that most commonly requested for public display is his climbing boot.<sup>1</sup> This fetishisation of the contact relic is more familiar from pilgrimages towards the bodies, or bodily traces, of the saints. However, since 'saints' remains in contemporary mountaineering parlance as a term for the greats of the climbing past, and since discourses of climber pilgrimage were deployed in the press during the Everest era, homage to the contact relic of Mallory's boot may be read in context. We should note that this specific prize of the reliquary is the point at which man met mountain, conjuring up Mallory's foothold, and its loss. Yet

the *letters* of the archive are also concerned with contact and with bodily conjuring.

We can reasonably read the epistolary page as ‘prosthetic’, as standing in lieu of unmediated contact, since that word’s origins in the term *prosthēnos* indicate an appended or supplementary letter (that is, character), rooting prostheses in the literary form (Armstrong 1998: 78). A letter (i.e. piece of correspondence) is of course something that unfolds in language, but it also extrapolates and extends touch capacities, making it a positive prosthesis in its magnification of human powers. When I write a letter I become my pen, with my concentration set at the tip, but I also (with the pen seen, too, as a prosthesis), stroke the page.<sup>ii</sup> My caress is given over to the scriptive instrument, while a possible steadying hand upon the paper keeps the unmediated human touch in play. Mallory himself dwells on the tactile trace, with his rather plaintive request that Marjorie ‘write me a little letter with a word of affection and I would kiss the hand that wrote it’ (08/03/24: 1), going on to ask ‘can you love a shadow – a mere hand that spins out lame halting words & belongs in some way to a name in the newspapers?’ (2). Additional tactile capacities of the mountaineer creep in here, with problems of expression conflated with the lame and halting step. When the letter meets its recipient, such traces of my touch come into contact with the touch of another; this is a caress at a distance. Further, whether or not I make explicit reference to it, the letter’s origins in the intimate contact of hand-and-page, and ultimate destiny to be (customarily) read alone upon receipt, forges a particular kind of bond that may well encourage a resonant physical experience for my reader. The saints reappear at this point, since the notion of *praesentia* has the saint present, upon death, both in heavenly realms, and at the site of his or her body parts or relics (see Brown 1981), a doubled presence that is here supplied via epistle. We cannot know whether Mallory harboured a desire for eventual, actual touch, the intervening pen and paper prostheses removed (although it seems from *his* responses that *Marjorie* did), but he clearly considers the letters a kind of transgression. Working at time of writing for the extra mural studies department of the University of Cambridge, his anxieties may be due to a mooted lack of privacy within the University postal delivery system and the gossip it might provoke (‘Anyway do you realise that I really was damned [...] angry with you Marjorie, you naughty girl? You tell me you meant to put “Personal” on the envelope, I have no doubt you did: but that is not the point’ (13/10/23: 1)). But it may more reasonably be supposed that a letter is, for Mallory, a great intimacy.

Within this broader story of the affective epistolary form, the expedition letter proves a particular case. Often focusing on physical travails in their accounts of recent days, such letters may attempt to convey the degraded or exhausted body, passing on experiences ‘on the hill’ to those reading in comparative comfort. In cases where the recipient is known intimately to the writer, this collapse of distance is also crucial, in that (as with the *praesentia* of the saints) the impossibility or impracticality of literal touch makes the imagined triumph over geography an imperative. In both cases we are looking for letters with the ability to be touching – in terms both of conveying bodily experience, and of emotional expression. When Mallory writes ‘oh, I like your letter well enough. I’m touched by it’ (02/03/23: 2-3), then, he is speaking of manifold forms of touch – the tactile trace of the author, the summoning up of a particular physical experience, and the emotional response to endearments. Upon receipt in the field, the letter which comes *to* the expedition member literalises the contact for which it stands, as it is usually kept close to the body, both for safekeeping and for preservation in inclement conditions, forming a kind of second skin or semi-permanent caress.

Writing in July 1923, Mallory again reflects on the strangeness of a relationship conducted by letter in its entirety:

It is curious how much you make me want to converse with you merely by writing. You have some literary power – the power of putting forth yourself, the responsive, feeling, emotional self in words & that I suppose is the power of literature. [...] the letter which proceeds from the real desire to tell things or still more which is inspired by some curiosity or excitement in the spiritual presence of the imagined recipient can be the best talk in words, the best of all. (31/07/23: 2)

