

Landscape and Imagination:

A History of Fascination
and an Anatomy of Passion
in Jacek Woźniakowski's
Góry niewzruszone
[Immovable Mountains]
and Robert Macfarlane's
*Mountains of the Mind**

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Introduction: Two approaches

In this article, I compare a (relatively) contemporary bestseller, Robert Macfarlane's *Mountains of the mind*, with a somewhat forgotten essay, Jacek Woźniakowski's *Góry niewzruszone. O różnych wyobrażeniach przyrody w nowożytnej kulturze europejskiej* [Immovable Mountains. Images of nature in modern European culture].¹ What unites both texts is that they reflect on

¹ Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the mind. A history of a fascination* (London: Granta Books, 2017). Quotations from this edition will be followed by the abbreviation RM and the appropriate page number; Jacek Woźniakowski, "Góry niewzruszone. O różnych wyobrażeniach przyrody w dziejach nowożytnej kultury europejskiej" [Immovable mountains. The images of nature in modern European culture], in: *Pisma wybrane*, t. 2. *Góry niewzruszone i pisma rozmaite o Tatrach* [Selected writings, vol. 2. Immovable mountains and selected writings about the Tatra Mountains], ed. Nawojka Cieślińska-Lobkowitz (Kraków: Universitas, 2011), 5–330. Quotations from this edition will be followed by the abbreviation JW and the appropriate page number.

mountains as a cultural phenomenon; however, they were written in different languages and almost thirty years apart² by authors who belong to different generations.³

While *Góry niewzruszone* is an academic text,⁴ Woźniakowski exceeds the framework of academic discourse. The Polish art historian, who had worked at the Catholic University of Lublin, also relies on the autobiographical and the personal. Indeed, the book is dedicated “to the memory of Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski and Wanda Pawlikowska” (JW 8). Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski was an ecological pioneer, who actively fought for the creation of a national park in the Polish Tatra Mountains. He was also Woźniakowski’s grandfather.⁵ Woźniakowski also declares his own passion for mountains (JW 9). His book is a sweeping treatise on the representation of mountains in art – it “identifies new connections between literature, philosophy and art.”⁶ *Góry niewzruszone* has been reprinted twice,⁷ translated into German,⁸ cited in academic publications,⁹ and become an artistic inspiration.¹⁰

Macfarlane’s *Mountains of the mind* is a hybrid text – it is part a reflection on the cultural history of mountains, part autobiography, and part reportage. Macfarlane recalls holidays spent at his grandparents’ house in the Cairngorms of North-East Scotland and his growing interest in mountaineering triggered, among other things, by reading mountaineering books. A more critical and broader reflection on climbing as a cultural and historical phenomenon, however,

² The first edition of *Góry niewzruszone* was published in 1974 (Warsaw: Czytelnik). Macfarlane’s *Mountains of the mind*. A history of the fascination was first published in 2003 (London: Granta Books).

³ “Filolog polski i filozof z wykształcenia, a historyk i krytyk sztuki z zamiłowaniem” [Polish philologist and philosopher with a degree, and art historian and critic with a passion]. Agnieszka Góra-Stepień, Jacek Woźniakowski 1920–2012, <https://teatrnn.pl/leksykon/artykuly/jacek-wozniakowski-1920-2012/>, date of access: 2 March 2023. Woźniakowski taught art history at the Catholic University of Lublin since 1953; from 1980 to 1990 he was a professor at this university, he was also the founder and editor of “Znak,” and a renowned publicist. Macfarlane, born in 1976, studied at Oxford and Cambridge. He is presently a fellow at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. He is a writer, traveler, and nature conservation activist. Apart from *Mountains of the Mind* Macfarlane also published, among others, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta Books, 2007); *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (London: Hamish Hamilton–Penguin Books, 2012); *Landmarks* (London: Hamish Hamilton–Penguin Books, 2015); and *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019). See: <https://www.davidhigham.co.uk/authors-dh/robert-macfarlane/>, date of access: 3 August 2023.

