Max Vigne makes use of the ostensibly dangerous Himalayan mountain range as if it was a Green World, that is, as a place which facilitates experimentation, self-discovery, and renewal. It’s an odd place to use as a playground, but he needed some place that would serve: it is clear that his life in England was safe but routine—humdrum. It is what was afforded him after a shock—his mother’s death—necessitated a life moved by necessity rather than by romance. Though he at first makes it seem as if his surveying position abroad is really about bettering his position at home, not long into the text it becomes apparent that it is really about rediscovering a life of “charm” (22), a life he had been familiar with before his mother died.

But this is not to say, however, that his initial way of characterizing the point of his travels inhibits self-discovery. Instead, very likely, it enables it—for those who’ve been traumatized by the loss of a parent can be overwhelmed by too much change. Because for them experimentation/play can be as much about the loss of the familiar and comforting as it is about the acquisition of the new and pleasing, it is risky business, to be undertaken with care. Therapists know that the traumatized need first to be made to feel secure before they can be brought to engage with the world experimentally, and Max may have prepared himself for a risky and playful re-evaluation of what he wants to do with his life by first having established himself as a respectable bourgeois Victorian—that is, by constituting himself as the sort of gentleman his own culture would lift up as a good example for other young men to emulate.

His journals entries delineate a sort of threat the Kashmir environment could present him with—namely, becoming lost and freezing to death—and his first action is to make himself feel less vulnerable to this threat. He does this by distinguishing himself from the lost man “found on a mountain that is numbered but still to be named” (17). While the lost man was untethered, unconnected, someone who traveled alone, Max is “attached to a branch, however small and insignificant, of the Grand Trigonometrical Survey of India” (17)—is part of confident Victorian expansionism abroad. But he is in fact connected to two empowered entities which lend support and security in this new environment. That is, as important to his sense of security as is his attachment to a respectable and grand survey company, is his
attachment to his wife at home, who is made to seem so much the suffering angel in
the house. Though he attends to the difficulty he experiences in connecting to her
through letters, though our attention is drawn to all he cannot convey to her for fear
of frightening her, we should not overlook the fact that she is someone he can turn to
for attendance and nurturance—she is someone he expects will attend closely to
whatever she receives from him, to whatever he has to say to her. She writes
“mothering” letters to him. His companions laugh at her advice for him to “wear
[his] [. . .] woolly vest” (22). But he doesn’t need to deem them—simply jealous—in
order to find some comfort in their jabs, for her letter helps establish her as the sort
of admonishing but nurturing and empowered mother-figure Victorians believed
determined the nature of their public sphere. It helps establish her as the kind of
mother-figure we all needed to know we could turn to for periodic support, when we
first explored the exciting but strange world we were born into.

The particular nature of his life back home provides him with a secure departure
point; he maps for himself a secure arrival point in the future, the end of his journey,
which will ostensibly mean a better position at home; and he has linked himself to a
company which makes him feel securely placed in the present: there is a sense that he
helps make himself feel secure through what might aesthetically feel like the sort of
triangulation he attempts to effect for his wife at the end of the text, in an effort to
make her feel secure. But of course he is on a journey, he is moving: he is never a set,
stationary point that can be clearly demarcated on a map. But his movement is made
to seem as if it amounts to little more than moving from one secure point to another
one well within sight. He describes his team as tied together. He moves with a “line
of men”—“chainmen” (27). This formation makes his movement through the
mountains seem rigid and limited, but also delimit—known.

And in some ways this manner of journeying is akin to the one he was already
familiar with back home: it follows the beaten path. He travels with men who literally
are not trailblazers. They are those who follow paths first established, demarcated, by
“the dashing scouts of the triangulating party” (26)—that is, by those who “dig
through feet of snow” so as to “expose” “level platforms” and “supporting pillars”
(26) for them to stand and step on, by those who are the ones most susceptible to
falling victim to insecure snow bridges, to falling into crevasses. The crew Max is
associated with “merely” adds “muscle and sinew on their bones” (27). In a sense,
though he tells his wife that “[e]verything [he is] [. . .] seeing and doing is so new,”
that “so much is rushing into [him] [...] all at once [that he] [...] gets confused” (26), it is not quite accurate to depict his life abroad as involving constant encounters with the wholly strange and new: in truth, much has been already been processed for him by the brave scouts at the forefront of the party, at the forefront of experiencing an as-of-yet unmapped world.

