

Book Review

Bruckner, Pascal. *The Friendship of a Mountain: A Brief Treatise on Elevation*. Polity, 2023.

Pascal Bruckner's latest book, *The Friendship of a Mountain*, is a quest to try to unravel the complex ideas that revolve around his lifelong relationship with mountains. It is a 147-page translation of a French edition that was published in Paris in 2002 and consists of 13 chapters (a rather ominous number for a mountaineer) framed by a brief preamble and an even shorter epilogue. It should be pointed out, de novo, that while Bruckner's book is quite eclectic, his primary focus is about his own unique experience with mountains, or, more specifically, the "internal mountain that fluctuates, in daily life, between joy and disarray, and [the] external mountain that confirms or belies the first one." As one might expect from this introductory sentence, readers who seek a technical treatise on mountaineering might be disappointed, because Bruckner's book is not so much about the art of climbing, per se, as it is a digression into the philosophy of mountains from a deeply personal point of view. It should not surprise the reader, therefore, that Bruckner drinks deeply from the sparkling waters of introspection, and rather than generalize about the subtle nuances he seeks to investigate, he employs a more intuitive approach to help synthesize his ideas into a meaningful whole. A good deal of his writing has its roots in the phenomenological tradition; and in his winding, "Tordesillesque" journey through the icy landscape every mountain is new grist for his windmill.

The first mountain that Bruckner tilts at is found in his childhood. Born in Austria, and later migrating to France via Switzerland, the author describes how he spent his early years at a sanatorium in the mountains recovering from tuberculosis, where he was smacked every time he spoke German. There are hints here of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Unlike Hans Castorp, however, Bruckner undergoes a profound feeling of estrangement from his parents, a Heideggerian angst akin to "*geworfenheit*," or "thrownness," which is perhaps why later in the book he flirts with the idea of Eastern mysticism in a chapter titled "Our Universal Mother." "Love and rejection" is the first of several binary couplets that Bruckner evokes to help articulate the ambiguity of his quest to reach the top. Others follow in quick succession in themes on snow (valley and mountain); fauna (animal and human); history (mountain gloom and mountain glory); experience (life and death); protection (preservation and conservation); and mysticism (profane and sacred). This by no means exhausts the list of ambiguities found in his narrative, but it gives a glimpse of his penchant for *ultramque partem* (comparing opposites), which pops up like a snow-capped peak in every chapter.

In one of Bruckner's early squibs on snow, "Where Goes the Snow When Melts the Mountain?," he evokes a quirky, zen koan, and leads us into a discussion on valley and mountain: the former,

he tells us, elicits a warm cosiness, with its dells covered in white crystals, and chalets blanketed in deep snow; the latter, by contrast, displays sparkling heights that lead us toward purification. Animals and humans interact in the mountains in curious ways in Bruckner's psyche: wolves wander nonchalantly between the slender legs of the chair lifts, while butterflies alight on the snow, carried to great heights "in a sort of ecstasy of ascension." Human beings, however, have had a more ambivalent relationship with verticality. Bishop Berkeley, for example, writes that as he traversed Mount Cenis on horseback in 1714 he was "very much put out of humour by the most horrible of precipices;" yet in 1782 all that changed when Rousseau confessed in his diary: "I must have mountain torrents, rocks, firs, dark forests, mountains, steep roads to climb or descend, [and] precipices at my side to frighten me." Here, another binary emerges—"mountain gloom and mountain glory."

What on earth precipitated this transformation? Once, only farmers, smugglers, chamois hunters, and eccentrics ever ventured into the Alps on a regular basis. But in the 19th century the English changed all that: for these intrepid gentlemen the summits became "an Atlantis in the heart of Europe," and, as Bruckner adds, they sought to open their souls "to [this] celestial realm." Although Alpine clubs soon proliferated all over Europe, the sport was not without its risks, as Edward Whymper discovered on his tragic conquest of the Matterhorn in 1865. In a chapter titled "The Two Faces of the Abyss," Bruckner elaborates upon this conundrum in yet another binary—"life and death." The mountain, he reminds us, is treacherous, "even when she seems to smile upon us," and in a curious, Hamletic aperçu he adds, "[y]ou never return from that fall that comes back to you in dreams."

Yet the mountain is not without its vulnerability. Bruckner recalls ascending Mount Bromo in Java (Indonesia) on a mule in 1977, only to return to a mountain completely commercialized in 2017. He goes on to note how the European Alps, once the preserve of an elite cadre of rock climbers, are now crawling with tourists, hiking, snowboarding, and mountain biking along its slopes as if they had bought a ticket to Disneyland. Tourism, however, is not the only threat to the mountain. Climate change is also taking its toll. Glaciers are now retreating rapidly "like the gums of old people who have lost their teeth," and in Switzerland the ice has to be wrapped in plastic to protect it from the sun's radiation. Recently, a funeral was held in the Alps for a dead glacier. In a chapter titled "Protecting the Great Stones," preservation and conservation are introduced as an ecological binary to help us confront this dilemma. Bruckner offers his personal thoughts in a programmatic statement familiar to students of ecosophy: "[i]t's our duty to take care of the mountain just as we would take care of any fragile subject."

Near the end of his book, Bruckner reminds us that a climber who confronts rock faces is to some degree a cousin of Don Quixote. But unlike Cervantes's hero, who suffers from an incurable nostalgia, Bruckner is a mystic. In his 13th chapter on "Sublime Chaos," the author elaborates

upon this idea by telling us that as we climb, we abandon the world of baseness, because “[a] vital drama plays out at high altitudes, that of a passage between two kingdoms... profane and sacred.” This final, anagogic binary evokes a gnostic element in Bruckner’s thinking. Like Simone Weil, who felt herself being pulled down by gravity but elevated by grace, Bruckner yearns for the summit: “Everything that elevates ordinary life above itself is worthy of celebration,” he tells us in his final chapter, because “[t]o climb is always to move towards the gods—even if you are an unbeliever.”

I enjoyed reading *The Friendship of a Mountain*, even though at times I found Bruckner’s rather gnomic thoughts a little challenging. Cory Stockwell, I should add, has done an excellent job of translation, and the 91 endnotes are a useful addition, but the book might have included a map or two, and photographs might have been useful ancillaries to embellish the narrative. There is also no index. After reading Pascal’s book, someone who has never climbed a mighty mountain might be tempted to go out and conquer their own summit. But don’t wait too long—the snow is melting. Fortunately, the summit will always be there.

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