

IMAGINING AVALANCHES

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ABSTRACT: Most of the papers presented at this meeting describe avalanches in graphs, charts, mathematical formulas, and other dialects of the language of science. This paper surveys some fictional and poetic descriptions of snow slides by American writers from Helen Hunt Jackson and Mary Hallock Foote in the 1890s to Linda Hogan and William Dickey in the 1990s with a detour through the boys' fiction of Monty Atwater. An argument may be made that all descriptions of reality, verbal and mathematical, are simplifications, so we need the imagined avalanche to fully understand the literal.

The word *avalanche* does not appear in English until the middle of the eighteenth century. *The Oxford English Dictionary* cites a book published in 1765 in which some travelers "perceiving a noise towards the top of the mountains, look up and descried two valancas driving towards the village." (812) Using the Italian equivalent of the French word *avalanche*, indicates two important points. English, and subsequently American, awareness of snow avalanches begins in the Alps, a direct result of the first phase of modern tourism that required Englishmen (and women) to visit classical Italy via Switzerland. Substituting a Latinate word for "snow slide" enhanced the experience and made it sublime. The other implication of this brief quotation is that snow slides, when they threaten life and property, deserve a suitably awesome name.

Nevertheless, it took more than a century for *avalanche* to come into common use. As late as 1796, *The Rural Magazine: or, Vermont Repository* published a translation of an account of an avalanche in northwestern Italy without using the word. What made this story compelling was that three women were rescued after being buried in their house under sixty feet of snow for more than five weeks. Although they suffered from the cold, they survived on milk from a goat that was trapped with them. Avalanches enter American consciousness as phenomena that are violently destructive, but often permit miraculous escapes. Avalanches provided artists, novelists, and poets with parables of human folly and

nobility, punishments and rewards.¹

Two of the earliest writers to use the avalanche as a symbol were Helen Hunt Jackson and Mary Hallock Foote. Jackson, born in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1830, was a childhood friend of Emily Dickinson and is remembered today as the author of two books exposing the mistreatment of American Indians, *Century of Dishonor* (1881) and the novel *Ramona* (1884). The unexpected death in 1863 of her husband, an Army engineer, may have inspired her sonnet "Avalanches," which uses the fact that avalanches can occur in good weather as a metaphor for any unexpected disaster.

Listen to what all Alpine records
tell,
Of days on which the avalanches
fell.
Not days of storm when men
were pale with fright,
And watched the hills with
anxious straining sight,
And heard in every sound a note
of knell;
But when in heavens still, and
blue, and clear,
The sun rode high,—those were
the hours to fear.

(Jackson, 421)

Foote, who was born on a farm in New York State in 1847, was well known in her life as a writer and illustrator. She lived in various places in the west with her mining engineer husband, eventually settling in Boise, where he worked on irrigation projects from 1885-1896. Wallace Stegner borrowed freely from her life and writings in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Angle of Repose* (1971). Foote's short story "The Cup of Trembling" is about a wealthy mine owner's wife, Esmée, who leaves him to

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spend the winter with Jack, the mine superintendent, in his cabin in the Cœur d'Alène. When her lover's brother, Sid, unexpectedly arrives while Jack is getting supplies, she hides until he goes away. After Jack's return, his dog, who had been with Sid, comes to the cabin and Esmée confesses that she had refused to let Sid in. Jack goes out in a storm and returns with Sid's frozen body. The guilty lovers believe that their sin has caused the tragedy; they have drunk from the cup of desire and expect punishment. Jack leaves, and Esmée is visited by a miner who directed Sid to the cabin. He listens to her story and warns her to leave because it's "snow-slide weather" and the forest above the cabin has recently been cut. Instantly she sees this as a sign and sending him away prepares to meet her fate. Soon, there is:

A stroke out of a clear sky;
a roar that filled the air; a burst of
light snow mounting over the tree-
tops like steam condensed above a
rushing train; a concussion of wind
that felled trees in the valley a
hundred yards from the spot where
the plunging mass shot down—then
the chinook eddied back, across the
track of the snow-slide, and went
storming up the peak, (Foote, 85)

Foote avoids making this a conventional moralistic ending by having the miners discuss early in the story whether Esmée is worthy of Jack's love. The miner who warns her to leave realizes too late that she is. Her suicide by avalanche may be required by the formulas of late nineteenth-century fiction, but Foote means it to be unjust because Esmée accepts her fate with newfound self-awareness.

