

“This Fabulous Rainbow of Sensations”: The Haptic Sublime in Modern Polish Mountaineering Literature

Przemysław Kaliszuk

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Faculty of Philology, Department of Polish Philology, Plac Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4a, 20-031 Lublin, Poland
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8668-3911>
przemyslaw.kaliszuk@mail.umcs.pl

This article looks at Polish mountaineering literature in the context of modernist aesthetics. Selected extracts from nineteenth-century travel writing are presented in which the essence of one's experience of mountains is associated with the sublime. The article then explores the emergence of a new type of climbing sensibility and its literary representation on the basis of twentieth-century mountaineering texts that show the inefficiency of earlier forms of the sublime. Polish mountaineers gradually developed a new language that allowed them to specify the experience of vertical space. The aesthetics of the haptic sublime, which was born of the clash of the literary discourse with the concreteness of the climbing experience, resolved the problem of satisfactory expression and introduced new narrative patterns. It placed the climbing experience in a new conceptual framework, deriving its unique character from the contradictions of modern culture. It also showed the autotelic character of climbing and constituted mountaineering literature as a type of narrative that is autonomous with regard to other kinds of travel narratives.

Keywords: literature and alpinism / Polish literature / mountaineering literature / modernism / the sublime / travel writing

Mountaineering literature is a phenomenon that appeared relatively late in Polish culture, namely in the late nineteenth century, and includes both documentary non-fiction and narrative fiction related to mountains and mountaineering. Since then, the topic of mountains has become ever more popular due to the changes in the notion of mountain landscape that have resulted from a gradual development

of mountain tourism and the culture of health resorts. The turn of the century brought new ways of perceiving mountainous areas, which were then used and modified in various narratives and discourses on travel, climbing, tourism, and alpinism (see Hennel; Kolbuszewski, *Góry* 239–264). Although this new interest in mountaineering narratives is associated with the post-war period as well as with Polish expeditions in the Alps, Jerzy Kukuczka's achievements in the Himalaya, and the Himalayan winter climbs of the 1970s and '80s, a specific mountain culture developed as early as the late nineteenth century. Within this framework, diverse mountain experiences have been put on paper, preserved, transformed, and conceptualized, to a large extent independently of previous, pre-modern thought patterns related to the relationship between humans and the mountains.

In Western cultures, the perception of mountains has undergone a radical change under the influence of modern thought and its demythologization of once horrifying mountains, now instrumentalized in new, often contradictory ways. The French Revolution was preceded by the conquest of Mont Blanc, whose discovery became the creation myth of alpine mountaineering and also a part of the narrative of modernity (see Hansen 33). In the Polish context, analogous transformations occurred somewhat later and were spread over time, making them less apparent than, say, the British experience (see Bainbridge, "Writing"). A crucial manifestation of the taming of the mountains was the cultural and scientific activity of geographers, naturalists, writers, tourists, and climbers who, beginning in the early nineteenth century, regularly visited the Tatra Mountains, the only mountain range in Poland with an alpine character (see Roszkowska, *Taternictwo* 46–120).

On a symbolic level, the exploration of the Tatras, the later Polish equivalent of the Alps and a modern model of the mountaineering playground (see Anderson 99–138), begins with the publication of the book *O ziemioródtwie Karpatów i innych gór i równin Polski* (*On the Earth-Forming of the Carpathian Mountains and Other Mountains and Lowlands of Poland*), written in 1815 by the Enlightenment rationalist Stanisław Staszic (see Kolbuszewski, *Literatura* 147–171). Three years later, the poet Antoni Malczewski climbed Mont Blanc (see Kurczab 30–36; Roszkowska, *Taternictwo* 250–251), but his account of the climb did not significantly impact the perception of mountains in Polish literature (see Kolbuszewski, *Góry* 134–136). Staszic's previous work on the Tatras is viewed as the introduction of a new approach to mountains, one matching the standards established by Horace-Bénédict de Saussure's *Voyages dans les Alpes* (*Voyages in the Alps*).

From today's perspective, it should be said that in his book, Staszic, who valued a rationalist approach based on empirical research (Matuszyk, *U źródeł* 68), relied on popular science to describe an unknown mountainous area. He provided essential information in a clear and accurate manner which enabled his readers to broaden their knowledge on the mountains. Initially an object of natural sciences and ethnography, the Tatras became an important part of cultural heritage and a source of national identity (see Kolbuszewski, *Tatry* 34–35). Owing to Staszic's work, "mountains knocked on the door of Polish culture, manifesting themselves [...] as both the heart of the community and a completely different realm" (Pacukiewicz, "Warstwy" 78). Staszic's occasional aesthetic appraisals of the Tatras were also a source of a Polish ideology of mountaineering (see Matuszyk, *U źródeł* 152–155). As shown by Andrzej Matuszyk, there is a close link between Staszic's portrayal of the Tatras and the categories of the sublime in Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant (Matuszyk, *U źródeł* 107–155). The narrative persona is immersed in the landscape of the Tatras, notices its vastness, and pays attention to details such as the shape and texture of the rocks. He suffers the horror resulting from the danger of high altitudes, experiences the vastness and magnificence of the mountains, feels the power and immensity of space, which he admires as he senses his own insignificance before returning to the reality that awaits outside that space (see Matuszyk, *Humanistyczne* 109–111). According to Matuszyk, Staszic, as a kind of climber *avant la lettre*, comes surprisingly close to later accounts by high-mountain tourists and mountaineers in the Tatras. Staszic inserts narrative passages into his scientific treatise, evoking the sublime in his accounts of reaching the summits of Krywań, Łomnica, and Kołowy. In this regard, Staszic represents a surprisingly modern way of thinking: he is aware that the mountains are radically different from the lowlands, a dissimilarity that cannot be expressed without showing how people experience high altitudes, what they are capable of seeing, and what physical condition they are in. The verticality of the landscape and the record of motion are intrinsic elements of Staszic's story, without which a discovery of the Tatras would be incomplete, if not impossible. "In Latourian terms, the experience of mountaineering accounts for both a purification and a translation of the landscape, which thereby undergoes transformation." (Pacukiewicz, "Warstwy" 80) In this sense, in Staszic's discourse, the description of a landscape seen from a mountain pass or a summit is related to the depiction of the sublime corresponding to concepts from around 1800 (see Boman 811–817; Frydryczak 78–114). It has become a

fundamental cognitive and aesthetic pattern, allowing for the depiction of the Tatras and the core of the experience of the mountains.