⁴ *Góry niewzruszone* was Woźniakowski’s habilitation thesis – see: Małgorzata Augustyniuk, Profesor Jacek Woźniakowski (1920–2012), https://www.bu.kul.pl/jacek-wozniakowski-1920-2012-sylwetka.art_41164.html, date of access: 5 July 2023.

⁵ Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski (1860–1939) was a lawyer, economist, literary scholar, politician and social activist. He was also the co-founder and editor of, among others, such magazines as “Wierchy” [Peaks], “Ochrona Przyrody” [Nature conservation], “Lamus”. See, among others: Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski. *Humanistyczna wizja ochrony przyrody i turystyki* [Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski. A humanistic vision of nature conservation and tourism], ed. Piotr Dąbrowski, Bernadetta Zawilińska (Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza Wierchy, Centralny Ośrodek Turystyki Górskiej PTTK, 2014).

⁶ Marta Jachowicz, “Jacek Woźniakowski jako krytyk sztuki współczesnej” [Jacek Woźniakowski as a contemporary art critic], *Roczniki Humanistyczne* vol. XVI–XVII, 4 (2008–2009): 9.

⁷ In 1995, a revised edition was published (Kraków: Znak). The version of the text reprinted in *Woźniakowski’s Pisma wybrane* [Selected Writings] in 2011 is based on the 1995 edition.

⁸ Jacek Woźniakowski, *Die Wildnis. Zur deutungsgeschichte des Berges in der europäischen Neuzeit*, trans. Theo Mechtenberg (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987).

⁹ See, among others: Maria Janion, “Kuźnia natury” [Nature’s forge], in: *Gorączka romantyczna* [The Romantic fever] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1975), 249; Martin Korenjak, “Why Mountains Matter: Early Modern Roots of a Modern Notion”, *Renaissance Quarterly* 70 (2017): 181, 204.

¹⁰ In 2019, an exhibition of paintings by Aleksandra Rudzka-Miazga entitled *Góry (nie)wzruszone* [(Im)movable mountains] was organized in Zakopane. See: *Wystawa “Góry (nie)wzruszone”*, <http://cojestgrane24.wyborcza.pl/cjg24/Zakopane/1,43,600163,Wystawa--Gory--nie-wzruszone-.html>, date of access: 2 March 2023.

dates back to one of Macfarlane's climbs in the Alps, during which he nearly died. The British writer's debut book was a success¹¹ among the general public and scholars alike.¹² It has been reprinted and translated into many languages,¹³ and the screenplay for the film *Mountain* was based on it.¹⁴

Despite the differences mentioned above, both books have a lot in common, and not only in terms of subject matter. Both are, quintessentially, essays. It is clearly visible in Macfarlane's book, and Woźniakowski calls his work an essay in the introduction, insofar as his "observations often go beyond the visual arts, venturing into literature, philosophy, and even theology" (JW 13).

What renders both texts distinct and at the same time complementary, and in that sense worthy of comparative analysis, is the focus on different timeframes. Woźniakowski analyzes the period from antiquity to the 18th century. Mountains were being discovered at that time, and ideas about them were being formed, as demonstrated by various texts of culture. Woźniakowski goes in his reflections as far as to the 1780s, just before the advent of Romanticism, and the first ascents of Mont Blanc. It was the beginning of the era of conquerors, which gradually led to the transformation of the natural landscape and dramatic changes in human imagination. Macfarlane picks up where Woźniakowski left off. The British writer connects the first ascent of Mont Blanc in 1786 with the tendency, which developed in the second half of the 1700s, to explore mountains not only out of necessity, but also because "a coherent sense began to develop of the splendour of mountainous landscape" (RM 15). By the mid-1800s, climbing as a sport had already emerged: "Mountains began to exert a considerable and often fatal power of attraction on the human mind" (RM 16). It is this fatal influence, the "mountains of the mind" which overshadow the real landscape in human imagination, that Macfarlane analyzes. The British writer studies how ideas about mountains have changed and developed in the past centuries.