What both Jackson's poem and Foote's story demonstrate is that knowledge about avalanches, their causes and dangers was spreading beyond mountain travelers and mining camps to a wider public. In January 1907, *Outing*, one of the most popular magazines of the time, contained a short story titled "How They Opened the Snow Road" with four illustrations by the rising young artist N. C. Wyeth, whose distinctive pictures for children's books such as *Treasure Island* would make him world-famous. One of the illustrations is, I believe, the earliest visual depiction of the use of explosives to trigger an avalanche.

Titled, "He . . . flung the six pounds of powerful explosive out into the great snow comb," Wyeth's painting for the illustration shows one of the eight miners (who have been working for days to open the road to the mine) tossing twenty-four sticks of dynamite into the snow. The twelve-foot snow comb breaks away and the resulting avalanche fills a gulch, allowing the men to construct a road for their sled and bring supplies to their starving families. The brief story focuses on the struggles of the men to clear a path with shovels between snowstorms. Wyeth's illustrations are characteristically detailed, with attention to clothing, the big "No. 2" ore shovels the men carry, and the play of light and shadows on the snow. Wyeth made three trips west between 1904 and 1906, including a visit where he sketched and collected gear that later served as props for his models, but he left no written record of any actual experiences with avalanches. The men in the story treat the dynamiting of the snow comb as a brilliant idea by the bravest of their comrades, but the practice dated back to 1879, according to Betsy Armstrong and Knox Williams. (Armstrong & Williams, 149) A letter from *Outing* editor Casper Whitney to Wyeth in January 1906 commissioned him to "witness the blasting and shoveling out of the wagon provision trails to the mining camps—such as Cripple Creek, Leadville, etc." indicates that triggering avalanches with dynamite was well known.²

The emphasis on man's power to control avalanches, not on their random destructive force, is the new element. The avalanche as adversary becomes a theme in men's fiction of the 1920s. The popular writer Courtney Ryley Cooper, a frequent contributor to *The Saturday Evening Post*, *True*, and other magazines and author of *Go North, Young Man!* (which promoted immigration to Canada), made an avalanche the climatic event in his novel *The White Desert* (1922). In this complicated mystery-romance, a young man journeys to Colorado from Boston to claim his inheritance, thousands of acres of forest and a lumber mill. In the course of the story he falls in love, learns he's being cheated by the manager, is suspected of murder, and attempts to recover his stolen property by setting up a rival saw mill to provide ties for a railroad construction project. Before he

can recoup his fortune and convince his love of his innocence, a blizzard closes the pass, trapping all the characters in a "white inferno." (Cooper, 215) He joins the railroad workers to clear the snow-clogged tunnels and snow-sheds. They are engaged in a war with nature. The climax comes when the locomotives pushing the rotary snowplows finally break free and clear the section of track called the "Death Trail," but the vibrations from their whistles trigger an avalanche.

Then, the blare of the whistles was drowned in a greater sound, a roar that reverberated through the hills like the bellow of a thousand thunders, the cracking and crashing of trees, the splintering of great rocks as the snows of the granite spires above the Death Trail loosed at last and crashed downward in an all-consuming rush of destruction. . . . while the hills sent back their outbursts with echoes that rolled, one into another, until at last the whole world was one terrific outpouring of explosive sounds and shrill, shrieking blasts, as though the mountains were bellowing their anger, their remonstrance at defeat. (Cooper, 274-276)

Part of the track is swept away, but the trains and the men survive. The villain confesses and the hero gets the girl and the forest.

The contribution of Montgomery Meigs Atwater to avalanche studies needs no review here, but perhaps his fiction is less well known. Atwater wrote a series of novels for young people whose central character, Brad Davis, becomes, over the course of half a dozen books, an avalanche expert for the U.S. Forest Service. In the first novel, *Ski Patrol* (1943), Brad is an eighteen-year-old college student who helps his uncles, a wildlife manager for the USFS and a state conservation officer, capture a poacher. There are some good backcountry skiing and snowshoeing scenes, but no avalanches. Eight years later, Atwater continued Brad's adventures in the novel *Avalanche Patrol*. (1951) Now in his twenties, Brad has been to avalanche school in Alta. His uncles arrange for him to fill the job of a missing snow ranger at a new ski resort called Snowhole, a former mining

camp that was wiped out by an avalanche in 1889. The main plot involves the murder of the former snow ranger by some bank robbers who use an old mine tunnel as an escape route, but there are numerous subplots, including a rivalry between Brad and a French skier for the attentions of a lovely American women's ski champion. Brad and his rival join forces to rescue her from the bandits during a blizzard—a "sockdolager"—and Brad traps the villains in the tunnel by causing an avalanche.³ The description of the avalanche itself is disappointing.