‘Merely by writing’ has a double meaning here – either ‘merely by writing, you prompt me into dialogue’, or ‘you make me want to converse with you via the epistolary form exclusively’. The power Mallory ascribes encouragingly to Marjorie (she shares his ambitions in authorship, and looks to him in part as a literary mentor) is subsequently ascribed to literature in general, but we close with the letter, circling back to that notion of conjuring to suggest that the recipient stands beside the scribe in spiritual form, a kind of muse. The phrasing ‘proceeds from’ underscores the extending reach-touch of the letter-prosthesis, grasping toward that muse (in a later note comes the line ‘farewell to you now – my holidays all unrelated – but you a figure more distinct, and nearer’ (04/10/23: 8)). For Mallory, the epistolary form brings Marjorie toward him, a spiritual presence which does not simply compensate for her physical absence, but appears to surpass it, the climber’s feelings baffling him in their intensity for a woman whose flesh is, after all, not simply absent in these instances of letter contact, but entirely absent from his ken. By October 1923, Mallory is asking:

why should a letter from you have such a strange effect on me? [...] after reading it I wanted to kiss you. If she’s a scolded child [for sending a private letter to a professional address] she’s a kissed child, spiritually kissed by a man she never set eyes on (04/10/23: 3-4).

The ‘strange effect’ is the conjured presence.

Woolf concurs with Mallory’s view of the epistolary relationship as one in which the addressee is present to the scribe, remarking that ‘a good letter-writer so takes the colour of the reader at the other end, that from reading the one we can imagine the other’ (Woolf 1967: 63), and that ‘all good letter writers feel the drag of the face on the other side of the page and obey it’ (Woolf 2011: 225). Further, ‘without someone warm and breathing on the other side of the page, letters are worthless’ (Woolf 1984: 109), a claim supported by the expedition letter, since it is precisely warmth and breath that are in short supply on Everest’s flanks.<sup>iii</sup> A curious feature of Mallory’s conceptualisation of the presence of Marjorie at the other side of his ‘line’ is its heat:

Guess what might happen if another spark glowed there in the chair opposite. Would two sparks make a fire? [...] What is it all about this fire always wanting to blaze up? Shall we see it blaze or shall we hold the snuffer on it? Two to one on the blaze now: tomorrow two to one on the snuffer. (07/11/23: 3)

There is more than the heat of passion at work here, with the conjured presence of the absent letter sender and/or recipient making itself known through an inflammation, or perhaps inflammation, with the latter’s suggestion of heat that will be felt in the flesh. The phrase ‘*in flagrante delicto*’ hovers around such a reading, with its implication of the caught-in-the-act revelation of a romantic affair. However, the phrase’s legal meaning of ‘blazing’ – that is, conspicuous – offence is perhaps more helpful since it leads us toward ‘caught red handed’ and draws attention to the operation of the touch and wider somatic system in sensing the burning presence of the absent addressee. One further explanation can be found for Mallory’s deployment of flame discourse in conceptualising the Marjorie relationship: the scene of writing itself. Discussing Horace Walpole, Woolf notes the difficulties of bridging the public appetite for one’s words, and the intimate setting in which they will be read, asking ‘how can

a writer turn at will from that impersonal stare to the little circle in the fire-lit room?’ (Woolf 2011: 226). In claiming the intimacy of Walpole’s epistolary intent, Woolf observes that he has told an addressee of ‘a spark from the fire [that] has burnt the page he was writing’ (226) – evidence against the claim that he wrote with posterity exclusively in mind. Mallory’s expedition letters, including perhaps those to his wife Ruth, might well have been written with an eye to posterity, with the last letters of R. F. Scott a relatively recent memory. Yet Marjorie was a secret, leading to the flickering flame – letters might be written or read by the fire, they might bring the warm glow of the imagined presence and/or of sexual desire, but such thoughts might well lead to a feeling that the pages must be burnt (‘the best letters of our time are precisely those that can never be published’ (Woolf 1966: 262)).<sup>iv</sup> Nor should we think that the snows of the summit preclude such heat – we have Woolf (see below) and D. H. Lawrence as a precedent. The abandoned first chapter of *Women in Love* (1921), now considered a prologue to the work, involves a mountaineering scene, and suggests that its three male protagonists are ‘enkindled in the upper silences into a rare, unspoken intimacy’ (1979: 489); one which is lost at ground level: ‘Then had come the sudden falling down to earth, the sudden extinction. At Innsbruck they had parted’ (490).<sup>v</sup> Whether prompting a tactile, spiritual or flammable connection, something about the letter says ‘Alpine for You’, as a mountain-themed 1951 episode of the *Popeye* cartoon has it, and in pining I will both conjure you, and touch you through this paper prosthesis. A particular yearning in an expeditionary context is both eased via the prosthetic reach and exacerbated or enkindled by the conduit of epistolary prose.