Initially, the Tatras attracted the Romantics who, following Staszic's example, travelled to this exotic and unusual region, even though not as visibly as in the case of British Romanticism (see Bainbridge, "Romantic"). Romantic texts, focusing mainly on descriptions of mountain landscapes, helped popularize the Tatras (see Kolbuszewski, *Tatry* 235). The next generation of writers explored the Tatras more intensely and introduced new components into the Romantic view of the mountains. This resulted in new literary and para-literary narratives but also in the first professional tourist guidebooks. The Romantic travel text as a narrative genre was gradually transformed into modern travel reportage (see Kolbuszewski, *Tatry* 239). Romantic curiosity about unusual landscapes gave way to (high) mountain tourism and scientific activities. The mountains gradually became an object of not only contemplation and landscape description, but also utilitarian endeavors and leisure activities such as hikes, trips, and climbs. This was accompanied by the establishment of tourist, ethnographic, outdoor, and eventually mountaineering organizations in the Tatras and elsewhere which gradually systematized and institutionalized human interaction with the mountains through legal acts and regulations but also through periodical literature, meetings, and lectures.

One event that particularly influenced the perception of mountains in European mountaineering literature was the successful ascent of the last unconquered Alpine summit, the Matterhorn, in the second half of the nineteenth century (see McNee 16–17). Not accidentally, the most important figures in mountaineering literature of that epoch, Edward Whymper, Leslie Stephen, and John Tyndall, all published their respective accounts in the second half of the 1870s, thereby opening a new era in mountaineering history and its literary representations (see Reidy). At the same time, a new generation of climbers directed their attention to new climbing challenges in the Alps and subsequently to high mountains beyond Europe, which in some way linked their climbing and literary activity to the pretense of imperial control maintained by the West (see Bayers). In Poland, one event that influenced mountaineering and its narration, albeit on a smaller scale, was the conquest of Ostry Szczyt in the Tatras in 1902, which, like the Matterhorn, was considered unreachable at the time. This event opened new climbing possibilities, following the model of British and European mountaineering (see Kolbuszewski, *Góry* 262–263; Roszkowska, *Taternictwo* 100–120). Around the same time, the nature of mountaineering and

the role of mountain guides began to be perceived differently: climbing came to be seen as a sports activity, and climbers gradually ceased to rely on local guides (see Roszkowska, “The Alpine” 9–10). In the Polish context, a colonial attitude toward local mountain communities, especially local mountain guides, is not documented. The transformation of tourists into independent climbers is manifested gradually in subsequent mountain narratives. It is accompanied by a change in the use of narrative devices and descriptions of touristic and climbing experiences. At the same time, at the level of the individual text, one can observe both a conceptual movement that demonstrates these changes and well-trying aesthetic solutions that do not allow for innovative depictions of climbing or the landscape itself.

Accounts of authentic experiences gained on mountain trips, and then climbs in the Tatras, published since the late nineteenth century, created a very broad spectrum of texts situated on the border between the genres of literary narrative, documentary narrative, journalism, and science (see Stępień 93–94). Notwithstanding their diversity, one can discern in them the emergence of a new sensibility and a new aesthetic, one aimed at expressing the unique character of communing with mountain landscapes, which, since Staszic’s time, has been streaked with certain forms of the sublime (see Pacukiewicz, “Inaccessible Background”).

Na przełęczy. Wrażenia i obrazy z Tatr (On the Mountain Pass: Impressions and Images from the Tatras), a book by Stanisław Witkiewicz published in 1889–1890, is located between two epochs. Witkiewicz used post-Romantic notions of the mountains, but he also perceived mountains in the context of early modernism, including the *fin-de-siècle* period (see Kolbuszewski, *Literatura* 375–395). The author heads to the mountains, goes on trips, and experiences the rocky areas, overdramatizing their grimness and horror. He narrates the events in a surprisingly anachronistic way, to a large extent consistent with the codes of the late Romantic period, which tended to discern the extraordinary in the mountains, including metaphysical aspects of reality. Although some modernist elements occur within the narrative—combining realistic, even naturalistic description with impressionist techniques, which sometimes brings Witkacy closer to the climber’s perspective—the self-registering sensations ultimately remain outside the landscape. It is clearly seen when the narrator observes one of the most characteristic peaks in the Tatras, Giewont, from a distance: “Giewont is in the glare of the brightly shining midday sun [...]. [T]he jagged contours of the ridge, touched by streaks of sunlight, are increasingly blurred and

softened; wild and steep walls of the hollows absorb water vapor from the air; dark forests are glistening with silver streaks, drizzling with blue, faint shadows—today, the entire mountainous area, usually so wild and inaccessible, is gentle and kind.” (Witkiewicz 58)

Similarly, the view from the Zawrat peak is mainly a description of the play of light, and the mountains—devoid of grimness and wildness—serve as background for the magnificent spectacle of nature, painting the landscape with sunrays (see Witkiewicz 153).

