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Author(s)	Tagaya, Shingo
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The Passion for Ascension: Robert Frost's "The Mountain"

Shingo Tagaya

I

After the long dark period in which man's fear had outdone his interest in mountains, the passion for ascension rose to the surface of human consciousness. This began, in the literary history of mountaineering, as early as the fourteenth century, when a great Italian poet, Petrarch, first climbed up the top of Mount Ventoux, leaving somewhat detailed documents on his own experience.

The dawn of mountaineering has found in its course some poets and philosophers much more interested in this field. One may remember Goethe's beautiful romantic poem about the peace on the peak ("Wandrer's Nachtlid"); one may point to Nietzsche's "Also Sprach Zarathustra" as having a philosophical argument about the significance of ascension (and also descent). Or one may also notice that English romantic poets used mountains as an important key image for their poetic expression: Byron wrote a poem about a roving young highlander; Wordsworth arranged that famous passage of Mount Snowdon to be put in the final climactic chapter of *The Prelude*. All these examples may be safely said to form a context contributing to the making of modern alpinism.

II

In this context, Robert Frost's "The Mountain" may be a

typical American poem describing man's passion for ascension. In this poem the poet is concerned with climbing a mountain up to its peak. He came across a local habitant who might give him information on climbing the mountain. The poet asks the habitant for useful information, but the habitant's answers are not so much helpful. In fact, he has never climbed it.

In this sense, the dialogue between them is not so successful; the climber tries to gather as much information as possible, but the habitant seems to know little about it. It seems that the failing interaction comes from a contrast between the two men's attitudes toward mountains. The contrast can be epitomized in a dialogue in which the climber asks the local man about his experience:

"You've never climbed it?"

"I've been on the sides,
Deer-hunting and trout fishing." (44-45)

The climber's expectation was betrayed. After all, the local habitant won't bother to struggle his way up to the top of a mountain; he confines himself within the field of mountain sides. Thus he confesses his indifference to climbing:

It doesn't seem so much to climb a mountain

You've worked around the foot of all your life. (82-83)

This essay attempts to see the poem as depicting the dawn of alpinism faced with rural darkness in a local community.

III

The opening introduction of the mountain is fearful. It depicts the mountain as a black shadow:

The mountain held the town as in a shadow.

I saw so much before I slept there once:

I noticed that I missed stars in the west,
Where its black body cut into the sky. (1-4)

The image of “a shadow” reminds us of the medieval treating of a mountain as dark; it was dark not only because people did not know much about it but also because it was allegedly a living place for demons. The human fear for the mountain created a dark image of it. And here in this poem, the “black body” tells something fearful about the mountain that “cut into the sky.”

This kind of fear, however, is a beauty and charm itself in our modern context. Thus, the following phrase “Near me it [the mountain] seemed” shows the poet’s ambivalent attitude toward the mountain: on one hand, he feels it is overwhelming; on the other hand, he feels it is close and dear to him. A similar coexistence of fear and dear can easily be found in Wordsworth’s Prelude, such as in passages on recollections of the poet’s childhood.

But now the dawn is breaking. The following morning found him much more interested in the region. He “walked forth at dawn to see new things” (8) and found himself interested in a river which ran through the town. His careful observation offers us many details about the river:

The river at the time was fallen away,
And made a widespread brawl on cobblestones;
But the signs showed what it had done in spring:
Good grassland gullied out, and in the grass
Ridges sand, and driftwood stripped of bark.
I crossed the river and swung round the mountain.

(10-15)

The river here is marked as destructive rather than benevolent: there is no water here and what he saw was only lifeless or inanimate things such as stones, sand, and driftwood. It

should be noted that these are inorganic things deprived of the vital image of water.

IV

A significant change of mood came when the traveller came across a local habitant, "who moved so slow" (16) that the traveller ventured to stop him. Thus begins the conversation between the two. In the dialogue, the man complains about the mountain that occupies the vast area of the village: "That thing takes all the room."

But in spite of the man's complaint about "that thing", the traveller found himself much more interested in the mountain. He asks the man about the way leading up to its peak:

"That looks like a path.
Is that the way to reach the top from here? — (34-35)

To this question the man replied:

"I don't advise your trying from this side.
There is no proper path, but those that have
Been up, I understand, have climbed from Ladd's. (38-40)

The fact that there is "no proper path" from the side of the town means that the people there are indifferent to climbing the mountain. Thus the lack of path is the lack of interest. The man recommends him to move over to another foot of the mountain (Ladd) and try it. But even so, the man is not assured about this in two ways: the source of his knowledge comes from other people's experiences, not from his own; and the phrase "I understand" signals some kind of hesitation.