The only tendency within Mallory’s letters that sidelines flame discourse is that of a pull toward metaphors of ropework, apparently forever on the tip of the pen of the active mountaineer.<sup>vi</sup> So it is to Mallory that we turn for an explicit reflection on the connection between epistolary practice and the strategies of the rope that will both propagate and symbolise trust on a climb:

What do you need me for, Marjorie? To prattle on like this in my psycho-moralising strain? [...] Or just to be a little closer – because words spelt in ink twist a line as one writes to throw over & tie to oneself that other one, whatever they say in kindness. (15/01/24: 3)

By time of writing, Mallory knew that he was to join the 1924 attempt on Everest, and it is therefore no surprise to find him thinking in terms of mountain metaphors. The rope line by which mountaineers are connected is, however, a particularly resonant representation of connection, trust, risk and intimacy – all concepts crucial to the Marjorie letters. Margrit Shildrick has suggested that touch is:

always an embodied gesture that may sustain a reciprocal sense of solicitude and intimacy [...]. To touch and be touched speaks to our exposure to, and immersion in, the world of others, and to the capacity to be moved beyond reason, in the space of shared vulnerabilities (2001: 402).

It is ‘shared vulnerabilities’, in a mountain space ‘beyond reason’ or rationally justifiable endeavour, that generate the reciprocity of trust within the belay. Writing of *Modern Mountaineering* (1933), George Abraham claims that ‘the full, careful, and discerning use of various belays, must be mastered thoroughly if the sport is to be practiced justifiably’ (1933: 151-2); while belay failure is the gravest of situations ‘on the hill’, it is also ropework that will supply a means of managing risk. The term ‘belay’ has shifted meaning across the decades, and may refer to rocks and projections used to secure the rope, the person providing anchorage to a lead climber, the rope activities of that anchor, or the more general use of a communal rope tied to all members of a climbing party. In each case, the aim is for a brace to be available in the event of a slip, meaning that a climber will move only a limited distance

beyond the point of anchorage, and cannot go into freefall. ‘Belay’ has also moved along the ropelines to the world of nautical slang, used on ship as an equivalent to ‘cut it out’ or ‘cease and desist’, where it also therefore retains a sense of the cut-off point and, for that matter, of an anchor. While the mountaineer’s repertoire of rope manoeuvres is vast, none is such a powerful symbol of trust and common purpose as the belay. One of history’s most famous images of roped climbers is that of the last sighting of Mallory, tied to Sandy Irvine during their final attempt upon Everest’s summit. Noel Odell, geologist of that expedition, was the last to see the two men alive:

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. (Odell 1924: 164)

Reading the script of the climber-letters, and the pen trail of the rope that links them, Odell eventually loses legibility due to the conditions. Repeatedly asked to ‘read’ this final sighting for an assessment of whether or not the pair ultimately summited, he is unable to say with certainty, to write the next passage of script.

## 2. Alpine Woolf

Despite her lupine surname, we do not necessarily expect to find Woolf on the mountainside. She is a doughty and determined traveller, writing memorably about Turkey and Greece, yet prevailing wisdom has us ascribe to her the natural habitat of the drawing room, and consider her explorations as primarily those of the mind. So it may be at first a surprise to find that on 22 June 1937, she records in her diary:

I wd. like to write a dream story about the top of a mountain. Now why? About lying in the snow; about rings of colour; silence...& the solitude. I cant though. But shant I, one of these days, indulge myself in some short releases into that world? [...] Oddly enough I see it now ahead of me – in Charing X road yesterday – as to do with books: some new combination. [...] I’m trying to get the 4 dimensions of the mind ... life in connection with emotions from literature – A days walk – a minds adventure: something like that. And its useless to repeat my old experiments. They must be new to be experiments. (Woolf 1984b: 95-6)

The reference to ‘that world’ might be read as indicating the closed shop of the climber’s ‘brotherhood of the rope’ (see McDonald 2007), with whose connections and traditions Woolf is familiar, but outside of which she stands as a non-practicing mountaineer. But since arrival in this world is a ‘release’, we can more convincingly claim that Woolf here figures the summit as a space of rarefied air, and ascension as a move toward the heavenly, rather than simply accession to a male-dominated cadre of climbers. Giving the memorial address for the loss of Mallory and Irvine at St. Paul’s Cathedral on 17 October 1924, the Right Reverend Henry Luke Paget intoned from the Latin psalms ‘*ascensiones in corde suo deposuit* [sic]: He has set ascents in his heart; or, as we should phrase it, He has set his heart on ascents’ (Paget 1924: 463). This reference to Psalm 84, Chapter 5 ‘In whose heart are Thy ways’ is useful in emphasising that Woolf, too, had set her heart on ascents, for all that she feels she ‘cant’ currently write about them. Yet the exploration of the mind with which we more readily associate the author does not fall away as we turn our attention to the business of mountaineering. Woolf’s mountainous imagination is perhaps simply the latest iteration of her longstanding interest in finding new forms for the proper expression of psychological experience. It is in Charing Cross Road, far from the snows of silence and solitude, that the