In the final volume of the Brad Davis adventures, *Snow Rangers of the Andes* (1967), however, Atwater lets his imagination flow more freely. While attending summer school at the University of Montana, Brad gets a call from the Chief of the USFS in Washington, DC. The Forest Service has been asked by the CIA to send an avalanche expert to Coracagua, a South American country that is developing a mine for a secret rare mineral in an avalanche-threatened valley in the Andes. Brad not only teaches the Caracaguans how to control avalanches, he also prevents a communist-led revolution by triggering an avalanche with a recoilless rifle that blocks the guerilla army and demoralizes its troops.

On the third shot the cornice stirred. Soundlessly, majestically, two hundred yards of it peeled away from its rocky anchorage. It leaned forward slowly. Puffs of snow smoke came out of it. Gathering speed, it broke apart and leapt into space, thousands upon thousands of tons of snow.

A hollow booming sound came out of the pass, and the whole alleyway leading to it disappeared in a churning cloud of snow dust. Then the booming stopped. The snow cloud drifted out over the Leone basin, sparkling in the sun. The defenders peered into Smuggler's Pass.

The cornice avalanche had fallen into the canyon well ahead of the leading invaders. It lay now in plain view, an immense wall of rubble mixed with house-sized snow boulders. Even at rest it was a

formidable barrier. (Atwater, 1967, 187)

Atwater's boys' books are enjoyable if a bit formulaic. His autobiography, *Avalanche Hunters* (1968), is better written and has better descriptions of avalanches. His contributions to the literature of snow and skiing lie chiefly in emphasizing the visceral thrill and pleasure of skiing and avalanches.⁴ The books that make the strongest claim to elevating avalanche stories to a serious art form are Joseph Wechsberg's *Avalanche!* (1958), a factual account of the destruction of an Austrian village in January 1954, and Tom Lea's *The Primal Yoke* (1960), the story of the psychological recovery and physical destruction of a young World War II veteran in the Tetons.

Wechsberg does for avalanche victims what Sebastian Junger did for sword fishermen in *The Perfect Storm*. In fact he begins his story of the avalanche that killed 57 of the 380 residents of Blons by remarking that "Avalanches belong to mountains as storms belong to the sea." (Wechsberg, 6) After reviewing the history of Alpine avalanches and the work of the Swiss Federal Institute for Snow and Avalanche Research, Wechsberg describes the villages clustered in the steep valley of the Lutz River in the Vorarlberg region where Austria, Germany, and Switzerland meet. He mentions the sporadic efforts of the villagers to protect themselves from avalanches—they built snow racks every few years after 1903, but failed to maintain them—yet concludes that these hardy, independent, conservative peasants were generally willing to let fate take its course. Using extensive interviews with the survivors and notebooks by the schoolteacher and his daughter written shortly after the tragedy, Wechsberg reconstructs the disaster almost minute by minute.

There were actually two avalanches in Blons on January 11, 1954: one at 9:36 a.m. came down the east side of the Eschtobel, a small stream that flows down from the peaks of the Falv and the Montcalv above the village; the other, at 7:00 p.m. on the west side where rescuers and survivors from the morning were huddled. It had been snowing heavily for three days and remained gloomy, but on the morning of January 11 the villagers were out trying to

feed their cattle and exchanging worried comments about the weather and avalanche danger. One villager, Albert Dünser, remembered being invited in by a neighbor.

Precisely at that moment Albert felt a strong wind. The fog was blown away. Albert didn't realize then that it was not wind but a column of compressed air preceding an avalanche. He heard "a crashing, swishing, roaring din," as if a hundred express trains were coming down the slope.

