

# Introduction

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The history of the emotional, aestheticising attitude of humans to the mountains can be divided into two, very clearly semantically marked strands. One of them is rooted in the human fear of what in the essence of the mountains is alien and unknown, and thus hostile and dangerous. It is a strand made up of prejudices, thoughts, beliefs as well as imperfect and fragmentary knowledge of unpleasant incidents which happened to people in the mountains. It is characterised by a set of behaviours, statements, iconic and verbal representations attributing to the mountains aesthetically negative values and infernal meanings suggesting that they are a space hostile to humans. The second strand is based on a strong foundation of the human passion to explore and belief in the beauty of the world, in the existence of ideal values in it, which leads to the mountains and mountain landscape being ascribed positive aesthetic values. Thus the mountains — as a geological phenomenon characterised by unique attributes (verticality, rockiness and hence potential hierophany) as well as an area providing valuable ores, herbs and other natural resources — have occupied a special place in culture from time immemorial. Stimulating the imagination of the communities living nearby and prompting explorers, treasure and mineral hunters, scientists and artists to act, the mountains became a source and place of positive experiences with varying degrees of intensity. On the one hand, they provoked fear characteristic of what is alien, unknown and unfamiliar, on the other they aroused curiosity and fascination. That is why a very important stage in their exploration in the history of civilisation came with the beginning of a unique aesthetic valorisation of the mountains, which was associated primarily with their hierophantic interpretation, followed by various belief concepts and religious practices, which, however, was only incidental to negative attitudes towards them. Jacek Kolbuszewski wrote about this in his book on mountain treasure hunters, *Skarby Króla Gregoriusa*:

The history of humanity has for centuries been linked to the mountains; from time immemorial people have settled near the mountains, lived in their vicinity, looked at the peaks, learned to read their appearance. And have been afraid of the mountains. They have been afraid of them and looked at them with fear. From the mountains came storms and blizzards. Nature in the mountains was governed by laws which people, used to living in valleys, could not comprehend. This was where irrational dangers lurked: snow fell in the middle of a hot summer, thunders struck on the coldest days, pieces of rock, even those untouched by human hand, came crushing down, wreaking havoc. It was difficult to frame these facts within a concise definition explaining all the phenomena. Humankind slowly got

to know the mountains and was slowly preparing for a magnificent mountain odyssey.<sup>1</sup>

What also slowly emerged was an aestheticising attitude to the mountains, linked in a variety of ways to an exploring attitude. Until some point the growth of the tendency was limited by the inaccessibility, wildness of mountain areas, as a result of which we have relatively limited evidence for the early stages of interest in the mountains — the first attempts to explore European and non-European mountain ranges — of any appreciation of the aesthetic values of mountain landscapes and ecstatic experiences provided by direct contact with the mountains. Worthy of note in this context are the first attempts at a literary conceptualisation of experiences associated with the contemplation of mountain landscapes, like Francesco Petrarca's famous letter featuring a description of the landscape seen by the poet from the top of Mont Ventoux.<sup>2</sup> Of interest are also fragments of Dante's *Divine Comedy* with a description of mountain climbing. We can also learn a lot from Konrad Gesner's account of the poet's ascent of Pilatus (1555), as it contributed to the eradication of prejudices connected with the mountain.

For a long time these sporadic manifestations of fascination with the mountain landscape were confronted with negative feelings. As Jacek Kolbuszewski writes:

When the mountains were primarily an obstacle to travel and made life hugely difficult, [...] enlightened men embarking on distant journeys viewed them with distaste: a certain Pole sent by his father on a journey across Europe, a journey meant to raise his level of culture, having travelled across the Pyrenees wrote disgusted that they are “such rocky mountains that one wants to spit”.<sup>3</sup>

A clear breakthrough in the way of seeing and understanding the specificity of the mountain landscape — which then resulted in various meanings and values, sometimes emblematic, being ascribed to it — came only in the mid-eighteenth century, which was linked to a number of momentous events in the history of literature and culture, especially the publication of Albrecht von Haller's *Die Alpen* (1729), a poem idealising Switzerland and its residents; and of *New Heloise* (1761), an extremely popular epistolary novel by Jean-Jacques Rousseau showing a perfect model of responding to the beauty of nature. Numerous tourists set off for Switzerland to confront their feelings about landscape with Rousseau's literary visions and experiences of his protagonists. This turned virtually into a European fashion, and Switzerland's Alpine landscape viewed from this literary perspective began to appear as a land of ideal beauty.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Kolbuszewski, *Skarby Króla Gregoriusa. O poszukiwaczach skarbów w XVII i XVIII wieku*, Katowice 1972, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> M. Cieński, “Literacki opis gór a estetyka nowożytnego pejzażu”, *Góry – Literatura – Kultura* 2, 1996, pp. 25–39.

<sup>3</sup> J. Kolbuszewski, op. cit., p. 23.

