Reading the Red Bull Sublime

ANNE C. McCARTHY

[I]

The cope of Heaven seems rent and cloven
By the inchantment of thy strain,
And o'er my shoulders wings are woven
To follow its sublime career. . . .
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, "To Constantia"

ON 14 OCTOBER 2012, THE AUSTRIAN DAREDEVIL FELIX BAUMgartner stepped out of a "space capsule"—essentially a high-tech helium balloon—hovering 128,000 feet over the surface of the earth. While eight million people watched on a *YouTube* livestream, Baumgartner fell for some nine minutes: a four-minute free fall that enabled him to break the sound barrier with his body, followed by five more minutes of falling slowed by a parachute. Eventually he landed safely on the ground in New Mexico.[1] He was not the first to break the sound barrier this way, as William Langewiesche notes in *Vanity Fair*. "But," Langewiesche adds, "no one before had willingly done it, starting from zero velocity, on-camera, and for bragging rights" (183). This event was the culminating moment in the five-year Red Bull Stratos Project, named for the energy drink company that was its principal sponsor. Part science experiment, part marketing stunt, Baumgartner's space jump was meticulously recorded by an infrared camera on the ground, fifteen cameras on the space capsule, and five more attached to his pressure suit. In the hours and the days following the spectacle, the video footage was edited and reedited to attract the eyes of viewers worldwide. As of May 2017, the ninety-second "Mission Highlights" video (*Felix Baumgartner's Supersonic Freefall*) had been watched more than forty-one million times.

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Red Bull, as the slogan goes, gives you wings.[2] The World of Red Bull—a network of Web sites devoted to extreme pursuits and artistic performances, an ever-changing rotation of online video content, the Red Bull TV smartphone app, sponsored events and competitions, and groups that conduct scientific studies on human potential—is dedicated to supporting this claim, not scientifically but aesthetically. The discourse of flight ranges from the purely figural (the performances of DJs, skateboarders, motocross racers) to the almost literal: the feats of BASE jumpers[3] and skydivers whose specially designed wingsuits allow them to careen above landscapes as varied as Manhattan and the Alps. Although Red Bull is not the only company to engage in this kind of aggressively curated lifestyle marketing (nor does every recreational thrill-seeker turn pro), no other company has been sponsoring as many of these activities for as long.

Founded in Austria in the late 1980s, Red Bull has long been known for its range of marketing efforts. Early on, the company's founder, Dietrich Mateschitz, seems to have realized that, as one marketing expert puts it, "Red Bull didn't need to be tasted; it needed to be experienced" (Wipperfürth 55). Especially in the age of streaming digital video, Red Bull's marketing blurs the line between participants and spectators. Combining wide-angle shots that show tiny human bodies tumbling through the vastness of a mountain range with the vertiginous footage from point-of-view cameras attached to those bodies, Red Bull's video content engenders an aesthetic context for consuming the energy drink that is not necessarily identical to the feats that are represented in the videos. In other words, one need not be Baumgartner falling through the sound barrier to find oneself reaching for a can of Red Bull. The ability to generate impressive visual content dictates what kinds of activities count in the Red Bull media empire. Images are edited into stories that rely on musical and visual cues far more than on language to make the drama—the danger of the stunt, the courage of the performer, the technical know-how of those behind the scenes, and the success of the conclusion—immediately accessible. An awed viewer might marvel not only at the daring and athleticism of the participants but also at the ingenuity of those involved in the recording process. "How did they film that?" becomes just as valid a question as "How did they do that?"

The aesthetic qualities of the World of Red Bull enable it to exceed its specific promotional mandate and give rise to a discourse that participates in a recognizably Romantic tradition: the Red Bull sublime. By "Red Bull sublime" I refer to the myriad of extreme sports and adventuring activities—particularly those that involve some form of flying in visually overwhelming landscapes—digitally recorded and disseminated to an international audience. Taking Baumgartner's space jump as the paradigmatic form of the aesthetic, this essay outlines its salient features. Most significantly, the Red Bull sublime goes out of its way to highlight the technological innovations and supplements that make its core activities something other than suicidal. An individual's athleticism and mental fortitude are important, but not even the most steel-nerved daredevil can, for instance, spend large amounts of time at high altitudes without supplemental oxygen or leap from 128,000 feet without a parachute and pressure suit. Those who perform the most dramatic stunts do so while wearing helmets, face masks, pressurized suits, and oxygen tanks. Others achieve a kind of flight by employing wingsuits or modified parachutes. The equipment is part of the spectacle. Instead of policing boundaries—the boundary between natural and built environments, the boundary between the human body and its prostheses—the Red Bull sublime delights in unexpected combinations. It does not cast

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nature as a thing to be resisted or dominated, nor does it unquestioningly privilege stunts performed in the wild, as it were, over those that take place in urban settings. In this way, the Red Bull sublime rejects the ideology of nature as other (or nature as site of profound sublime experience) that has long held sway in philosophical and popular representations.