[The neighbors] looked up. What they saw took their breath away. The Esch house, No. 40, which stood below the road and belonged to Lorenz Türtscher, a brother of Benedikt—the fine, large, sturdy Esch house—was coming straight at them, flying through the air! (Wechsberg, 116)

Just as the house is about to strike them it implodes from the column of compressed air that created a vacuum around the structure. "Then a black cloud was all over them, and a terrific noise—a low roar and at the same time a high-pitched whistling, as an eerie double-bass-and-piccolo-flute duet." (117) Albert was pulled up by the suction, wrapped by a steel cable flying through the air, and thrown eight hundred feet across the Lutz River into a deep snow bank.

When he recovers, Albert stumbles back to where he had been standing, but finds "Nothing but snow—a horrifying desert of dead white snow. Stones, broken beams, tree trunks sticking out like overturned gravestones and crosses in an abandoned cemetery." (Wechsberg, 119) What follows are stories of desperate searches and miraculous rescues. Many perished, more survived. Months later the village is rebuilt, but some of the survivors move away. Recalling the Falv avalanche, the school teacher, Eugen Dobler, wrote in his diary: "Not a human sound from the white graveyard. Only the storm howling its triumphal victory hymn, as if it were mocking us little people. . . . [the avalanches] may have some meaning, but we little people can't understand it. They made no sense whatsoever to us." (125, 234) Wechsberg does not moralize about the avalanche or the behavior of the survivors, but his concluding remarks appear scornful of the

Alpine peasants for their failure to take the simplest precautions and their bickering over compensation. He also notes that the avalanche provided the children of the village with a new game—treasure hunting. For months after the disaster they pulled furniture, books, kitchen utensils, and clocks out of snow banks and the river. Dobler's four hundred-page diary was scattered over the valley, but every page was recovered.

The perspective of Tom Lea's splendid novel *The Primal Yoke* is different, but complements Wechsberg's observations on the behavior of mountain dwellers. As I note in *Snow in America*, Lea tells the story of Hank Spurling, a marine veteran of World War II who returns to his home in the Tetons, where his father is a guide. He has been traumatized by combat and the death of his brother in the war. As he rebuilds his life by helping his father, he falls in love with the daughter of one of his father's wealthy clients. She is separated from her husband and they begin a passionate affair. Guilt drives her to return to her husband, causing Hank to leave the Tetons to become a ski instructor at Sun Valley. Her husband's suicide frees her to return and they appear to have a happy future until her father's plane crashes in the mountains. Hank leads the effort to retrieve his body. As the party edges across a glacier toward the downed plane, Lea exhibits considerable skill in describing the unstable snowpack:

Hank stopped once on the winding way, to probe ahead with his ax at a suspicious wale and hollow of powder. It was firm. They came gladly into the violet blue shade around the uphill shoulder of the dark tooth. Hank reached out and touched with his glove the frost-gritted bareness of the stone.

Up a sharp slot of corn-snow, then wind-packed hard-crust, they came again into the stab of the sun's white dazzle; they stopped to unrope. The hump of the slope out ahead hid the face of the peak farther up. . . In tense and unspoken urgency now, the file of three men plodded rightward, climbing along a glare of greater and emptier highness, stopping often, worried with the looseness of glittery deep powder underfoot.

Revealed above the easing crest of the hump ahead, first they saw a thick cornice of snow wind-scoured against the sky. (Lea, 331-332)

Just as they reach the plane the cornice falls and the avalanche carries Hank to his death. In the final lines of the novel Hank's father remarks to his remaining climbing partner that Hank had abandoned the mountains when he fell in love, to which his friend replies: "They claimed him before he got away." (336) This grimly misogynistic and naturalistic ending may account for the generally negative critical reception of the book. Lea, who was born in El Paso in 1907, is known for his illustrations of books by Frank Dobie and his paintings of the Southwest, as well as his popular novel *The Brave Bulls*. *The Primal Yoke* captures the mood of impending doom in post-war America. In the context of the times, the unstable cornice of snow may be a symbol of Cold War tensions and nuclear annihilation.