mountain has reared up before her once again, returning us to her suggestion, in her essay 'The Cinema' (1926), that it is in the city's momentary conjunctions that we find experiences '[a]waiting a new art to be transfixed' (Woolf 1950: 171). The reference to 'some new combination' here, a literary form that will render both 'life' and 'emotions', recalls the language of Nicholas the dentist, amateur orator of Woolf's recently completed *The Years* (1937), who refers to the soul as 'wish[ing] to expand; to adventure; to form – new combinations?' (Woolf 1968: 238). When Woolf sees the mountain loom before her in the street, it may therefore be said to be both prompt and symbol, heavenly ascents demanding new forms for their proper description, and the hard graft of literary experimentation being a kind of mental mountaineering, a long slog up the slopes.<sup>vii</sup>

In November 1940, Woolf writes that she wants to 'brew some moments of high pressure. I think of taking my mountain top – that persistent vision – as a starting point' (Woolf 1984b: 341). The mountain offers 'persistent vision' through the scope and clarity provided by elevation, but it is also persistent in its long-term residency in Woolf's imagination, in turn echoing the lengthy timescale of the mountain's own life; it, of course, endures. Woolf's response to this strange geological outcrop in/of the imagination is a short story that takes the long view, through the representation of a mountaineering moment. The published text of that story is drawn from a typescript with holograph revisions dated 1 March 1941, and thus we are both at the end of Woolf's mountain-related diary entries, and within the final days of her life since her suicide comes on the 28th of that month (her death in the River Ouse seeing her turn not to the mountain but to the water, that other preoccupation of her writing life, to bring about her end (see Lee 1997: 760)). The typed title 'Inconclusions' is in this holograph draft crossed out and 'The Symbol' written in its place (Dick 2003: 305). This apparent shift toward clarity of meaning is unravelled by Woolf's, and her protagonist's, grappling with the nature or object of that symbol, the mountain.

The story begins:

There was a little dent on the top of the mountain like a crater on the moon. It was filled with snow, iridescent like a pigeon's breast, or dead white. There was a scurry of dry particles now and again, covering nothing. It was too high for breathing flesh or fur covered life. All the same the snow was iridescent one moment; and blood red; and pure white, according to the day (Woolf 2003: 282).

In an Alpine setting, we find this rebarbative summit in which neither men nor animals belong. Percy Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' (1817) is echoed in this description of the colour instability of the snow: 'The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves, / Now dark – now glittering – now reflecting gloom – Now lending splendor' (2009: 1 1-4), as well as in the loneliness of the location: 'the snows descend / Upon that Mountain; none beholds them there' (1131-2).<sup>viii</sup> The implication of the heavenly is present once again, in that the summit is shorn of the fleshly – we should note that it was described in the typescript as 'virgin'; and that the term is retained later on in the tale (Woolf 2003: 305; 238). The ominous blood red flash within the heavenly white of the summit anticipates disaster, a kind of shepherd's warning. Omen gives way to the certainty of danger as further hints accrue that all will not go well: 'The graves in the valley – for there was a vast descent on either side [...] recorded the names of several men who had fallen climbing' (Woolf 2003: 282). Following these intimations, Woolf changes focus and takes us to a domestic scene – one itself concerned with focusing, with an unnamed woman, subject to a mountain view, writing a letter to her sister in Birmingham: "'The mountain,'" the lady wrote, sitting on the balcony of the hotel, "is a symbol..." She paused. She could see the topmost height through her [field] glasses. She focussed the lens, as if to see what the symbol was'

(Woolf 2003: 282). The touch of humour here indicates that we cannot look in order to know; the indecipherability of the mountain as symbol is not to be solved by attending to its scrutability. Yet Woolf does begin by foregrounding the visual aspects of this scene of epistolary activity, carefully positioning her protagonist as an audience member (or, with the anticipated disaster in mind, as a witness):

The balcony overlooked the main street of the Alpine summer resort, like a box at the theatre. There were very few private sitting rooms, and so the plays – such as they were – the curtain raisers – were acted in public. They were always a little provisional [...]. So little that was solid could be dragged to this height. (Woolf 2003: 282)<sup>ix</sup>

In addition to one explanation for that ‘Inconclusions’ title – the provisional nature of a town built so high – this quotation suggests that if the doings of that town are the ‘curtainraiser’, then the mountains themselves may supply the main act, and so it proves:

One can see the mountain from every window. [...] I can assure you, I could shriek sometimes coming out of the one shop where they sell papers [...] always to see that mountain. [...] Somehow the talk, even among the invalids, who are every where, is always about the mountain. [...] In the storm last night, I hoped for once it was hidden. But just as they brought in the anchovies, The Rev. W. Bishop said, ‘Look there’s the mountain!’ (Woolf 2003: 283-4)