Technological innovation, moreover, opens up the topos of descent as a site of sublime experience. The preference for ascent is embedded in the language of the sublime itself, through an emphasis on elevation and transcendence, as well as through its role in the development of high moral character. Descent is, at best, an inevitability; at worst, it is a tragedy. By drawing attention to the pleasurable terror of recreational falling—and, more important, by making descent the central site of aesthetic experience rather than its aftermath—the Red Bull sublime illuminates a historical difficulty of talking about descent. Yet it also invites a reconsideration of the comparatively limited ways that writers of earlier eras confronted—or evaded—the problem of descent. In the third part of this essay, I introduce two exemplary mountaineering escapades of the Romantic poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Keats. Both writers use poetic form to transform experiences of bodily peril experienced while descending from mountaintops (Scafell and Ben Nevis, respectively) into more manageable imaginative accounts, though in each case the final poetic product remains marked by the possibility of falling. This fear of falling reveals a broader Romantic inarticulacy around the idea of descent and its relation to the sublime, even though, as Thomas Weiskel points out, the sublime "is phenomenologically a negation, a falling away from what might be seized, perceived, known" (24–25). Seen as forerunners of the Red Bull sublime, these attempts at recovery become legible as efforts, however brief, to rethink or resist the mandates of ascent.

[II]

With enough determination, any bloody idiot can get up this hill. . . . The trick is to get back down alive.
—Mount Everest guide Rob Hall

The sublime is typically understood as a form of elevation, arising from an initial moment of incomprehension or terror to some higher awareness. Longinus, the ancient writer taken up by the eighteenth century, contends that "the true sublime naturally elevates us: uplifted with a sense of proud exaltation, we are filled with joy and pride, as if we had ourselves produced the very thing we heard" (179). Sublime language, that is, raises the minds of the listeners to an equal height, in order to "override"—to use Neil Hertz's term—"certain conventional lines of demarcation" that persist between speaker and listener (1). Eighteenth-century theorists of aesthetics employ a similar set of figures to talk about the effects of the sublime in both rhetoric and nature. In his *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757), Edmund Burke ventures to suppose that "we are more struck at looking down from a precipice, than at looking up at an object of equal height" (114). Sublime vertigo teeters on the edge of the cliff but does not step over it. One must go up in order to look down. Metaphors of ascent are equally, if not more, central to Immanuel Kant's account of the dynamical sublime in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Confronted with the vastness of nature's force, which a human being cannot possibly withstand, the Kantian subject nonetheless finds these objects sublime insofar as "they raise the soul's fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist . . . and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature's seeming omnipotence" (120). Nature, Kant continues, "is here called sublime [*erhaben*] merely because it elevates [*erhebt*] our imagination, [making] it exhibit those cases where the mind can come to feel its own sublimity,

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which lies in its vocation and elevates it even above nature" (121). But all such mental elevations are temporary. Accounts of the sublime give only cursory attention to the process by which "the mind returns," as Burke puts it, "to its usual state of indifference" (83).

Strictly speaking, none of the major eighteenth-century or Romantic theories prescribes a physical route to the sublime. Though Kant invokes Horace Bénédict de Saussure's mountaineering feats as having potentially sublime effects ("his intention was to instruct mankind" [125]), he nonetheless emphasizes the broader principle that "sublimity is contained not in any thing of nature, but only in our mind" (123). However, the popularization of the sublime in the Romantic era was accompanied by an expansion in recreational mountaineering and, especially after the Napoleonic Wars, a burgeoning tourism industry centered in the Alps. As numerous recent histories have established, physical acts of ascent in natural settings were understood (rightly or wrongly) as a reliable path to sublime transcendence (see Bainbridge; Colley; and Duffy). Indeed, while it may be true, as Weiskel argued more than forty years ago, that "infinite spaces are no longer astonishing; still less do they terrify" (6), the mutually informing ideas of mental and physical elevation—of rising above society, above concern for one's own comfort, above fear itself—continue to exercise a powerful cultural force. "In the quite voluminous firsthand mountaineering literature," writes Sherry B. Ortner,

> mountaineers often discourse in fascinating ways on the kinds of meaning and insight they derive from the sport: about the moral fiber of the inner self, about the nature of bonding and friendship, about the peace and calm of high cold places against the noise and bustle of modern society. All of this makes the risk of accident and death worthwhile; indeed it seems precisely the risk of serious or fatal accident that produces the payoff of meaning. (139)

Mountain climbers are imbued with a certain moral authority and credited with a Romantic impatience with the crowdedness and inauthenticity of a world that is too much with us. Jon Krakauer adopts a similar position in his 1996 nonfiction best seller *Into Thin Air*, going out of his way to establish that high-altitude climbers are not like the "adrenaline junkies chasing a righteous fix" by engaging in activities like "bungee jumping or skydiving or riding a motorcycle at 120 miles per hour." Rather, they are engaged in "an almost Calvinistic undertaking" that involves weeks of "toil, tedium, and suffering" in pursuit of "something like a state of grace" (140). The climbers on Mount Everest willingly submit to the difficulties of ascent. The "adrenaline junkies," by contrast, are engaged in compulsive downward (or, at best, lateral) movement that renders them morally suspect; the risks that this latter group takes are not balanced by a higher meaning.