He encounters his new environment to some extent as a tourist would some place he’d never been to, or as a watcher or reader of a never-before-seen play would experience everything he witnesses within a Green World environment, or as he and his wife encounter their letters to one another, which they know will be edited so that much of what could frighten has been removed. That is, he encounters “the new” without fear it will shock or disorient. When he tells his wife “that all one’s pleasures [there] [...] are retrospective [...] [that] in the moment itself, there is only the moment, and the pain” (42), he comes close to universalizing not just how one would experience the Himalayan mountain range but how one might experience any unfamiliar environment. But of course not everyone takes more pleasure from recalled than they do from immediate experience. We note that Annie Dillard’s narrator in *Tinker Creek*, for example, often exults in unprocessed, intense, even overwhelming experience. She prefers to look upstream rather than downstream; she prefers to expose herself to the impact of the new rather than situate herself so all lived experience amounts to what has already passed at least someone by—to a perpetual re-encounter with history. And it may be that people who have not learned early on that life could at any moment present them with experiences they are unprepared to deal with, share Dillard’s narrator’s preference for unmediated, unprocessed experience.

Both temporal and spatial distance from threats help Max develop a mental state well suited for self-reflection and exploration. The company he travels with can threaten him: Michael is one of three men who make sexual advances upon him. But he rebuffs them; and since this action leads to Michael, at least, “ceas[ing] to deal with him directly,” for him to “communicate [to Max] by sarcastic notes” (30), it effectively distances them from him and makes their communication something under Max’s control: *he* determines when to read Michael’s letters, and can thereby be sure to be well braced to deal with whatever they might contain. Though even when in a crowded group he still finds ways to create room for himself—he tells us of how he successfully created “the solitude he so desperately need[ed]” through writing to
Clara, and of how his reading led him to feel drawn to, closer toward, those whose
works he had been reading—clearly he prefers to keep physically distant from the rest
of his company whenever possible. He manages just this the evening Michael tells a
triangulator to tell a tale Max knows could lead to campground disorder. When he
guesses things might get out of hand, he “fle[es] the campfire [. . .] and roll[s] himself
in a blanket in a hollow, far from everyone, carved into the rocky cliffs” (46). So
ensconced, he is safe from whatever carnage developed that evening. And he thereby
positions himself so that upon his return he would once again deal only with
processed, denatured experience: when he returned to the site in the morning he
would encounter only the remains of whatever happened the night before.

We note that by having fled he thereby enabled more play for himself. The next
morning offers a surprise: what developed from the evening of story-telling. He
hides, and therefore the next morning, can seek! And there is play in another instance
in which he creates physical distance between himself and his companions—
specifically, the time he falls into a fissure after having left his companions, who had
prematurely set up camp. He escapes the crevice by essentially making himself into a
bridge—that is, through play. He admits he actually enjoyed being in the crevice; and
given that it meant being physically removed from and to some extent protected
against “capture” by a group that annoyed him, we can understand why he found the
“cold and quiet” (37) seductive. But he might take pleasure in the incident for
another reason: because it staged for him exactly the sort of calamity he feared he was
most vulnerable to while journeying and let him know that he was in fact capable of
handling dangerous situations without aid. Though he eventually will be shamed into
deeming this episode not so much something he shouldn’t write home about but
something not worth writing home about, it provides him with the sort of experience
he can use to make himself feel less the tourist and more a manly adventurer.

It is not quite accurate to say he relied only on his own resources to emerge from
the crevasse, though, for we are told that “it was the thought of not getting to read”
his wife’s letters which inspired his efforts. It is, then, an incident which shows how
strongly he needs to think of his wife as someone he must return to, as someone to
draw strength from. But it is also one which speeds up his reliance upon, his
attachment to, other people. His next letter is moved by his enthusiasm to tell her
about his developing letter relationship with Dr. Hooker, and to inform her of how
drawn he is to men such as Darwin, Gray, and Hooker. It is one where he tells her he
“plans to share his records with Dr. Hooker and however else is interested” (42). We note that when he first mentioned receiving a letter from Dr. Hooker he made contact with him seem akin to his seeing K2 for the first time. That is, he made it seem akin to what a tourist would feel upon closing upon greatness: it enraptures, but does not obligate—it could forever after be an encounter he might dazzle others with but which doesn’t necessitate any soul-shifting on his part in any substantive way.

When he first describes his renewed interest in botany to his wife, he makes it seem something which would enhance but not “deform,” harshly alter, their life together upon his return; it will simply allow him to point out more things to her in their garden. But in this letter it is evident that his involvement with Hooker, and his rediscovery of his interest in botany, will involve distancing, not closing, the distance between his wife and himself.