The passage is subtle in its establishment of the division of labour. Others, as we soon learn, will climb the mountain, but letter writers, clerics, and those who are feeble of body will have to find other ways to contemplate the slopes, the latter being so unfit for a climb that it seems amazing they register the presence of that mountain at all (‘even [...] the invalids’). The looming of the Charing Cross peak here finds a more literal rendering, as does that notion of the ‘persistent vision’, since the mountain cannot be escaped (recalling the Matterhorn’s domination of the town of Zermatt). That Woolf’s mountain should invoke ‘shriek[s]’ puts us in mind of John Ruskin’s famous objection to the participant mountaineer, who has ruined the Alps by treating them as ‘soaped poles in a bear-garden, which you set yourselves to climb, and slide down again, with “shrieks of delight”’ (1903-12: 89). Ruskin sides with the spectators.

Spectator contemplations might well be profound, given this ever-present reminder of the scale of history, this *memento mori* that so challenges the flesh. For Woolf’s letter writing woman, proximity to a high place has prompted that ‘long view’:

I never told you [...] how I longed when the doctor came, that he should say, quite definitely, She cannot live another week. It was very prolonged; she lived eighteen months. The mountain just now reminded me how when I was alone, I would fix my eyes upon her death, as a symbol. I would think if I could reach that point – when I should be free – we could not marry as you remember until she died [...]. I thought, when I reach that point – I have never told anyone; for it seemed so heartless; I shall be at the top. (Woolf 2003: 283)

The long view finds a typographical equivalent in the frequent use of the dash in this passage. Woolf’s partial shift from the semi-colon, her customary recourse when depicting either flow or scattered thought, is important in its visual rendering not only of the extended scope of vision, and perhaps of the yearning an Alpine view might provoke, but of the ropes that would make ascent possible. One further form of labour is introduced by Woolf here – not literary experimentation, nor literal mountaineering, but the sacrifices of a woman left to care for an ailing relative, and in doing so foregoing/postponing the happiness that might otherwise have been hers. (Such lingering illnesses were a concern of Woolf’s at this time: see the bed-bound Mrs. Pargiter of *The Years*.) These domestic responsibilities can be contrasted with the opportunities available to male relatives: ‘so many of our uncles and

cousins were explorers. I have always had a great desire to explore for myself. But of course, when the time came it seemed more sensible [...] to marry' (Woolf 2003: 283). The letter, and the mountain that prompts it, therefore affords Woolf the chance to think through the thwarted lives of women, an abiding interest in her fiction and non-fiction writing. Further, with the suggestion that mountaineering is men's work, while letter writing is women's, Woolf picks up the thread of arguments she has established in her many discussions of epistolary practice. Reviewing the published letters of Dorothy Osborne, she remarks that letter writing 'was an art that a woman could practise without unsexing herself. [...] that could be carried on at odd moments, by a father's sick-bed, among a thousand interruptions' (Woolf 1967: 60).<sup>x</sup> It is a mother's sick-bed that has been recalled in 'The Symbol', but this tale makes clear that, while she has had no time for adventuring, our scribe has had time to form an epistolary habit. Room therefore exists for a 'mountain of one's own' interpretation, in which the snow and not the grass is forbidden territory, the notion of trespass transposed from college lawns to Alpine heights (Woolf 1984a: 5-6).<sup>xi</sup>

However, our reading of the story is modified once mountaineers come onto the carefully constructed scene: 'Lowering her glasses, she nodded at the young men who in the street below were making ready to start. With one of them she had a certain connection [...] an Aunt of his had been mistress of her daughter's school' (Woolf 2003: 282). That 'certain connection' compels the letter writer to follow the fate of the party, forming a link between her domestic balcony location, and the harsh realities of the slopes. She participates in an established feature of the Alpine holiday given that 'by means of various telescopes enthusiastic onlookers could trace a climb from its start to its conclusion. As a result, by [the] mid [nineteenth]-century, mountaineering was not as solitary an undertaking as it had once been' (Colley 2010: 57). Thus ascending climbers will potentially have their attention split between the immediate contact of body-and-rock, and the spectacle their progress presents to those watching in the hotels affording a view of their route. While Woolf's story remains with the woman, through its other doublings (sister and sister; inside and outside; mountain and valley) it asks us to consider this bifurcated attention of the stars of the mountaineering show. Woolf's story complicates the active climber/inert observer dualism, involving two fields of action, figured as masculine and feminine, the mountaineer (his attention split between the tactile labour of the climb, and imagined tourist eyes) and the scribe (attending to both mountain scene and epistolary page). This appears a story of separation – and yet the symmetry here of two hand experiences (rock grasp; pen grasp; two forms of *chirurgie* or hand-made work (Derrida 1993: 5)) might lead us to suspect that connections ('a certain connection') will also be drawn, putting the letter writer and the mountaineer in contact, by virtue of their tactile acts.