The moral distinction between ascent and descent is particularly significant for Krakauer's book, which narrates a deadly series of events on Mount Everest that mostly takes place after the climbers have reached its summit. Krakauer comments on the absence of "intense elation" as he achieves this goal, remarking portentously that "the summit was really only the halfway point. Any impulse I might have felt toward self-congratulation was extinguished by overwhelming apprehension about the long, dangerous descent that lay ahead" (189). Resisting the exultation of the sublime as premature, he models the appropriate reserve of the experienced mountaineer. Indeed, even if descent does not end in outright tragedy, as it does in *Into Thin Air*, it is taken almost for granted as an inevitable, but far less interesting, part of the process. *The Ascent of Everest*, an account of the first successful expedition to the summit led by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953, more or less ends at the top, leaving the entire descent to a final section called "Aftermath."

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The description is terse, at best: "The mountain had been climbed and we lost no time in getting away." "No one had any regrets about this leave-taking of Everest" (Hunt 196). The journey back to Base Camp is narrated in less than two pages.

By aestheticizing certain types of extreme sports, the Red Bull sublime reverses the traditional valuations of ascent and descent. Extreme sports are broadly defined as "outdoor leisure activities where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident is death" (Brymer and Gray 136). The category encompasses activities that range from mountaineering, free climbing, and big-wave surfing to skydiving and BASE jumping. All these activities are well represented in the visual universe of Red Bull, yet they differ greatly in the degree to which they can be classified as extreme. Eric Brymer and Tonia Gray suggest that "BASE jumping is arguably one of the most extreme of extreme sports" (137), particularly when compared with the—relatively—safer activity of skydiving, where the longer falls leave significantly more room for error. Moreover, there exists considerable variation in the ways that individual extreme sports are perceived in mainstream culture. Mountain climbers belong to a centuries-old tradition of exploration and fortitude, while participants in other extreme sports may be more likely to be pathologized as narcissistic risk takers in search of the next adrenaline high (Brymer and Schweitzer 865). These non-mountain-climbing activities, especially BASE jumping, constitute the core of the Red Bull sublime.

Skydiving, BASE jumping, and their variations, such as mountain swooping, come closest to realizing Red Bull's discourse of flight—yet they do so by making descent the central object of visual and narrative interest. The eight-minute Skycombo video released online in June 2014 (*Ultimate Skydiving Combo*) opens with the image of clouds seen through the window of an airplane, then fades, in turn, to Vincent Reffet and Fred Fugen (who perform daredevil stunts as the Soul Flyers), each shown from the neck up, faces obscured by oxygen masks. Mont Blanc, rising above the fog clinging to its base (a representation familiar from scenic postcards and Romantic poetry alike), appears briefly as the background for the video's title before fading away. At the thirty-second mark, 33,000 feet in the air, Reffet and Fugen (now wearing camera-equipped helmets emblazoned with the Red Bull logo) step from the airplane and begin their descent. This is no ordinary skydive: they tumble acrobatically in a tandem free fall filmed from a number of different angles and distances. At certain moments, the camera is positioned so that their bodies appear to be falling up. Opening their parachutes (which also prominently display the Red Bull logo) at approximately one minute and eighteen seconds, the duo approaches the summit of Mont Blanc from above. As the music intensifies, they transform into mountain swoopers, skimming the heights of alpine ridges before a sharp, vertiginous turn toward the ground and a triumphant landing in a green field dotted with yellow flowers. The video contains no narration and few words beyond the names of the skydivers and occasional information about altitude, temperature, and location. The speech of Reffet and Fugen is obscured by the sound of breathing through oxygen masks, though the shouts of success at the end are unmistakable.

The hero of the Red Bull sublime is not given to introspection. He—and it is almost always, though not exclusively, a young man—is an athlete and daredevil rather than a poet, philosopher, or explorer. Examinations of interiority—the motivations that drive a person to climb a mountain via the most difficult route possible or to leap off the world's tallest building wearing a custom-designed wingsuit—do not make good video. Despite his risk-taking behaviors, the hero of the Red Bull sublime is usually likable, friendly, even humble about his accomplishments and what

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he has seen. He is frequently "stoked" about his accomplishments and also "stoked" about the next race, the next jump, the next surfing contest. He may trade in clichés about "going beyond limits" or "seeing if it can be done." In this, the hero of the Red Bull sublime participates in a long-standing tradition of verbal failure, since most accounts of the sublime insist on a moment of linguistic and cognitive breakdown—the sublime, that is, marks the encounter with the unspeakable. Burke calls this "astonishment": "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (101). If certain kinds of words (as Burke affirms in his *Philosophical Enquiry*) are among the most effective tools for gesturing toward the inexpressible abyss of the sublime, their failure to access the sublime becomes that much more powerful. Language, like the understanding, reaches for the infinite, and in its failure to get there, it discovers that the yearning itself is the most important thing. It is appropriate, then, that the hero of the Red Bull sublime is an enthusiast rather than a theorist.