The literary and social revolts of the 1960s produced the first macabre comic avalanche novel, William Hjortsberg's *Alp* (1969). Set in a fictional Alpine gasthaus under the shadow of the north face of the unclimbable Juggernaut, the novel's bizarre characters, who include honeymooners from New York, climbers from Jackson Hole, the unhappy guest house owner and his lustful daughters, a blind witch, a perverted city official, and a cannibalistic dwarf, provide the frenetic and absurd plot that culminates in the triggering of an avalanche with a 75mm howitzer by the cuckolded husband. The sexually liberated bride and her Alpinist lover escape. The dwarf too survives, his last act is the cutting of the strings of six helium-filled yellow balloons that mark the burial places of the members of the Avalanche Patrol. From *Cup of Trembling to Alp*, the imagined avalanche still executes justice. Hjortsberg, novelist, screenwriter, and Montana resident, may expose justice as a joke, but he's sentimental enough to let the guilty lovers escape.

For the 1980s and 1990s, poetry provides a variety of imagined avalanches. Because the literary conventions of lyric poetry usually require brief, intense metaphors that force the reader to reconsider his or her normal perspectives,

these avalanche poems take us beyond the literal disaster of Wechsberg, or even the cruelly ironic avalanches of Foote and Lea. The Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan who lives near Boulder, Colorado, compares the sudden but inevitable mental breakdown of a woman to an avalanche:

Just last month
the avalanches like good women
were headed for a downfall. I saw
one
throw back her head
and let go of the world.

Hogan's brief poem ends with a note of joy, however, because the avalanche/woman knows:

about the turning wheel of earth,
love, markets, and even the spring
coming soon with its
wildflowers.

(Hogan, 1991, 76)

William Dickey was a western poet, born in Bellingham, Washington, in 1928; he died in San Francisco in 1994. One of his last poems, "Avalanche," as a metaphor for the struggle to hold things together, specifically a marriage. It begins:

I have spent the whole day, or is
it twenty years,
building up with you this
conclusion, that totters
over our heads.

Let it slip, swing, the nominal
body purse itself for a
second, and then
discharge.

Ruin. How we have waited for it.

The chute, the white wave of
massiveness
when nothing can be understood
or outvoted.

Millennia later, we will be
chopped
out of the glacier. You will be
wearing
a sign saying "You." I will be
wearing,
frozen, allowable, an admiration.

We will each be classified
according to our kinds.
(Dickey, 1994, 85)

The next two stanzas provide some explanation. The poet loves a woman who does not return his love. Rejection for him is like being frozen under ice and snow but he imagines being frozen with his lover, that even in the crushing discovery of betrayal there is a lasting bond. The conclusion of the poem points back to the beginning so that when the couple are "chipped out of the glacier," that is, remembered and discussed by their friends, the poet hopes her accusatory "You" will make his smug "admiration" for her believable. It's not the only possible interpretation of these lines, but the point I want to make is that Dickey's avalanche is about all those small things that people do to one another over the years that finally, like a sand-pile model of avalanches, cause a collapse. Moreover, Dickey says, people need to classify and be classified, to know that what they do has significance.

That in short is the final meaning of the imagined avalanche. The avalanches created by Helen Hunt Jackson, Mary Hallock Foote, N. C. Wyeth, Courtney Cooper, Monty Atwater, Joseph Wechsberg, Tom Lea, William Hortsberg, and the poets stand for many things—punishment, challenge, sensual thrills, the collapse of order and belief. Yet all these possibilities stem from one desire, to make sense of life, of nature. A goal pursued in metaphor as well as graphs and charts and formula.

¹ Although avalanche may refer to landslides, it is usually synonymous with snow slides. Since they share many characteristics it is worth noting that Eric Purchase's *Out of Nowhere: Disaster and Tourism in the White Mountains* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) uses the example of a rockslide in New Hampshire in 1826 to show how attitudes toward nature were evolving.

² Letter in possession of the Wyeth family quoted in a letter to the author from Christine B. Podmaniczky, Associate Curator, N.C. Wyeth Collection, Brandywine Museum, Chadds Ford, PA, June 5, 2000.

³ Sockdolager is an American colloquialism dating from the early nineteenth century meaning an unusually large or exceptional person or thing. In this case a blizzard with thunder and lightning. See *A Dictionary of Americanisms On Historical Principles*, Mitford M. Matthews, ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1951, 1590).

⁴ The sensuous *and* sensual dimensions of avalanches are apparent in Dolores LaChappelle's "satire" on avalanches as a metaphor for love.

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