Writing of handwriting, Vivian Sobchack remarks upon its pleasures, which are 'as much in the manual forging and visual sight of the letters and words as in their [...] communicative value, and [in] a physical fatigue felt in the hand' (2004: 114). The letter writer combines the effort of the hand with the hard work of phrase formulation:

Still holding the pen, still tipped with a drop of ink, she waved down at the climbers. She had written the mountain was a symbol. But of what? In the forties of the last century two men, in the sixties four men had perished; the first party when a rope broke; the second when night fell and froze them to death. We are always climbing to some height; that was the cliché (Woolf 2003: 283).

Her ink-tipped pen of course echoes the precipitate drop to which she refers ('when a rope broke'), but the poised or hesitant pen is also the symbol of the aphasic, s/he who, like Prufrock, cannot 'spit out all the butt-ends of [his] days and ways' (Eliot 1963: 15). The



Prufrockian conundrum might sensibly be read as a response to the blank canvas of the mountain's snows. Addressing Wordsworth's references to Mont Blanc in Book VI of *The Prelude*, Alan Liu has remarked that 'the whiteness at Mont Blanc [...] is the space in which history can ghost into the present; it is not no meaning but a panic of too much possible meaning' (Liu 1984: 528). We should note the panic of possibilities which is put forth by the bone-white mountainside, as well as that two-way *tabula rasa*, in which the epistolary page remains blank or 'virgin' precisely because of the blankness of its selected subject. In a line present in the typescript but excised, Woolf makes explicit this concern with ineffability: there is about the mountain 'something that far from running into ink spontaneously, remained almost unspeakable even to herself' (Woolf 2003: 305).

In a 1907 letter to Violet Dickinson, Woolf describes the difficulties of transition from thought to written form, takes on the language of the shifting summit, and creates another moment of ineffability which all comes down to the pen-point: 'Now my brain I will confess [...] floats in blue air; where there are circling clouds, soft sunbeams of elastic gold, and fairy gossamers – things [...] that must be tenderly enclosed, and expressed in a globe of exquisitely coloured words. At the mere prick of steel, they vanish' (cited Stimpson 1987: 173). In 'The Symbol' two writers attempt to overcome such difficulties. The author has an in-story proxy – she is tracing a woman who is tracing a climb; both scribblers are women, writing by hand. Yet Edward Mendelson has said of W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood's *The Ascent of F6* (1936) 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' (Mendelson 1981: 251-2). So it may be that, despite some hints toward the snows as the preserve of the masculine, the *mountaineers* are the Woolf proxy, highlighting the effort that must go into the attempt to express oneself in epistolary form. As for 'palpable suspense', we are dealing with both palpation, in terms of hand/body interactions, and suspense – we anticipate a fall, to follow a moment of ink-drop suspension. It is the indecipherability of the symbol of the mountain that prompts a contemplative pause, drawing together the impossibility of its explication in a letter, and the purposelessness of the climb so treasured by the committed mountaineer (remembering Mallory's oft-quoted response to the question of why climb Everest? 'Because it's there').<sup>xii</sup> For Daniel Chandler, it is the symbiosis of mind and hand in the act of handwriting that makes the letter both potent and problematic: 'words flow from a pen, not from a mind. [...] I *become* my pen; my entire organism becomes an extension of this writing instrument. Consciousness is focused in the point of the pen' (1992: 69). It is therefore no surprise to find the letter writer pausing – she must not only decipher the mountain, and explain the purpose of the climb undertaken in full view of the graveyard, but also somehow express *herself* in relation to that mountain. To quote Cecil Day Lewis: 'Those Himalayas of the mind / Are not so easily possessed: / There's more than precipice and storm / Between you and your Everest' (1954: 92).<sup>xiii</sup>

Eventually Woolf breaks the suspense of her story and lets her mountaineers – and her ink – drop:

'As I write these words, I can see the young men quite plainly on the slopes of the mountain. They are roped together. One I think I told you was at the same school with Margaret. They are now crossing a crevasse...'

The pen fell from her hand, and the drop of ink straggled in a zig zag line down the page. The young men had disappeared.

It was only late that night when the search party had recovered the bodies that she found the unfinished letter on the table on the balcony. She dipped her pen once more;

and added, ‘The old clichés will come in very handy. They died trying to climb the mountain ... And the peasants brought spring flowers to lay upon their graves. They died in an attempt to discover...’