The feats that characterize the Red Bull sublime are performed predominantly by young European and American men who possess excellent health, access to the best medical care, corporate sponsorships, and the time to seek out danger as a form of recreation. Although the paradigmatic performer in the Red Bull universe is, like the product's main consumers, male, the Red Bull sublime does not deliberately reinforce the aesthetic gendering that goes back at least to Burke's association of femininity, weakness, and beauty (144). Red Bull's marketing strategy is nothing if not inclusive, and a fair number of female athletes are represented among the ranks of its heroes. A video and accompanying article and photo gallery posted for International Women's Day 2016, for instance, highlights "the female athletes who are pushing the boundaries and achieving great things in their sport" (Mann) but leaves broader questions about the underrepresentation of women unaddressed, though these questions have been asked in other venues. What the ambivalent role of gender (to say nothing of class, nationality, and physical ability) in the Red Bull sublime suggests is the extent to which the aesthetic depends on an ability to bracket the very issues that contribute to the broader sense of precariousness it registers.

Just as it avoids plumbing the depths of its practitioners' psyches, including the darker motivations that might drive someone to engage in dangerous activities, the Red Bull sublime does not traffic in representations of catastrophic loss. No one ever dies in a Red Bull video.[4] The dangers of extreme sports hover in the background without becoming clearly visible. The technology that makes the stunts look as impressive and dangerous as possible is also employed in the service of decreasing the body count—if not to zero, then to a number that has tacitly been deemed low enough from a promotional and public relations standpoint. The relative silence around these deaths, however, distinguishes the Red Bull sublime from other representations of extreme sports. Kristin Jacobson, for instance, makes the presence of death a defining feature of what she calls American adrenaline narratives: "Crudely stated, adrenaline sports and the narratives written about them require at least a few dead adventurers killed by a combination of their own ambition and the extreme conditions" (357). The Red Bull sublime makes it possible, in unprecedented ways, for us to consume images of dangerous, exciting stunts without having to worry about witnessing catastrophe as we would in, say, a tightrope act witnessed in real time. Yet the power of these images continues to depend on a viewer's ability to suspend that knowledge just enough for the death-defying stunts to remain legible as potentially deadly activities. The exuberance of technological mastery and aesthetic perfor-

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mance continues to depend on the possibility that the cameras will record a death.

[III]

> I seemed every night to descend, not metaphorically, but literally to descend, into chasms and sunless abysses, depths below depths, from which it seemed hopeless that I could ever reascend. Nor did I, by waking, feel that I *had* reascended. This I do not dwell upon; because the state of gloom which attended these gorgeous spectacles, amounting at last to utter darkness, as of some suicidal despondency, cannot be approached by words. (De Quincey 119)

Certain forms of descent are easier to talk about than others. Many Romantic writers on both sides of the Atlantic—as well as many before and after them—used metaphors of descent and falling as figures for certain kinds of creativity or knowledge. There are even occasional representations of literal descents, such as Edgar Allan Poe's "A Descent into the Maelström," where a fisherman recounts his harrowing near-death experience in a violent whirlpool. At one point, Poe's fisherman recalls feeling "sick and dizzy, as if I was falling from some lofty mountain-top in a dream" (442). The story of being pulled into the depths, however, is told on "the summit of the loftiest crag" (432). The sensation of falling from that height remains, in a very real sense, unthinkable and more inevitably fatal than the maelstrom itself, accessible only as a dream or nightmare. Even Thomas de Quincey, something of an expert in thinking the abyss, marks out depths that remain beyond words, depths that render the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical inoperative (119).

"When I find it convenient to descend from a mountain, I am too confident & too indolent to look round about & wind about 'till I find a track or other symptom of safety; but I wander on, & where it is first *possible* to descend, there I go—relying upon fortune for how far down this possibility will continue" (Coleridge, *Collected Letters* 2: 841). Thus Coleridge writes to Sara Hutchinson in the summer of 1802, describing how he had ended up stranded on the side of Scafell mountain in the Lake District. Like many climbers after him, he expended all his energy on reaching the mountain's summit and reveling in the sublimity of the experience. In the process of descent, however, his mind has also come down to its "middle range" or even lower. The "Palsy" of his body, however, suggests an inner turmoil and (though he denies it) a fear of falling:

> My Limbs were all in a tremble—I lay upon my Back to rest myself, & was beginning according to my Custom to laugh at myself for a Madman, when the sight of the Crags above me on each side, & the impetuous Clouds just over them, posting so luridly & so rapidly northward, overawed me / I lay in a state of almost prophetic Trance & Delight—& blessed God aloud, for the powers of Reason & the Will, which remaining no Danger can overpower us! O God, I exclaimed aloud—how calm, how blessed I am now / I know not how to proceed, how to return / but I am calm & fearless & confident / if this Reality were a Dream, if I were asleep, what agonies had I suffered! what screams! (842)

Whatever panic Coleridge may have felt on realizing that he was "suspended on a ledge neither able to move back or forward" (Vardy, par. 8) is, at least in his letter to Hutchinson, displaced into a bodily affect. Paralysis and trembling, instead of being unambiguous signifiers of fear, become for him proof of fearlessness, a way of registering his presence in a terrifying situation in a way that appears emotionally neutral.