Undoubtedly, the most interesting passages of the book *Na przetęczy* are the climbing parts that reveal the already mentioned aesthetic sensibility of the climber, as the self is actively placed within a dynamic landscape:

We were walking up the mountain, stopping at each of the progressively higher floors of the granite edifice [...]. [T]he higher we were, the more palpable was the sense of being suspended in the air. However, the wall of rock we were approaching served as a shield, at least on one side. We are walking along a slippery [...] slope, which is not that small in close-up [...], yet it hangs over the throat of the couloir whose grey stony floor stretches from the summit to the bottom of the valley [...]. We are following a path along the base of a granite wall, on the brink of a precipice, and we are climbing up the steep slope rising above the couloir. (Witkiewicz 230–231)

Sensuousness and kinesthetic imagery that appear in this passage, used by Witkiewicz to express the perceptible horror, are subordinated to passive visual perception which creates a “painterly quality” (Witkiewicz 162) reminiscent of the aesthetic category of the picturesque (see Frydryczak 98–114). The sublime that appears in Witkiewicz’s account is marked by the physical experience of the concreteness of the mountains (the evocative style of the description of rock formations illuminated by sunlight), and yet the narrative persona chooses a conventional, effusive expression. This becomes clear in the description of the panorama from the summit or from the mountain pass. This return to the well-tested patterns for the expression of the sublime is surprising, if understandable. In his book, Witkiewicz ponders the identity of the “taternik” (Witkiewicz 63–69, 138). The word itself had no precise meaning at the time; today used as a synonym for the Tatra mountaineer, it referred to both a tourist and a climber. Witkiewicz clearly defines the Tatra mountaineer as a climber, emphasizing the physical aspects and athletic character of mountaineering (see Roszkowska, *Taternictwo* 129–132), but he excludes himself from this definition. Hence, his construction of the sublime is in accordance

with the pre-mountaineering notion of the relationship between man and mountains.

In “Ze wspomnień o Widłach” (“Memories of Widły”), a short story published in 1908, Roman Kordys passes a threshold that Witkiewicz did not cross. Kordys’ notion of the sublime reflects a clear shift toward a modern concept of mountaineering. The story places emphasis on the importance of presenting the relationship between climbing and the spiritual experience. At the beginning of the story, the narrative persona confesses: “We were supposed to enter the unknown world of crags and peaks that appeared strikingly inaccessible [...]. It made the desire to take on challenges that seemed impossible even more intense, and the urge to wrest the secrets of the majestic crags more ardent.” (Kordys 71) The persona experiences intense emotional reactions to the mountain which are obviously born of the climber’s sensibility expressed through stylistic devices typical of early modernism. Kordys’ narrative re-enacts the connection between the physical features of the climber’s body, vertical movement, and the mountain. Kordys treats the climb itself instrumentally, as a prelude to another experience; the essence of mountaineering is a spiritual experience that opens subjectivity to unparalleled transcendent experience and induces self-reflection. Having reached the eastern summit of Widły, the narrator rhetorically indicates the difficulties in expressing his experiences: “It is humanly impossible to depict the intensity of sensations and the depth of feelings we were bursting with. We sat down quietly in silence to decorously celebrate this shining moment in our lives.” (76) At the end of the story, when the mountaineers manage to climb the ridge, Kordys encapsulates the endeavor in a pompous and lofty tone, almost making an apologia for human expansion across the world: “We wrested the secrets of the summit of Widły. Feelings burned out forever, only memories remained [...]. [A]nd so on and so forth, endlessly, higher and higher, driven by the lofty and ardent desire to achieve unknown, unreachable goals! Excelsior!” (85)

In his 1910 collection *W Tatrach (In the Tatras)*, Kordys’ fellow climber Mieczysław Karłowicz deploys a similar strategy of defining one’s own subjectivity and a similar narrativization of climbing. Karłowicz undertakes high-mountain hikes accompanied by a guide, but it is him who actually initiates escapades and selects relatively ambitious goals. In a story about the ascent of Gerlach, the highest summit of the Tatras, one can notice a subtle modification of the aesthetics of the sublime. While Karłowicz is enjoying the panorama on the summit of Gerlach, his admiration of the aesthetic beauty of the menacing

mountain landscape is accompanied by a suggestion that the peaks visible way off in the distance might become (or have already been) a goal of other expeditions. The description is delivered by an active narrative persona who shares his satisfaction at being surrounded by unique space, at such high altitude where, for a brief moment, a human being is higher than the giant peaks of the Tatras:

What a view! [...] [H]ere I felt that I was up at the top of the Tatras: I saw the horizon line circled around me. In front of me Vysoka bowed its head, that Vysoka, pristine and proud, which makes such an impression from the summit of Rysy. Behind it Rysy, also diminished, it does not dare to raise above the horizon. Around, at the precipice and down below your feet, stretch the Big Valley and the Batizovská Valley. And what wonderful weather! [...] Here the Krywań Mountain, the tall Krywań, for a long time considered the highest peak in the Tatras, stretches its long arms. And over there, in the plains, cities and towns with the roofs of churches. I stood there for a long time, looking around. (Karłowicz 30)

The feeling of enthrallment evoked by the view after reaching the summit stems from a realization that only a skilled mountaineer can access this landscape. In another text from his book, Karłowicz is more than just a tourist collecting the views as he also reveals his knowledge of the pragmatics of the climb, focusing on the issues related to efficient and safe hiking through rocky surface: “We stepped on the rock for the first time. Here I had the immediate feeling that Mięguszwiecki does not mean the same as Gałuchowski and that one can’t mess around with that. Right after passing through the couloir, I felt a tingle slip up my back at the sight of its smooth slippery walls [...]. I steadfastly climbed over the steep rocky walls whose advantage was that the granite was firm and that it had not let me down even once.” (36)

To a large extent, Karłowicz’s prose is situated at the transition stage between early modernist accounts of mountain hikes and modern mountaineering literature. Throughout the book, Karłowicz draws attention to the practical aspects of climbs, and his descriptions of the landscape are enriched by visual and even tactile and kinesthetic elements. His expressions of the sublime resemble the then new aesthetics of modern mountaineering literature: his experiences are undoubtedly embedded in vertical movement.