There seemed no fitting conclusion. And she added ‘Love to the children,’ and then her pet name. (Woolf 2003: 284)<sup>xiv</sup>

Reinforcing a personal connection, and reiterating the youth of the party, Woolf raises the stakes of the accident. While a typical Woolfian ellipsis suspends the reader’s progress over the mountain’s crevasse, it is a zigzag line that marks the epistolary page.<sup>xv</sup> That liberated ink drop traces, in fact, the shape of a *safe* mountain descent; it is the pen, point of consciousness of the observer/scribe that suffers the abrupt fall that echoes that of the climbers themselves. Writing resumes, although personal expression is jettisoned in favour of the clichés that have hitherto been avoided, although often remarked upon (Woolf 2003: 283; 284; 305; 305).<sup>xvi</sup> The language of sacrifice is partially evoked, but the absence of a ‘fitting conclusion’ reiterates the purposelessness of the climb, the ‘because it’s there’ draw to the top. Both the climb and the letter remain unfinished – ‘Inconclusions’ indeed. Woolf’s protagonist, in struggling with unwieldy clichés in her attempt to recoup the possibly ‘indefensible’ deaths for a noble purpose, draws attention to the common terminology and uneasy equation between ‘the fallen’ of the Great War, and those who are lost on the hill (see Westaway 2013). But the hellish descent is also a fall from grace, a kind of catabasis, as the intermittently fiery glow of Woolf’s summit may be said to anticipate. Thus the fall of a climber falls between two discourses of fallenness – that of youth wasted in war, and of the descent from heavenly realms. While God has apparently set his heart on ascents (*ascensiones in corde suo disposuit*) – to climb, then, is human, to *err* divine – the broken line is also a hellish *descent*. The break in Woolf’s epistolary line occurs at the moment where language fails, when the hell of the fall and the discourse of noble sacrifice battle it out, via blotted ink and cliché. It is perhaps in the zigzag ink trace that speaks most eloquently about the loss of the climbing men, and the impossibility of its proper transcription. Woolf has remarked that when ‘the art of letter-writing [was] in its infancy [...] the language was still too rich and stiff to turn and twist quickly and freely upon half a sheet of notepaper’ (Woolf 1967: 60). In the zigzag we have an example of the liberty of the twisting line of the contemporary page, which partakes of the freedom of immediate response, and offers direct access to feeling.<sup>xvii</sup> ‘The Symbol’ is therefore a work as interested in epistolary practice as in mountaineering, its doubled line break drawing our attention to two forms of (hitherto) binding line. Read in this way, Woolf’s story introduces the suggestion that mountaineering might be said to be always an affecting narrative, best accessed through the affective epistolary text seeking to link the bodily (‘days walk’) with the emotional (‘minds adventure’).

### 3. The Line that Binds

Contemporary body studies, amongst which theories of affect make a central contribution, have re-thought the human sensorium, so that ‘rather than talk of bodies, we might talk instead of brain-body-world entanglements’ (Blackman 2012: 1). Woolf is prescient in suggesting that brain/emotions, body and world might become entangled in a mountaineering moment, resulting in the frayed (or zigzag) epistolary line. For Lisa Blackman, bodies are ‘characterised more by *reciprocity and co-participation* than boundary’ (2), reciprocal relationships finding pertinent allegories in the epistolary or belay relationships, themselves intertwined in complex ways, as both Woolf and Mallory show. Rummaging through drawers of ill-stored letters, a half-hearted epistolary archive, Woolf states that ‘the effect is indescribable. One could swear one heard certain voices, [...] was in Italy, was in Spain, was

horribly bored, terribly unhappy, tremendously excited' (Woolf 1966: 262). The affective nature of these letters, not only conveying experience but also conjuring it in the emotional and bodily centres of the addressee, is clear. Further, it is the 'haphazard ways' and 'general absorption in the moment' (262) of these modern letters which makes them so powerful, suggesting that the art of the letter, far from being killed off by cheap postage, has become a potent literary force. Woolf's susceptibility to the voices of others finds a cruel echo in the symptoms of her poor mental health, leading ultimately to her suicide, shortly after completing 'The Symbol'. Like her drawers, Woolf's mind became stuffed with voices ('but what to do with them? (262)), and she wrote one last letter to Leonard before ending her life, severing the tenuous thread of existence, her final binding line.

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<sup>i</sup> Information received: RGS Deputy Librarian Jan Turner.

<sup>ii</sup> I reverse Chandler's claim here (see below).

<sup>iii</sup> Woolf conceives of the scribe/conjured addressee relationship as a duet. Rebutting the suggestion that Walpole wrote for posterity using friends as mere 'pegs' from which to hang letters, she writes: 'If [William] Cole had been nothing but a peg there would have been none of this echo, none of this mingling of voices' (Woolf 2011: 225). Tackling Prosper Mérimée's *Lettres à Une Inconnue* in 1906, Woolf claims: 'to read the

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letters intelligently you must construct a reply; they demand it as imperiously as certain notes struck on the piano demand, & seem to imply their harmonies' (Woolf 1992: 342).