Trembling on a narrow ledge, Coleridge comes to occupy, at least for a moment, an elusive zone of experience. He acknowledges the danger of his situation and his physical helplessness before the forces of nature and

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responds (as much as he can) without the kind of fear that would constitute a mental flight from the fact of his predicament. Terror and nervous laughter give way to "a state of almost prophetic Trance & Delight." From his physically prone position, he can recall feeling "calm" and "blessed," "calm & fearless & confident," even though he is no closer to finding a safe escape route. He has already recognized that it is as impossible to go down safely as it is to go up, that no help will arrive from the sky. Elevation is the problem, not the solution. Even in the process of descent, his description of his experience draws on the lexicon of the sublime. Coleridge celebrates his ability to resist the immediate impulse to panic through the "the powers of Reason & the Will"—a paradigmatically Kantian response—but his letter also adumbrates the limits of that transcendence. As Alan Vardy observes, "His descent was anything but recuperative in the way we typically figure the sublime, as he was by turns elated, giddy, terrified, irrationally calm, chastened, stoic" (par. 1). To put it another way, at some crucially vertiginous moment Coleridge must have looked down with a sense of dread. When he tells the story a day later, however, he presents his gaze as moving upward toward the "Crags" and "Clouds," almost in defiance of the fact that he was coming down the mountain at the time.

Coleridge, like the daredevils of the Red Bull sublime, survives his ordeal. When the paralysis passes, he is able to spot an exit route that allows him to continue. The letter written the day after the event represents an initial attempt to manage the vertigo and the fear of falling that linger even when he returns to solid ground. He soon afterward transformed this mountaineering adventure into the alpine effusion "Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni." Although he had never seen Mont Blanc in person, he evidently decided that the emotions he experienced on Scafell deserved a broader stage and a more reverent message.[5] In mentally transporting himself to the Alps, Coleridge not only amplifies the religious overtones of the experience but also radically repositions himself in relation to the mountain:

> O soveran BLANC!
> The Arve and Arveiron at thy base
> Rave ceaselessly; but thou, most awful Form!
> Risest from forth thy silent Sea of Pines,
> How silently! (*Coleridge's Poetry* 195, lines 3–7)

Coleridge's mind and spirit take flight while his body remains stationary and largely seems to disappear. To the extent that there is downward movement in the poem, it describes the action of natural formations on the mountain itself—waterfalls, avalanches—and not of the human body. The final stanza of the poem reiterates this position:

> Thou too again, stupendous Mountain! thou
> That as I raise my head, awhile bow'd low
> In adoration, upward from thy Base
> Slow-travelling with dim eyes suffus'd with tears,
> Solemnly seemest, like a vapoury cloud,
> To rise before me—Rise, O ever rise,
> Rise like a cloud of Incense, from the Earth!
> (197, lines 74–80)

Coleridge's "bow'd" head signifies reverence in the face of a religious sublime,[6] and the repetition of "rise" insists on an upward-moving mental transcendence. Ultimately the mountain moves upward as well, undergoing a figural sublimation from solid rock to a "vapoury cloud." But these images also suggest that Coleridge was not fully able to cope with the vertiginous conditions of his actual descent from Scafell. His feelings have been elevated, but his body shrinks from repeating the physical experience.

The sublime that Coleridge presents in "Hymn" very deliberately backs away from the edge, erasing descent from the poetic record, even as that record remains haunted by

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its inevitability. This haunting may explain why many of Coleridge's readers have found the poem to be less "straightforward" than it initially appears (Curran 60). As Christopher Stokes remarks, "the expected address *to* God is continually deferred: the natural elements to which the speaker turns are, in a sense, turns away from the primary addressee; or at least a series of folds in this work of address" (126). Even here, it is possible to discover the "falling away" that Weiskel established as central to the Romantic sublime. In the poem's final lines, the mountain all but vanishes into thin air, its massive presence metaphorically sublimated into "a vapoury cloud" that "Rise[s] like a cloud of Incense, from the Earth!" If the natural formations of "Hymn" are designed to make the presence of God more palpable, the poem ends with the implication that, in the presence of the extrasensory infinite, the finite itself dematerializes. Though seemingly far from the embodied concerns and outright physical anxiety of Scafell, "Hymn" does not in the end banish Coleridge's fear of falling.

Several months before embarking on his 1818 walking tour of northwest England and Scotland, Keats described his lofty expectations to the painter Benjamin Haydon. "I will clamber through the Clouds and exist," Keats writes. "I will get such an accumulation of stupendous recollections that as I walk through the suburbs of London I may not see them—I will stand upon Mont Blanc and remember this coming Summer when I intend to straddle ben Lomond—with my Soul!—" (*Letters* 1: 264). Keats takes for granted that an act of physical ascent—climbing a mountain—will result in a concomitant elevation of mind and soul that will equip him to achieve his apotheosis as a poet and maintain those heights even after the trip is over. The raptures with which he greets his first sight of the Lake District are appropriately elevated and sublime. Yet, when he writes to Benjamin Bailey that July, the exhaustion is palpable:

> I have been among wilds and Mountains too much to break out much about the[i]r Grandeur. I have fed upon Oat cake—not long enough to be very much attached to it—The first Mountains I saw, though not as large as some I have since seen, weighed very solemnly upon me. The effect is wearing away—yet I like them mainely— (342)

The process of becoming a mountaineer has dulled his poetic sensibilities, at least temporarily, rather than sharpened them. Views that are sublime in isolation take on the flavor of "Oat cake" in aggregation, bringing the workaday feeling of suburban London to the mountaintops.