The development of tourism in the Alps went hand in hand with the Enlightenment era scientific aspirations. Their spirit inspired modern exploration opening to people the ideal world of values carried by the mountains. With the arrival, primarily in the Alps, of the first travellers making conscious attempts to reach inaccessible regions of the high mountains and then ascend the highest peaks for exploration- and sport-related purposes, there began to emerge modern mountaineering, which was another medium for idealising the mountains. As the authors of the excellent monograph *Fallen Giants: A History of Himalayan Mountaineering from the Age of Empire to the Age of Extremes* write:

Now a sprawling tourist metropolis and the unrivalled mountain-climbing capital of Europe, Chamonix was in 1741 a remote and backward farming village of no interest to anyone but a few crystal collectors and chamois hunters. The fantastic tangle of mountains and glaciers that dominated its surrounding valley was generally reviled as ugly and fearsome, the icy realm of witches and dragons. But [William] Windham and company, to their surprise, found the Chamonix Valley “rather agreeable”, the mountains and glaciers fascinating, and on arriving at the village they hired a few local peasants to escort them onto the Mer de Glace, the “sea of ice” that in those days descended from the North Face of Mont Blanc (or “Mont Maudit”, the cursed mountain, as the Chamoniards knew it) right to the edge of the village. But “that did not satisfy our curiosity”, Windham later wrote, “and we discovered that we had come too far simply to stop”. Against their guides’ advice, the party pressed on for four hours to Montenvers, a small plateau above the Mer de Glace [...].

Of the many travellers who followed Windham and Pococke into the Chamonix Valley, by far the most important to the history of Alpine mountaineering was Horace Bénédict de Saussure (1740–1799), a wealthy Genevan geologist and botanist who on the occasion of his first visit in 1760 not only climbed the Brévant, a pinnacle in the Aiguilles Rouges, but also offered a sizable reward to the first person successfully to climb Mont Blanc, the dominating massif of the Chamonix Valley and (as far as he knew) the highest mountain in Europe. [...] Several failures followed in quick succession before Michael-Gabriel Paccard, a local doctor, and Jacques Balmat, a local chamois hunter, reached the main summit in 1786 and then promptly fell out over who had taken the leading role. [...] For our purposes, its significance lies in the spur it gave to Alpine mountaineering generally. De Saussure’s *Voyages dans les Alpes* (1779) had already brought the marvels of Chamonix home to readers in Geneva, Paris and London, but now, with Paccard’s and Balmat’s ascent, and even more with de Saussure’s own successful repetition of the ascent in 1787, no vicarious account would do. The public came to see the Chamonix Valley for itself, and this

once-remote village quickly became the crowded centre of a novel form of middle-class recreation.<sup>4</sup>

The growing anthropogenic impact on the mountains and the development of mountain regions were accompanied by a clear change in the emotional attitude to the mountains, primarily among representatives of a broadly defined middle class visiting them more and more frequently for the purpose of recreation. Within less than half a century the long-standing aversion to the mountains was replaced with an almost affirmative attitude, which was associated to some extent with a change in the aesthetic tastes, happening in European culture already in the second half of the eighteenth century. Literary and paraliterary works from the turn of the nineteenth century contains many examples of avowed admiration for the mountain landscape, which was the basis of complicated processes of its idealisation.

Another phenomenon growing in strength from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards was the idealisation of the mountain shepherd culture, accompanied by a growth of mountain exploration as well as development of mountaineering and mountain tourism. In the historical context we can point here to a certain logical set of complementing attitudes: discovery of the purpose of the existence of the mountains, pragmatism, aestheticisation and idealisation as well as the resulting ideologisation (Young Poland movement!). The intensity of these processes varied; the processes were articulated in a variety of ways in literary narratives, in art as well as in a broad social and economic discourse. In the symbolic dimension the idealisation of the mountains was also present in state creation processes. Yet today mountain idealisation and its derivatives turn out to be an ambivalent phenomenon. On the one hand, they constitute the foundation of a positive view of the mountains and mountain regions, on the other — a source of controversy and sometimes also conflicts.

Most of the articles by Polish and foreign authors collected in the present volume concern various aspects of the continuing process of mountain idealisation, analysed not only in a historical context, but also in the context of contemporary phenomena. The authors of the articles try to view the idealisation of the mountains from a new perspective, often going beyond the boundaries of individual research disciplines within their discourses. Among the topics they examine, there emerge several leading questions: to what extent is the phenomenon of the idealisation of the mountains associated with their ontology and perception of mountains in terms of archetypes and symbols, and to what extent is it a new cultural construct linked to the emergence and spread of a certain type of literary genres as well as development and popularisation of landscape painting? What are the factors of the idealisation of the mountains? To what extent are they linked to the development of civilisation, ideas of progress, popularisation of sport and leisure — is the idealisation in direct or inverse proportion to them? How was this

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<sup>4</sup> M. Isserman, S. Weaver, *Fallen Giants: A History of Himalayan Mountaineering from the Age of Empire to the Age of Extremes*, New Haven-London 2008, pp. 29–30.

process influenced by the development of the network of mountain resorts and health resorts, and what is the share in the idealisation of the mountains of the aesthetic categories of beauty, nobility, picturesqueness, wildness?

Presenting our dear readers with the thirteenth volume of *Góry – Literatura – Kultura*, we hope that some of the cultural processes taking place in the mountains or linked to them in one way or another will become better known thanks to broad research within the humanities, which will contribute to a revision — so important today — of the bond between people and nature, between society and the natural environment.

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