Feeling uneasy, the traveller asks the local habitant about his own experience, "You've never climbed it?" (43), to which he replies, "I've been on the sides, / Deer-hunting and trout-

fishing." (44-45) Instead of climbing, he is just bound to the mountain sides in chasing animals or catching fish. After all, he sees a mountain only as a necessary supply source for his life; he never thinks of climbing a mountain unless necessary.

V

But this does not mean that he knows nothing about the mountain. After all, he has lived for so many years near the mountain. He tells the traveller about an amazing fact about the mountain:

There's a brook
That starts up on it somewhere — I've heard say
Right on the top, tip-top — a curious thing.
But what would interest you about the brook,
It's always cold in summer, warm in winter.
One of the great sights going is to see
It steam in winter like an ox's breath,
Until the bushes all along its banks
Are inch-deep with the frosty spines and bristles —
You know the kind. Then let the sun shine on it! (45-54)

But again, in spite of the details here, the illustration comes from his secondhand knowledge, not from his direct experience. Another notable fact is that the man's attention is paid to a brook, with the vital image of water as supporting life. If we couple this image with that description of the barren river (10-15), we may realize a possible contrast here: the habitant shows interest in the brook as a life source of the village, while the traveller's notice goes to the waterless scene of the river. Thus in spite of the habitant's effort, he cannot successfully draw the traveller's attention to the brook much more related to their life:

"There ought to be a view around the world
 From such a mountain — if it isn't wooded
 Clear to the top." (55-57)

Instead, the traveller shows much more interest in the fine view that might be gained from the top of the mountain. But a "wooded" top might not be good for him to enjoy such a magnificent view. Here again, the wood closely related to the villagers' life should go out of sight of the traveller. He seems to like to ignore the wood which might prevent him from seeing the "world"; after all, the outsider prefers a fine view to the nature of the village.

This leads him to another yet ignorance of the wood:

I saw through leafy screens
 Great granite terraces in sun and shadow,
 Shelves one could rest a knee on getting up —
 With depths behind him sheer a hundred feet —
 Or turn and sit on and look out and down,
 With little ferns in crevices at his elbow. (57-62)

It should be noted that the words referring to inorganic things, such as "terraces", "shelves", "crevices", and "elbow" are technical terms of alpine climbing. These words may be said to illustrate that the traveller's interest is in climbing in the modern context of alpinism. The descriptions here are unmistakably ones by an alpinist, not by a local habitant.

VI

The alpinist's descriptions of the mountain, though imaginative and enchanting enough, meets the man's simple comment of indifference:

"As to that I can't say. But there's a spring
 Right on the summit, almost like a fountain.

That ought to be worth seeing." (63-65)

What do we make of this flat reply replaced by an abrupt introduction of a spring? It should be clear by now how difficult it is for the alpinist to hold a proper conversation with the man who has never experienced climbing and has perhaps known little about the mountain. Again, the man's knowledge about the spring turns out just a hearsay:

"I guess there's no doubt
About its being there. I never saw it" (66-67)

How on earth can he be sure ("no doubt") without an experience? Nevertheless, the conversation continues to the point of an unfruitful argument:

"One time I asked a fellow climbing it
To look and tell me later how it was."
"What did he say"

"He said there was a lake
Somewhere in Ireland on a mountain top."
"But lake's different. What about the spring?"
"He never got up high enough to see." (73-78)

Here, the interaction is almost breaking up. There is no doubt that the alpinist is irritated by the abruptness and whimsicality of the man. The failing communication reaches as far as an argument on climbing for climbing:

"Twouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it."
"I shouldn't climb it if I didn't want to —
Not for the sake of climbing." (88-90)

Thus, Frost's "The Mountain" illustrates the way the passion for ascension is faced with the local indifference. The poem contrasts the different attitudes toward mountains between an alpinist and a local habitant by focusing on the interesting

interaction, though failing, between the alpinist (outsider) and the local habitant (insider). In a sense this is a poem about the situation in which an alpinist curiosity cannot easily be understood by native people.