But despite the fatigues of travel, Keats found the motivation to reach the summit of Ben Nevis, the highest peak in Scotland. To his brother Tom, he compares the experience with that of "a fly climbing up a wainscoat" and "mounting 10 Saint Pauls without the convenience of Stair cases" (352)—a rather striking reversal of his earlier desire to leave London behind. Members of the climbing party had to maintain constant vigilance as they scrambled "loose stones large and small" that sometimes forced them to crawl on all fours (354), hardly an image of triumphant upward motion. What struck Keats's eye on Ben Nevis were not panoramic views but "chasms" that

> appear great rents in the very heart of the mountain though they are not, being at the side of it, but other huge crags rising round it give the appearance to Nevis of a shattered heart or Core in itself—These Chasms are 1500 feet in depth and are the most tremendous places I have ever seen—they turn one giddy if you choose to give way to it— (353)

While gesturing toward the experience of sublime vertigo, Keats's description also signals a fundamental shattering that penetrates this supposedly monolithic mountain. The loose rocks that inhibit the climbers' movement

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are mere symptoms of this "shattered heart." Keats remains reticent in describing how he got down from Ben Nevis: "'T was the most vile descent—shook me all to pieces" (357). Having gone up the mountain despite a sore throat, he never fully recovers from that "vile descent." He cuts short the rest of his walking tour in Scotland, returns to London, and dies less than three years later.

The reserve that characterizes Keats's mention of the "vile descent" may stem from his brief encounter with the possibility of a descent even more vile and deadly and from the desire not to "choose to give way" to fear. His *Hyperion. A Fragment*, a poem written after his walking tour, imagines an alternative descent able to embrace vertigo without paralyzing fear. At the end of book 1, the eponymous Titan, the last of his race to hold power, chooses to relinquish the heights that have been his home and to fall, lucidly, into history:

> Hyperion arose, and on the stars
> Lifted his curvèd lids, and kept them wide. . . .
> . . . . . .
> And still they were the same bright, patient
> stars.
> Then with a slow incline of his broad breast,
> Like to a diver in the pearly seas,
> Forward he stooped over the airy shore,
> And plunged all noiseless into the deep night.
> (*Complete Poems* 292, lines 350–51, 353–57)

Hyperion is both powerful and vulnerable. He keeps his eyes open as he steps over the edge and abandons himself to the "deep night." This is not a suicidal plunge or a shattering; it more closely resembles a modern-day BASE jump, where fear is temporarily conquered through an aesthetic flourish. Jonathan Mulrooney argues, "Falling measures [a] new kind of experience for *Hyperion*'s readers by representing the ways in which movement, both physical and affective, remains possible even when historical circumstances limit political, social, and aesthetic freedom." It represents "a new kind of heroic mobility" that recognizes its very restrictedness as constitutive (253). Hyperion's plunge (and the implied free fall that marks the gap between books 1 and 2 of the poem) registers the first traumatic encounter with a newly precarious reality, revealing what Mulrooney calls a "radical openness which imagines the human subject as a *necessarily* unprotected locus of historical experience" (253). This productive vulnerability, emblematized in moving images of free fall, becomes fully realized in the precincts of the Red Bull sublime. Although the technology that enabled a realization of human free fall was still more than a century in the future, Keats's description of Hyperion's fall—a description that does not appear in the poem's later iteration, despite its being titled *The Fall of Hyperion*—uncannily anticipates the figure of Baumgartner stepping from his space capsule and plunging to earth before the eyes of millions on that October day in 2012.

[IV]

> His job wasn't just to survive the feat but to survive the feat and be recorded while doing so, and the final product was not just a world record—lowest BASE jump ever—but, more important, a visual record: The handsome man leaping toward his death from the iconic colossus, plummeting earthward for an instant, and then, the next, floating away over the favelas, buoyant and ecstatic under a rectangular chute that doubled as a mobile billboard for Red Bull, his primary sponsor, the company that pays for his globe-trotting, death-defying publicity stunts, the company that, in return, insists upon having these feats documented on film so that they can be played over and over, attracting the eyeballs of just the sort of young, adrenaline-craving men who serve as the company's customers. (Dittrich)

Arguably, no one embodies the flying-falling condition of the Red Bull sublime better than Felix Baumgartner. He has held world records for the highest and the lowest BASE jumps, and he has completed a skydive across the

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English Channel using a carbon fiber wing. In 1999, he jumped from the arms of the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, a feat described years later by Luke Dittrich. Baumgartner appears here as the fully realized hero of the Red Bull sublime: a figure on video who falls—or, in Dittrich's words, who "leap[s]" and "plummet[s]." Free fall, in this description, marks the moment of escape, hinting at an unexpected mobility and a transcendence that is not entirely subsumed under the marketing plan represented by the parachute that is also "a mobile billboard for Red Bull." The opening of that corporate-sponsored parachute is, of course, what saves Baumgartner from the death that would otherwise result from his jumping off the statue. It turns a suicidal gesture into an act of courage, daring, and art. Promotion and preservation belong to the same gesture. The opened parachute transforms the moment of sublime uncertainty into a manageable image, making the stunt available for repackaging into a video that can be endlessly replayed—a media-promoted product best consumed while drinking a can of Red Bull.