In 1912, Ferdynand Goetel published a very important text in the history of Polish mountaineering literature, titled *Wycieczka—jak się o niej nie pisze* (*Excursion—How Not To Write About It*). Goetel used parody to sharply criticize the methods of recording summit climbs

and hikes in the Tatras. He ridiculed the linguistic structure of those records which remained largely under the influence of Romantic journeys and depicted extraordinary impressions or sensations in accordance with the literary style of post-Romantic modernism of the *fin-de-siècle* period. Goetel managed to capture and ridicule the conventionality of two complementary methods of expressing mountain experiences. He laid bare the effusive emotionality that treated the mountain landscape as a pretext and evinced excessive literariness in order to express spiritual experiences evoked by the view, thereby diminishing the importance of the climb itself. Goetel describes the climax of a model account of a mountain hike as follows:

The summit! The view—the feeling—I knew mountaineers who felt nothing after having eaten something—but I've never known anyone who would feel something after not having eaten [...]. It is necessary to have the desire to feel, to be aware of your feelings, and to be proud of the fact that you have better, deeper feelings than your neighbor. It is also important to mark the moment at which the emotions are about to reach their maximum intensity, and at this very moment it is advisable to close one's eyes and hold one's breath. Whoever fulfills all these conditions will experience the wonderful feeling of being merged with nature, full of contempt toward people and the world—then they can go ahead and write an article. Of all these conditions, I then managed to fulfill only one—I ate something—so it is no wonder that I now don't remember much about the moments spent on the summit. (Goetel 107)

Goetel also drew attention to the hermetic professionalism of the climbing discourse, which seemingly aimed at achieving precision and concreteness of the description of vertical movement through the use of terms describing space (ridge, route, overhang, holder, etc.), all borrowed from the climbing sociolect (107–108). This resulted in tedious repetitions of simplified climbing route itineraries. Goetel's *Wycieczka* provided a clear indicator that the pool of narrative and linguistic devices, which became rigid and inadequate in modern climbing, has exhausted itself (see Pacukiewicz, "Literatura" 497–498). According to Jacek Kolbuszewski, the publication of *Wycieczka* marked "the birth of modern mountaineering literature, in which the very fact of undertaking a climb becomes far more important than any literary attempt to recount the mountaineering experience" (Kolbuszewski, *Tatry* 471). It also indicates a conceptual transformation of the notion of the sublime, which appears as a kind of grotesque anachronism in Goetel's narrative. Goetel emphasizes the physical aspects of vertical movement, whose peculiar

absoluteness does not allow for metaphysical reflections during the climb or even *ex post*. Goetel also outlines the problem of the dialectic between authenticity and the new concept of concrete experience embedded in a state of physical exhaustion. “As the suffering body denied aesthetic pleasure [...] the mountaineers’ afflicted attention shifted slowly from the mountains into their own selves,” writes Philipp Felsch of a process that started already with de Saussure atop Mont Blanc (Felsch 347).

Goetel’s parody can be read as a clear manifestation of the gradual development of a new sensitivity that Alan McNee defines as the haptic sublime. According to McNee, “[t]he haptic sublime involves an encounter with mountain landscapes in which the human subject experiences close physical contact—sometimes painful and dangerous, sometimes exhilarating and satisfying, but always involving some kind of transcendent experience brought about through physical proximity to rock faces, ice walls, or snow slopes” (McNee 151). Like the eighteenth-century sublime, the haptic sublime is an aesthetics of overcoming a threat or difficulty, but “its emphasis on the physical proximity of the human subject to the object of sublime experience and its insistence on the privileged status of the mountain climber [...] involve quite a new type of subjectivity” (151).

The seismic shift in the conceptualization of climbing and climbing narrative that occurred in the interwar period is at work in Wiesław Stanisławski’s short story from 1930, titled “Zrobiliśmy Małą Śnieżną” (“We Did Mała Śnieżna”). Stanisławski’s story imitates the arduous, strenuous vertical motion consisting of repetitive movement and at the same time evokes a full sensual engagement without unnecessary redundancy. Stanisławski’s narrative is terse and devoid of the schematism ridiculed by Goetel. Reaching the summit is described in accordance with the rhetoric of the shame of feelings: Stanisławski makes no attempt to solve the problem of effability through the excessive use of descriptive devices intended to describe emotion accurately and capture the essence of climbing (see Pacukiewicz, “Inaccessible Background” 222). The narrator closes the story with this metaliterary device: “We are on the summit. Why on earth should I spoil the pleasure of a sixteen-hour struggle and describe my feelings or refer to my ideology? A hundred pages wouldn’t be enough to describe but a shadow of this fabulous rainbow of sensations [...]. Some reader would surely fall asleep over the book that includes some of the most beautiful moments in my life, as did I over ‘The Epic of Mięguszowiecka Pass’.” (Stanisławski 278)

The author avoids derivative philosophizing. He uses brevity as a convenient and efficient stylistic device to capture both physical activity and the concreteness of space. This concealment enables him to evoke his sublime experiences, even if this sublimity of movement has distinctive features of mountaineering. It is closer to a physiological affect that escapes precise definition than to an intellectual reflection which is somehow built around an inexpressible experience. Stanisławski also recalls *Na przełęczy* by Witkiewicz (periphrased as “The Epic of Mięguszowiecka Pass”) and humorously refers to an anachronistic way of describing one’s relationship with the Tatras.