Woźniakowski asks: "What role do mountains actually play, not only in painting, as an inspiration, an embodiment, and a sign of our viewpoints, choices, and dreams?" (JW 12). He further argues that how we see mountains, especially at a given time, "gives us a new insight into culture;" it shows "its scale, style, and quality" (JW 13). Woźniakowski analyzes what led

¹¹See reviews: Kevin S. Blake, "Mountain Symbolism and Geographical Imaginations", *Cultural Geographies* vol. 12, no 4 (October 2005): 527–531; Maciej Krupa, "Góry – historia wyobraźni" [Mountains – a history of imagination], *Nowe Książki* 4 (2019): 45.

¹²See among others: Anna Dziok-Łazarecka, "Tekstualne doświadczenie krajobrazu górskiego – o funkcjach intertekstualności w książce Roberta Macfarlane'a *Mountains of the Mind*" [A textual experience of mountains – the role of intertextuality in Robert Macfarlane's *Mountains of the Mind*], *Białostockie Studia Literaturoznawcze* 11 (2017): 275–288; Przemysław Kaliszuk, "Wertykalna izolacja. Górską prozą Tadeusza Piotrowskiego" [Vertical isolation. Tadeusz Piotrowski's mountain prose], *Napis* 27 (2021): 134; Ilona Łęcka, "Szalaniec czy taktik? Wizerunek alpinisty we współczesnej literaturze górskiej" [A madman or a tactician? The image of a mountaineer in contemporary mountaineering literature], *Nowy Napis Co Tydzień* 30 (2020), <https://nowynapis.eu/tygodnik/nr-30/artukul/szalaniec-czy-taktyk-wizerunek-alpinisty-we-wspolczesnej-literaturze>, date of access: 5 July 2023.

¹³Macfarlane's book was republished by Granta Books also in 2004, 2008 and 2017. It was awarded the Guardian First Book Award, The Somerset Maugham Award, and The Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award. It was also nominated for The Boardman Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature and John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. *Mountains of the Mind*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mountains_of_the_Mind, date of access: 15 April 2023.

¹⁴*Mountain*, dir. Jennifer Peedom, script Robert Macfarlane, Australia 2017.

to the “romantic transformation” that is so important for modernity. He also points out that culture is currently undergoing another transformation, the symptoms of which are “ecological movements, as well as a boom in literature devoted to environmental protection and nature conservation” (JW 12).

When George Mallory was asked why he wished to climb Mount Everest, he famously responded “Because it’s there.”¹⁵ Macfarlane returns to this simple yet fascinating answer¹⁶ and further investigates what makes people sacrifice what is most precious for them, their own lives and the happiness of their loved ones, for the sake of climbing. Why are mountains so fascinating? What cultural role do mountains play? He looks for reasons behind this fascination in history, literature, and scientific (for example, geological or philosophical) texts.

Both writers adopt different points of view, but they ask essentially similar questions, and the parallel reading of both essays gives rise to a complementary history of fascination, which has played and still plays an important role in European culture. Woźniakowski and Macfarlane not only write successive “chapters in a book about men and mountains” (JW 304), but also devise their unique typological approaches. Woźniakowski distinguishes between different approaches towards mountains. Their respective rises and demises indicate subsequent stages of seeing and discovering mountains in culture. Still, the boundaries between them are not strict; different attitudes can be observed in different periods, and sometimes they function simultaneously. Macfarlane also systematically describes “imaginary mountains,” that is the most important reasons for the fascination with height, in the respective chapters of his book. They are historical in nature because they have emerged and prevailed at a given time, but they also permanently marked how we see and imagine mountainous landscape. The key problem in both essays is the gap between natural landscape and imagination.