Fully imbricated in the iterative capabilities of digital media, the Red Bull sublime is nonetheless marked by archival anxiety. The production of iconic, unforgettable images is counterbalanced and even contradicted by the imperative to produce as many images as possible. For every singular image—Baumgartner standing on the threshold of his space capsule, bodies tumbling in the air over Mont Blanc—there are hundreds if not thousands of others whose effect is felt and then forgotten. Six-second BASE jumps from skyscrapers all begin to look alike. On Red Bull's Web sites and *YouTube* channels, it can be difficult to locate a particular video or article once it passes from active promotion. It can be hard and sometimes even impossible to identify the definitive rendering of a given stunt that has been filmed from any number of different angles.

This frenetic pace of content generation reflects what Sianne Ngai has described as "the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism" (1), conditions that in her view inhibit the sorts of grand aesthetic experiences associated with the sublime in favor of a "vernacular" aesthetic of ineffectuality. The action-packed Red Bull aesthetic bears more than a passing resemblance to Ngai's concept of the "zany," as both foreground the "politically ambiguous intersection between cultural and occupational performance" and both can be described as "an aesthetic of action in the presence of an audience" (182). Like the figure of the zany, the hero of the Red Bull sublime puts his body on the line in ways that call attention to physical and economic precariousness, performing and amplifying vulnerability for an international audience. Yet the performances associated with Red Bull possess an earnestness that would be a liability for the zany. Where the zany adapts itself to the varying demands of capitalist multitasking and affective labor, the heroes of the Red Bull sublime use the company's gift of wings to enact a fantasy of Romantic freedom: flight for its own sake. But the omnipresent Red Bull logo makes clear that the concept of pure flight is always in tension with the need for supplemental wings.

Taken together, the multiple representations of Baumgartner's 2012 space jump demonstrate the tensions of the broader aesthetic, pushing certain dimensions of the Red Bull sublime to their limits. Central to this work is the free fall itself. In the normally fast-paced world of the Red Bull sublime, the four minutes and twenty-nine seconds that elapsed before Baumgartner opened his parachute was an eternity. Even viewers who pride themselves on having an attention span longer than a typical highlight reel could find themselves looking away from a spectacle that was at once unbearably tense and, quite simply, boring. The Stratos Project

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live stream began nearly eight hours before the jump itself.[7] Early *YouTube* viewers could watch the preliminary launch of the balloon-propelled space capsule and track its slow ascent. As Baumgartner makes his way methodically through a forty-three-point safety checklist, split-screen images show his view from inside the capsule alongside shots of Mission Control and his family and friends. The audio commentary that attempts to fill up empty spaces with technical information evokes the space shuttle launches that used to be broadcast to rapt audiences on American television, except that Red Bull's live stream was set to a twenty-second delay, long enough to prevent any image of disaster from reaching the public. In the live stream, everything moves much more slowly than it does in a typical Red Bull video. The loudest noise is Baumgartner's breathing through his oxygen mask. When Baumgartner jumps, he quickly falls out of the range of the capsule's cameras, rendering this moment invisible. His image is picked up by infrared cameras on the ground, but he remains a speck on the screen, moving jerkily, tumbling through an abyss and sometimes out of the frame. When the camera does stabilize, it produces an illusion of stasis, giving little indication of the speed of the fall. It is only toward the end of the jump, long after he has opened his parachute, that the camera can get close enough to show him in any detail. By then, the most important tasks of the jump are over. As a result, the free fall is visually unimpressive—a rarity among recent Red Bull productions. This fault was quickly corrected in the "Mission Highlights" video (*Felix Baumgartner's Supersonic Freefall*).

"I wish the whole world could see what I see," remarked Baumgartner as he stood on the threshold of the space capsule. But, despite the many cameras attached to and trained on his body, the jump comes up against the representational limits of the Red Bull aesthetic. Almost as soon as he touched down, the footage of the event began to be edited and repackaged into more manageable sequences that were at once more dramatic and less moving. The "Mission Highlights" video, posted to *YouTube* the same day as the jump, features a fifteen-second version of the free fall, spliced with images from Baumgartner's point-of-view camera, Mission Control, and the ground camera. A four-and-a-half-minute documentary-style video posted the next day features more of the buildup to the jump, with just over thirty seconds of Baumgartner in free fall set to an inspirational sound track and, like the highlights reel, makes use of spliced-in images of the witnesses on the ground (*Red Bull Stratos—World Record Freefall*). Both videos move closer to the dominant Red Bull aesthetic by containing the free fall, using editing and musical cues to make the event appear faster, shorter, and more exciting than it actually was, reminding viewers that they are watching a success story. The power and scale of the accomplishment remain evident—perhaps even more so than they were in the live stream—but at the same time much less is demanded of the viewer.