<sup>iv</sup> See also Woolf to Ethel Smyth: 'Lets leave the letters till we're both dead. Thats my plan. I dont keep or destroy but collect miscellaneous bundles of odds and ends, and let posterity, if there is one, burn or not.' (Woolf 1994: 272).

<sup>v</sup> David Trotter drew my attention to this specific quotation. Lawrence himself climbed, spending a week with David Garnett and Harold Hobson in Mayrhofen and *en route* to Sterzing, in August 1912. He also walked in Switzerland with A. P. Lewis in June 1914 (Lawrence 1979: 498 n8).

<sup>vi</sup> One last line completes the mountaineer's contribution here: the 'line' or ascent trajectory superimposed upon sight of a peak.

<sup>vii</sup> Woolf's understanding of the summit owes much to Lawrence, clearest when Crich attempts the slopes alone: 'Should he climb the other ridge, or wander along the hollow. How frail the thread of his being was stretched!' (Lawrence 1979: 473).

<sup>viii</sup> Mallory is also a Shelley man: 'Do you know Shelley? One of the greatest spirits that have appeared on earth [...] he has influenced my life more than any one' (08/03/24: 3). Shelley was a substantial feature of Robert Bridges's anthology *The Spirit of Man* (1916), taken on Mallory's 1924 expedition, as I have noted elsewhere (Garrington 2013: 39).

<sup>ix</sup> Catharine Stimpson suggests that Woolf's own letter writing is theatrical: 'She creates a series of private theatres for an audience of one, each with its own script and scenery, lights and costumes' (1987: 169).

<sup>x</sup> The connection between women and the epistolary form is long-standing: 'In the eighteenth century [...] women who wrote familiar letters were figures of epistolary contradiction, simultaneously lauded as "naturally better" writers and disparaged as naturally disorderly' (Brant 2006: 18).

<sup>xi</sup> *A Room of One's Own* invokes a further 'line' via fishing metaphor. Seated by the Cam, Woolf notes: 'Thought [...] had let its line down into the stream. It swayed [...] letting the water lift it and sink it until – you know the little tug – the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line' (Woolf 1984a: 5). See also Woolf's use of the letter as bait, most explicit when she writes to Smyth that 'this is a little worm dangled to catch a letter – a long one' (Woolf 1994: 309).

<sup>xii</sup> Wordsworth anticipates Mallory in his explanation for spending the summer vacation in a trip to the Alps: 'But nature then was sovereign in my heart, / And mighty forms, seizing a youthful fancy, / Had given a charter to irregular hopes' (1995: 1338-348).

<sup>xiii</sup> The precipitate drop does double duty in 'The Symbol', containing the possibility of a letter cut short or abandoned, the mountain's inexpressibility having got the better of the scribe, but also underscoring (or dangling pendulously beneath) the reference to other falls in Woolf's potted history of mountaineering. It is the four deaths of the 'sixties' that are crucial – a reference to the Matterhorn disaster, in which four lives were lost following a broken rope. Further evidence that Woolf has the Matterhorn in mind is provided by the name she gives the hotel's proprietor, Herr Melchior (Woolf 2003: 284), presumably named for Melchior Anderegg with whom Woolf's father, Alpinist Sir Leslie Stephen, climbed frequently (Stephen 1996: 86 n2).

<sup>xiv</sup> See also Lawrence: 'When they brought the body home, the next morning, Gudrun was shut up in her room. From her window she saw men coming along with a burden, over the snow.' (1979: 475). Woolf's rendering, with floral tributes upon the graves, is squarely within the pastoral tradition.

<sup>xv</sup> The crevasse turns up in another epistolary context when, in *Three Guineas* (1929), Woolf writes to her addressee that while class unites them (they are both 'educated'), gender divides them: 'But...those three dots mark a precipice, a gulf so deeply cut between us that for three years and more I have been sitting on my side of it wondering whether it is any use to try to speak across it' (Woolf 1984c: 110).

<sup>xvi</sup> Woolf's concern with cliché, particularly when describing mountaineering, may be rooted in her reading of Alexander Pope. The latter's, or (via pseudonym) Martinus Scriblerus's, *Peri Bathous, or, The Art of Sinking in Poetry* (1727) bemoans the failures of contemporary verse to rise above the bathetic, deploying topographical metaphors of mountains and fens to explain such rising-and-sinking. Pope's role in Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) confirms her interest in his work.

<sup>xvii</sup> Note Woolf's 'Modern Letters' (1930): 'a well-formed handwriting is now the rarest of happy discoveries. Here it slants, here it bends back; it is rapid, and running in almost every case' (Woolf 1966: 260). While speed of execution leads to illegibility, the hurried letter allows the form to grasp the moment, an abiding Woolfian interest.