At the end of the text we are told of Max’s need to prepare his wife to accept difficult truths, and he shows the need to slowly prepare himself for as much as well. When he first mentioned great personages he is or is becoming connected to, such as Hooker or his relation Godfrey Vigne, he made their connection to him seem indirect and inconsequential. He actually says that he is (only) “tangentially” (20) related to Vigne: he tells himself there is no direct, pressing link between them. When he mentions Hooker’s letters to him, he identifies them as an effort of Hooker’s “to encourage an amateur” (40)—that is, he chooses to believe that Hooker writes to him more out of kindness than out of respect for the work he had undertaken. But though from such statements of his as, “What draws me to these men and their writings is not simply their ideas but the way they defend each other so vigorously and are so firmly bound” (40), it is clear that though he looks to these men as those he might bind himself to, he is not yet prepared to make firm the link. But he is preparing himself, constructing “bones” upon which, after he comes to believe that he is in fact worthy of sustained communication with Hooker and/or of identifying himself more squarely with his great relation, “muscle” and “sinew” can be added later.

He more boldly characterizes himself to seem more similar than dissimilar to these men—and different from his wife—after he re-establishes a link to his childhood life, to his mother. He becomes fully aware of the continued existence and relevance of this link after his fall into the crevasse. After that experience, he writes, “He himself has changed so much he grows further daily from her [i.e., his wife’s]
picture of him. It is his mother, dead so many years, who seems to speak most truly to the new person he is becoming. As if the years between her death and now are only a detour, his childhood self emerging from a long uneasy sleep” (48). Did the landscape somehow help consolidate his attachment to his past life? There is reason to believe so, for he fell into the crevasse after wandering through an environment that made him feel as if he was stepping backwards through time. And he admitted his desire to sleep, perhaps to hibernate, while enclosed within snow at the bottom of the crevasse. Though, then, his wife helped extricate him from the crevice, he emerged someone prepared to believe his life with her but a long detour, to make himself feel more awkwardly related to her than to greats like Godrey Vigne.

His wife is made to seem a kind of useful object. In a Winnicotian sense, she is the primary object to be left behind only once the venturing “child” has securely attached himself to transitional ones. She is someone who must be construed as good and pure, as someone he desperately wants to map his soul for, as someone to return to, until he feels less in need of her support and love. After he has revived and reattached himself to his early childhood self, and after he has begun to link and identify himself more and more with Hooker, he is prepared to admit to himself that his previous home is not something he is actually all that eager to return to. Initially he said that both he and his wife decided he should go abroad, even though it was clear the decision was mostly his own. Initially his complaint about being away from her was that he was unable to keep in constant contact, to provide her with a well-documented map of his soul. Now we hear of him choosing not to write to her for months at a time. His experience with Dima is something he uses to help him reassess his time with her. He compares her to his wife, and, as he witnesses Dima’s charm fade away, admits that much of his life with his wife lacked charm: it lacked precisely what he knew along side his mother as a child and what seems newly available to him should he continue to add to his already established relationship with professional botanists.

He leaves Dima behind, but his attachment to her facilitated his peers’ acceptance of him. It lends him some of the mystique men such as Dr. Chateau, of those who have been in the mountains for decades doing—who knows what?, possess. It lends him some of the mystique his relation Godrey possessed. Fitting more naturally to his new environment, he begins to distance himself from terminology, ways of thinking, he had adopted earlier. We are told, “Nobility, duty, sacrifice—
whose words are those? Not his. He is using them to screen himself from the knowledge of whatever is shifting in him” (54). He may well have used them, however, to enable such shifting to occur in the first place, for they too made him seem to embody, to partake in, a buoyant Victorian ethos. We note, though, that he describes himself as morosely beginning to doubt the real benefits and righteousness of Victorian expansionism. But he may be beginning to doubt the rightness of efforts by those such as Hooker he had previously hero-worshipped, because he is better prepared to detach from them as well.

That is, when he begins to doubt the legitimacy, the righteousness of his mapping efforts, he has become a skilled draftsman who has learned through trial and error how to articulate his environment through maps and notes, and an adventurer, who has successfully lead men through mountains. He is no longer an amateur. He has demonstrated to himself that he is worthy of the attention of people like Hooker. But perhaps, because not adjusting his estimations of Hooker and Godrey would entail an obligation to continue becoming like them, would limit his freedom, his ability to establish his own future, he now cooperates in making them seem less worthy of his loyalty. Time has come for him to leave even more behind him, to forage on ahead, a true trailblazer—now no mere servant of the map.

Work Cited