On the first anniversary of the event, Red Bull released unedited footage of the entire nine-minute jump as seen from three of the cameras on Baumgartner's person (*Red Bull Stratos FULL POV*). Where the live stream had suffered from distance, the pressure suit and helmet cameras work together to generate a sense of something like intimacy. There is no commentary, only the three camera views with a sidebar of meters and an altitude chart. Unlike the live stream and the videos created from it, we do not see Mission Control, nor do we hear Baumgartner speak with his team. There is no music. The only sound is the whoosh of air passing over the falling body. Everything exciting happens in the first thirty seconds. The step out of the capsule is eerily silent, without platitudes about height and vision and going home. The potentially deadly flat spins—one of the few truly risky elements of this stunt—press close, giving a much more

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visceral sense of their intensity and, in turn, of the effort involved in Baumgartner's not opening his parachute and thus maintaining his vulnerability. We are reminded that the sublimity of his act lies in his entering fully into the fall and refraining from doing the one thing that would make it stop. Once he breaks the sound barrier and enters thicker air, he seems barely to be moving—even though, according to the speedometer, he is still falling at a speed in the range of a hundred to two hundred miles an hour. The last five minutes, after the abrupt opening of the parachute, are considerably slower. It is only toward the end that his body gets close enough to the ground to seem to be moving quickly again, although now he is moving the most slowly. Without the commentary of the live stream, the video is often disorienting; again, it challenges a viewer's ability to watch, to pay attention, to comprehend. In so doing, it once again opens a space in which to experience the jump as sublime.

Of course, as with any of these videos, it is never possible fully to forget that we are watching an elaborate, extravagant advertisement. However, the free fall demonstrates that the representational codes of the Red Bull sublime have already been exceeded and set against themselves. Seen from a number of different angles and at varying lengths, alternately submerged and brought forward from the company's digital archives, the free fall refuses to coincide with itself. If the existence of so much video footage allows it, at least in theory, to be endlessly reproduced and reinterpreted, that need for reinterpretation comes from the fall itself and is already operating, as potentiality, in the Romantic sublimes of Coleridge and Keats. Though it presents itself as being essentially transparent, essentially real—real bodies, real risks—the Red Bull sublime is, like its predecessors, a technology of figuration, an aesthetic gesture toward what escapes us.

Flight, in the broad sense of the company's marketing materials, is undoubtedly a kind of mastery; the successfully completed BASE jump or snowboard trick emblematizes the overcoming of external contingencies as well as the vertigo that comes with the performance of a potentially deadly action. Safely seated in front of a computer screen or holding a mobile device, a spectator can nonetheless experience the "sacred thrill" of adventure (Kant 129). Watching videos of BASE jumps and other stunts encourages a kind of breathless suspension in the face of the contingent, even while the promotional context means that any actual disasters occur outside the frame, at a comfortable distance from the viewer. Survival is easy enough. Success comes with fully occupying the space of the aesthetic and producing in consumers a feeling congruent with what Burke calls the "delightful horror" of the sublime (165), at once fully invested in the danger and fully protected from actual destruction. Red Bull's performance artists (who are also, irreducibly, the icons and spokespersons of an energy drink) flirt with death, with consummation; but, like the figures on Keats's Grecian urn, they create a space of aesthetic suspension through which viewers may become entranced, enchanted, rapt, and more fully aware of their own precariousness and the sensation of falling.

Notes

1. My account of the jump comes from a variety of sources, including Langewiesche; Marder; Rushe; and the Web site of the Red Bull Stratos Project (www.redbullstratos.com/).

2. See the Red Bull home page (www.redbull.com/us-en/).

3. BASE jumpers leap from fixed objects; the acronym stands for "bridges, aerials, structures, and earth."

4. But people do die while engaged in dangerous activities sponsored by or otherwise related to Red Bull. A German television reporter identified at least five deaths of Red Bull–sponsored athletes as of 2013 (Höppner).

5. In a letter to William Sotheby, Coleridge writes that on Scafell he "involuntarily poured forth a Hymn in

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the manner of the *Psalms*, tho' afterwards I thought the Ideas &c disproportionate to our humble mountains—& accidentally lighting on a short Note in some swiss Poems, concerning the Vale of Chamouny, & it's Mountain, I transferred myself thither, in the Spirit, & adapted my former feelings to these grander external objects" (*Collected Letters* 2: 864–65).

6. Duffy argues that the posture of being on the ground looking up characterizes many poems of the religious sublime in this period: "[T]he religious response to the Alpine sublime . . . depended for its success precisely upon the repudiation of the idea of actually ascending the Alps, a practice which religious responses consistently figure as hubristic and invasive, if not downright sacrilegious. In other words, while the discourse of ascent privileges the view from the top over the view from the valley, the rhetoric of the religious response to the natural sublime depends precisely upon the idea that the highest summits are inaccessible" (48).

7. The eight-hour archive of the live stream ("Red Bull Stratos—freefall from the edge of space—SUCCESS!") can be accessed through the *YouTube* playlist (*Red Bull Stratos Anniversary*).

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