In his 1935 book *Zdobywanie Mercedario* (*The Conquest of Mercedario*), Adam Karpiński describes his ascent of an Andean summit somewhat differently. The Polish expedition set off for the Andes and headed to the Puna de Atacama region at the very end of 1933 with the view to exploring unknown mountainous areas; their aim was to make topographic and cartographic measurements, collect rare botanical specimens, and determine the effects of high altitudes on the physiological processes in the human body. As official reports revealed (see Daszyński; Narkiewicz-Jodko 18–21), the teleology of the expedition combined exploratory and scientific objectives, while the athletic goals of climbing were somewhat secondary. Karpiński describes his impressions, combining the enthusiasm of an explorer with a faith in human cognitive faculties. He starts with specific observations to finally connect climbing with the idea of progress:

The summit—2.05 p.m. A spacious platform covered with scree, elevated by natural forces to a height of about 6,800 meters [...]. I am measuring the altitude and temperature [...]. Photographs, azimuths—everything hampered by clouds [...]. [A]nd then making a mound of rock upon the peak [...]. Is that all? No. Because there is a strong urge to reach higher and larger peaks, to make sure that nothing on earth will remain unknown and unreachable—and nothing higher than the signs made of stones by the Victorious Man. (Karpiński 134–135)

The mountaineer uses a lofty tone and places his achievement within the context of a modern vision of humanity according to which the human being dominates nature. The sublime, which resonates loudly in the final part of the story of the conquest of Mercedario, is constituted here under the influence of the aesthetic and sensual sensitivity of a climber immersed in modern anthropocentric myths (see Simpson).

No story by a Polish mountaineer matches the pathos that Karpiński’s text derives from a faith in modern rational thought. Faith in progress

and science clearly began to weaken after the outbreak of World War II, and climbing itself gained relative autonomy at the time. For example, in 1945, Jakub Bujak, who climbed Nanda Devi East, filled his memoir with an imagery that placed his essayistic disquisition in the context of the aesthetics of the haptic sublime. For Bujak, the Himalayan achievement alone provides a sufficient explanation and does not require any other conceptual framework than the pure motivation for climbing. This is the sole and the most satisfactory reward. Later on, Jerzy Kukuczka will write in a similar vein.¹

On the other hand, writing about his pre- and post-war Alpine expeditions, his climbs in the Tatras, and his rescue operations, Wawrzyniec Żuławski used a fixed set of stylistic devices that enabled him to crystalize the haptic sublime. He continued to employ the narrative techniques used by Stanisławski. He described each ascent in detail, but without wrapping it up in layers of tedious verbiage, with the feelings and accompanying reflections expressed in a laconic style. For Żuławski, the mountains are a site of autotelic human activity associated with voluntary risk and the pleasure deriving from it (see Dutka). The story “Innominata” (1939/1956) begins as follows: “Innominata—‘A crag not named!’—a slender pyramid disappearing against the background of the enormous mass of Mont Blanc [...]. [T]he wall engulfs you like a sea. You can see rocky crags towering above you; they present a riot of color in the sunshine [...]. You can see the surrounding colossal gullies, depressions, crevices, in which blue-green mounds of ice sparkle in the sun.” (Żuławski, *Wędrówki* 63) A similar passage can be found in “Zamarła turnia” (“Dead Crag”), which Żuławski wrote in 1958 and is dedicated to a rock wall in the Tatras (see Żuławski, *Trylogia* 152–153).

Jan Długosz, one of the best writers among Polish mountaineers according to Agnieszka Szymaszek (see Szymaszek), was also influenced by the modern aesthetics of the haptic sublime. His texts evince an undertone of unaffected existential reflection, while also referring to specific climbs (see Kolbuszewski, “Kilka”). His 1955 book *Piosenka Brassensa* (*Brassens’ Song*) tells the story of the first ascent of Kazalnica Mięgoszowiecka in the Tatras. Długosz’s text evokes vertical move-

¹ In Kukuczka’s *Challenge the Vertical*, the haptic sublime is a dialectical coupling of concrete reality and reflexivity. The tension (or passion) between the concrete and the abstract is particularly strong whenever mountaineers reach an eight-thousand-meter peak (see Kukuczka 37, 65–66, 210, 235–236). The story is not a diary but rather a reconstruction of memories (see Kaliszuk). It is an example of a mature form of the haptic sublime as a reflective-pragmatic aesthetic and a cognitive construct.

ment, the bodily presence of the human subject anchored in rocky space, subsequently providing philosophical insights as well. Długosz somehow reverses the conditions that led the proto-alpine narratives of early Polish modernism to a state of exhaustion. Here, the haptic sublime, operating on a conceptual and aesthetic level, determines further choice of narrative techniques that enable reflective effort and intellectual work; observations are made with regard to interpersonal relations or the condition and nature of a human being as a creature that confronts the natural world.² Nevertheless, the reflective effort requires the physical effort involved in vertical movement on the rock wall. The climax of *Piosenka Brassensa*—reaching the summit—encourages self-reflection, though made ex post, while working on the literary record of the impressions and finding adequate verbal expression for them:

We are simul-climbing over easy terrain, on the crest of buttness situated here. The route seems endless. More and more crags, gullies, grasses, and flowers appear on the path. We are extremely tired and tormented by constant thirst [...]. And when I completely lose hope of reaching the top of the wall—I walk onto a mound. I look with disbelief at [...] the path leading to the Pass pod Chłopkiem. The summit [...]. For the three days spent at Kazalnica I would gladly give up even the seventh ascent of the Petit Dru—the hardest alpine wall [...]. Well, some experiences are inimitable and unique. (Długosz 39)

The concept of the haptic sublime appears in Polish mountaineering literature also in the form of humorous anecdotes which are incorporated into the stories of mountaineers who have been embracing triviality ever since Goetel's time. The bantering parody used by Goetel, who ridiculed the statuesque solemnity of early modernism, revealed the ordinary nature of mountaineering life. Goetel has shown that false aggrandizement removes the physical aspects from the climbing process, making it primarily a spiritual practice. This process of de-heroization

² The haptic sublime also unexpectedly reveals itself in texts that functioned in wide literary circulation. Jan Józef Szczepański, a writer and reporter who can be included in the group of Polish post-war founders of high modernism, was also a mountaineer in the Tatras. In his work, mountain-related experiences are a regular theme, and one can even identify a certain mountaineering thread in his stories (see Pacukiewicz, "Climbing"). The short story "Sizal" (1973) is dedicated to the memories of his first climbs in the Tatras during World War II. In this text, Szczepański reveals a tangle of contradictions that define climbing. A particular occurrence triggers him to create a certain kind of modernist philosophy of climbing as a form of self-reflective praxis. For him, climbing is an emanation of modern human subjectivity facing the world (see Szczepański 92–93).

and de-sublimation became the norm in Polish mountaineering literature, as writing straightforwardly about prosaic but necessary activities entered the repository of those texts and was no longer viewed as an embarrassing background.

“Zimą za Bonattim” (“Following Bonatti in Winter”), a short story from 1977 in which Tadeusz Piotrowski depicts his winter ascent of Mont Blanc along the Walker Buttress, includes a very characteristic scene that illustrates in an anecdotal mode the narrativization of mountaineering within the aesthetics of the haptic sublime. This is undoubtedly a continuation of Goettel’s kind of ironic dismantling of turgid loftiness. Piotrowski and his fellow climber found themselves in a difficult situation; bad weather conditions forced them to stop climbing, they were exhausted, frostbitten, and in dire need of shelter. Unexpectedly, the dramatic situation reveals its humorous side. The narrator describes a unique view in a sketchy manner and even captures his partner’s critical response:

At the jagged ridge, the wind plays its ghastly melody of death [...]. The scenery is fantastic [...]. It is so unusual and beautiful in its horror that I need to express my feelings with words, share my impressions [...] “Look, what fantastic things. It was worth coming here just to admire the views.” For a brief moment, he looked at me as if I were out of my mind and blurted out in one breath: “I don’t give a shit, you hear me, I don’t give a shit about your fantastic views. I can’t feel my legs! They are frostbitten again! You must be out of your mind!” (Piotrowski 192)

The author constructs a picture which, on the one hand, shows the beauty of the landscape that requires verbal expression and could lead to aesthetic contemplation while, on the other hand, the paralyzing physical suffering unceremoniously removes reflective intellectualizations, demonstrating their absurdity. The fascination with the aesthetics of the panorama clashes with the concreteness of physical life which is impossible to ignore. Beauty is brutally dominated by physiological discomfort but, paradoxically, a view that is only available to a climber may be expressed thanks to this physiological contrast which it was dialectically coupled with. The passage reveals a specific usage of the aesthetics of the haptic sublime which is shared by a certain text from the twenty-first century.

Artur Paszczak’s 2001 piece “Filar Ganku” (“The Ganek Buttress”) records an interesting moment of his climb, focusing on pragmatic aspects of effort, which leads to a description of a unique state of the self which involves the haptic sublime. Like Piotrowski’s fellow

climber, the protagonist and narrator of Paszczak's short story focuses on the basic needs of his body—safety, comfort, food—as well as the pure joy of occupying vertical space. Taking care of oneself seems paramount when climbing a rock wall. Happiness does not manifest itself as triumph over the world, one's own weakness, or encounter with transcendence, but as the prosaic need to relax: "I make a belay position and I feel great. I succumb to euphoria, soak up the mountain scenery, the fact that I am here, that I am with my friends, that we are doing so well, I think about the descent, which I know so I don't need to worry, about calling home, maybe even from the peak, about beer, a good dinner, and lots of other nice things." (Paszczak 76)

Modern Polish mountaineering literature has employed the haptic sublime in two basic ways. The first is reflective, while the second is pragmatic. They complement each other and rarely exclude each other within a single text, especially when a story refers ironically both to the sublime itself and to the tradition of writing about mountaineering.

Modern Polish mountaineering literature is diverse in terms of genre, while its central conceptual objective is to narrate the experience of communing with the mountains. Since around 1900, the time of tourist mountain narratives and proto-Alpine literature, writers have been interested not only in defining mountain landscapes in opposition to lowland areas, but also in learning about what triggers their desire to come into close relationship with the mountains. Rather than a purely cognitive matter, this was an attempt to create a new perception of space and landscape related to cultural transformations in the modern world as well as new practices with which people shape themselves and their surroundings (see Berleant 53–75; Frydryczak 217–234). Mountaineering is a specific manifestation of these vast changes in the human attitude to and perception of the natural world. The haptic sublime appeared in modern mountaineering narratives when it became clear that experiences resulting from high-mountain travel cannot be made to fit any existing narrative scheme, ideology, or aesthetics. The initial difficulties in portraying otherness began to disappear. Literature gradually led to the realization that this unique experience has sensual spatial characteristics without, however, being confined to a physical experience. Vertical motion in mountainous areas required a new language. The modern model of the sublime soon became insufficient. With the advancement of techniques for hiking in the mountains and the development of new climbing practices and technologies, mountains became more accessible and people entered into a new, previously unimaginable relationship with space through their own bodies. The

sublime gradually gained a pragmatic dimension. Accounts of mountaineering eliminated sentimentality and limited metaphysical and spiritual considerations. They abandoned the instrumental approach to climbing and hiking and focused on the autotelic nature of communing with mountain landscapes, which encouraged active participation rather than passive admiration.

In modern Polish mountaineering literature, the haptic sublime manifests itself in varying proportions in descriptions of topography and movement, in depictions of the physiology of the human body functioning in vertical space, in attempts to record and express sensuousness, tactility, and spatiality, and, eventually, in imperfect linguistic representations of climbing as a complex human spatial machinery. The haptic sublime is also featured in the definitions of mountaineering as well as in explanations of the motivation for climbing. At the same time, if we consider the haptic sublime as a basic determinant of Polish mountaineering literature, it cannot serve as a precise tool for periodization within a broadly understood framework of modern literature, since it manifests itself in different, often contradictory ways. Polish mountaineering literature seems to be so integrally linked to the concept of the multiform haptic sublime that it is difficult to determine when it becomes a form of the denied sublime of modernism rather than its critical and polemical continuation (see Felsch 357–360). This problem appears, for example, in Jon Krakauer’s bestselling book *Into Thin Air*. On the one hand, this is a postmodern mountaineering narrative that comprises an ambiguous critique of imperialism (see Bayers 127–141); on the other hand, it uses the category of the haptic sublime in the same way that modernist mountaineers used to (see Colley 217–228; Mazzolini 85–109; McNee 221–223). In this context, the tradition of the haptic sublime appears to be an interesting problem that brings together cultural determinants of contemporary climbing and its literary representations.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Ben. *Cities, Mountains and Being Modern in fin-de-siècle England and Germany*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- Bainbridge, Simon. “Romantic Writers and Mountaineering.” *Romanticism* 18.1 (2012): 1–15.
- Bainbridge, Simon. “Writing from ‘the Perilous Ridge’: Romanticism and the Invention of Rock Climbing.” *Romanticism* 19.3 (2013): 246–260.
- Bayers, Peter L. *Imperial Ascent: Mountaineering, Masculinity, and Empire*. Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2003.

- Berleant, Arnold. *Art and Engagement*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991.
- Boman, Stephan. "‘A Grave of Pure White Snow’: The Documentary Sublime, Environmental Aesthetic, and The Epic of Everest." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 25.4 (2018): 809–834.
- Bujak, Jakub. "My Highest." *Dziennik himalajski i inne pisma Jakuba Bujaka*. Ed. Magdalena Bujak-Lenczowska. Trans. Krzysztof Lewoc. Katowice: Wydawnictwo STAPIS, 2015. 267–277.
- Colley, Ann C. *Victorians in the Mountains: sinking the sublime*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010.
- Daszyński, Stefan Witold. "A Polish Expedition to the High Andes." *The Geographical Journal* 84. 3 (1934): 215–223.
- Długosz, Jan. *Komin pokutników*. Ed. Ewa Dereń. 3rd ed. Warsaw: Iskry, 2008.
- Dutka, Elżbieta. "Park parków, plac zabaw i okolica. Doświadczenie przestrzeni górskiej w ‘Wędrówkach Alpejskich’ Wawrzyńca Żuławskiego." *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne* 11.1 (2018): 119–134.
- Felsch, Philipp. "Mountains of Sublimity, Mountains of Fatigue: Towards a History of Speechlessness in the Alps." *Science in Context* 22.3 (2009): 341–364.
- Frydryczak, Beata. *Krajobraz: od estetyki the picturesque do doświadczenia topograficznego*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2013.
- Goetel, Ferdynand. "Wycieczka—jak się o niej nie pisze." *Czarny szczyt: proza taternicka lat 1904–1939*. Ed. Jacek Kolbuszewski. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1976. 102–109.
- Hansen, Peter H. *The Summits of Modern Man: mountaineering after the Enlightenment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Hennel, Roman. "Przedmowa." *Tatrami urzeczeni*. Ed. Roman Hennel. Warsaw: Sport i turystyka, 1979.
- Kaliszuk, Przemysław. "A Vertical Schema of Experience: Travel Writing from the Himalayas (Jerzy Kukuczka, Adam Bielecki)." *Forum poetyki* 11–12 (2018): 50–65.
- Karłowicz, Mieczysław. *Mieczysław Karłowicz w Tatrach*. Ed. Jerzy Młodziejowski. Krakow: PWM, 1957.
- Karpiński, Adam. "Zdobywanie Mercedario." *W walce o szczyty Andów*. Author Konstanty Narkiewicz-Jodko. Warsaw: Główna Księgarnia Wojskowa, 1935. 122–135.
- Kolbuszewski, Jacek. *Góry—przestrzenie i krajobrazy*. Krakow: Universitas, 2020.
- Kolbuszewski, Jacek. "Kilka uwag o pisarstwie Jana Długosza." *Taternik* 43.3 (1967): 127–130.
- Kolbuszewski, Jacek. *Literatura i Tatry*. Zakopane: Wydawnictwa Tatrzeńskiego Parku Narodowego, 2016.
- Kolbuszewski, Jacek. *Tatry w literaturze polskiej. Cz. 1–2*. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1982.
- Kordys, Roman. "Ze wspomnień o Widłach." *Czarny szczyt: proza taternicka lat 1904–1939*. Ed. Jacek Kolbuszewski. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1976. 70–86.
- Kukuczka, Jerzy. *Challenge the Vertical*. Trans. Danuta Hołata-Loetz. Katowice: The Great Man Foundation, 2015.
- Kurczab, Janusz. "Osiągnięcia alpinistów polskich w Alpach na tle alpinizmu światowego (1786–1975)." *Materiały z teorii i dydaktyki alpinizmu*. Ed. Andrzej Matuszyk. Krakow: AWF, 1990. 11–105.
- Matuszyk, Andrzej. *Humanistyczne podstawy teorii sportów przestrzeni*. Krakow: AWF, 1998.

- Matuszyk, Andrzej. *U źródeł ideologii taternictwa*. Krakow: AWF, 1985.
- Mazzolini, Elizabeth. *The Everest Effect*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2015.
- McNee, Alan. *The New Mountaineer in Late Victorian Britain*. Cham: Springer, 2016.
- Narkiewicz-Jodko, Konstanty. *W walce o szczyty Andów*. Warsaw: Główna Księgarnia Wojskowa, 1935.
- Pacukiewicz, Marek. "Climbing with Conrad: Jan Józef Szczepański's Mountaineering Stories." *Yearbook of Conrad Studies* 10 (2015): 103–116.
- Pacukiewicz, Marek. "Inaccessible Background': Prolegomena to the Studies of Polish Mountaineering Literature." *Metamorphoses of Travel Writing*. Ed. Grzegorz Moroz and Jolanta Sztachelska. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. 218–231.
- Pacukiewicz, Marek. "Literatura alpinistyczna jako 'sobąpisanie'." *Napis* 16 (2010): 495–511.
- Pacukiewicz, Marek. "Warstwy krajobrazu w 'O ziemiorodztwie Karpatow' Stanisława Staszica." *Krajobraz kulturowy*. Ed. Beata Frydryczak and Mieszko Ciesielski. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2014. 75–87.
- Paszczak, Artur. "Filar Ganku." *15*. Ed. Piotr Drożdż. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Góry, 2006. 61–80.
- Piotrowski, Tadeusz. *W burzy i mrozie*. Warsaw: Iskry, 1977.
- Reidy, Michael S. "Mountaineering, Masculinity, and the Male Body in Mid-Victorian Britain." *Osiris* 30.1 (2015): 158–181.
- Roszkowska, Ewa. *Taternictwo polskie: geneza i rozwój do 1914 roku*. Krakow: AWF, 2013.
- Roszkowska, Ewa. "The Alpine Context of the Development of Polish Mountaineering up to 1914." *Studies in Sport Humanities* 24 (2018): 7–16.
- Simpson, Thomas. "Modern Mountains from the Enlightenment to the Anthropocene." *The Historical Journal* 62.2 (2019): 553–581.
- Stanisławski, Wiesław. "Zrobiliśmy Małą Śnieżną." *Czarny szczyt: proza taternicka lat 1904–1939*. Ed. Jacek Kolbuszewski. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1976. 276–278.
- Staszic, Stanisław. *O ziemiorodztwie Karpatow i innych gor i rownin Polski*. Warsaw: Drukarnia Rządowa, 1815.
- Stępień, Tomasz. "Przestrzeń w literaturze 'górskiej'." *Od poetyki przestrzeni do geo-poetyki*. Ed. Elżbieta Konończuk and Elżbieta Sidoruk. Białystok: Wydawnictwo UwB, 2012. 87–102.
- Szczepański, Jan Józef. "Sizal." *Najlepsze polskie opowiesci o górach i wspinaniu*. Ed. Jan Gondowicz and Waclaw Sonelski. Katowice: Stapis, 1993. 89–97.
- Szymaszek, Agnieszka. "Direttissima przez życie. Szkic do portretu Jana Długosza." *Góry* 238 (2014): 27–31.
- Witkiewicz, Stanisław. *Na przełęczu*. Wrażenia i obrazy z Tatr. 3rd ed. Ed. Roman Hennel. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1978.
- Żuławski, Wawrzyniec. *Trylogia tatrzańska*. 5th ed. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sklepu Podróżnika, 2018.
- Żuławski, Wawrzyniec. *Wędrówki alpejskie*. 2nd ed. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sklepu Podróżnika, 2018.

»Ta čudovita mavrica zaznav«: haptično sublimno v moderni poljski alpinistični literaturi

Ključne besede: literatura in alpinizem / poljska književnost / alpinistična literatura / modernizem / sublimno / potopis

Članek obravnava poljsko alpinistično literaturo v kontekstu modernistične estetike. Uvodoma predstavi izbrane potopise iz 19. stoletja, ki posameznikovo doživljanje gora povezujejo s kategorijo sublimnega. Nato se posveti vzniku nove vrste doživljanja alpinizma in njegovih literarnih upodobitev; v ospredju so alpinistični spisi iz 20. stoletja, ki kažejo na nezadostnost starejših oblik sublimnega. Poljski alpinisti so postopoma razvili novo govorico za izražanje doživljanja vertikalnega sveta. Estetika haptičnega sublimnega, ki je izrasla iz trka literarnega diskurza in konkretnosti plezanja, je rešila problem zadovoljivega izraza in vpeljala nove pripovedne obrazce. Izkustvo plezanja je umestila v nov konceptualni okvir, s tem ko ga je izpeljala iz protislovij moderne kulture. Poleg tega je pokazala na avtotelični značaj alpinizma, alpinistični literaturi pa zagotovila avtonomijo v odnosu do drugih tipov potopisne pripovedi.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article

UDK 821.162.1.09:796.52

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3986/pkn.v45.i1.05>