A history of a fascination

If we want to reconstruct a history of the fascination with mountains, we need to start with Woźniakowski’s essay, which is more focused on the past, and then move on to Macfarlane’s text, which focuses on post-romanticism and the present. This notwithstanding, both writers do not strictly follow chronological order. They do not present a linear cause-and-effect sequence, but rather combine diachronic and synchronic perspectives, zooming in on the most important issues.

Woźniakowski writes about the ways of seeing which are reflected in the way subsequent generations, social groups, and individuals approach “that strange thing that has remained virtually unchanged for millennia and yet has been subjected to constant interpretations, that is mountains” (JW 13). Woźniakowski writes about the Classics first. The approach which emerged in Antiquity gained special importance in the 17th and the 18th centuries,

¹⁵Macfarlane calls his essay “an extended variation on George Mallory’s famous response.” Adam Robiński, “Dobra droga do pogadania” [Good way to talk], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 37 (2018): 95.

¹⁶Marek Pacukiewicz writes about the possible interpretations of Mallory’s answer in: *Grań kultury. Transgresje alpinizmu* [The ridge of culture. Mountaineering transgressions] (Kraków: Universitas 2012), 8–11.

and continued to play an important role until the 19th century. Seen as chaotic and disorderly, mountains defied the classical canons of beauty. The towering irregular landscape aroused fear rather than interest. Woźniakowski writes that the classical approach to nature is “anthropocentric, utilitarian even to the point of hedonism, normative – especially when it comes to biological or ethical arguments, often allegorical, synthetic, static” (JW 15). Man and his products take center stage, and mountains may only act as a background. They are useful because they complete the picture. Moderation and order, which were both highly valued, could not be found in mountains. Attempts were made to tame the chaotic landscape, for example, by explaining how it could be useful for humans (e.g. as a water reservoir). The classical vision of the world was static and stable.

Almost simultaneously, an enthusiastic, as Woźniakowski puts it, approach emerged. Although Woźniakowski does not provide an explanation, it is worth recalling the origins of the word “enthusiasm.” It comes from Greek and originally meant “inspired by a god.”¹⁷ Today, it is used to describe “eagerness, a state of elation, joy, delight.”¹⁸ The enthusiastic approach towards nature is “selflessly epistemic as regards two different but often intertwining contexts, namely the empirical and the theocentric one” (JW 15) and allows one to “connect with the world” (JW 84). The enthusiastic approach can be seen in biblical texts. Mountains were cherished as products of divine creation – as an expression of God’s wisdom, goodness, and power, they must be good. But we also find in this attitude traces of a different, more pessimistic interpretation – mountains are also a product of a disaster or a punishment for sins. The search for knowledge renders this approach “enthusiastically epistemic,” and the religious motivation renders it essentially theocentric. Mountains remain in the background; God is in the center. The enthusiastic approach comes to the fore especially in the 15th, 16th, and the 17th centuries. Woźniakowski, quoting Saint Augustine, writes about “mountains clothed with light” (JW 73), that is illuminated by God, surrounded by an aura of mysticism and mystery. Leonardo da Vinci provided instructions on how to paint mountains in his *Treatise on Painting* (JW 92–97). In keeping with the enthusiastic convention, mountains should be painted using different shades of blue. Earthly (closer, darker) mountains and heavenly (more distant, brighter, illuminated) mountains should be rendered chromatically distinct. Woźniakowski also noticed such duality in Petrarch’s letter from 1336 (considered the first mountaineering account), in which the poet described his ascent of Mont Ventoux in Provence. The artist experienced the hike “both realistically and metaphorically,” and when he reached the top, he contemplated the view, was overcome by divine power, and began to read Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* (JW 75).

Woźniakowski then moves on to describe the sentimental approach. The name points to one of the Enlightenment trends, which was characterized by a focus on man’s inner life, feelings, and states. The Polish art historian further defines the sentimental approach as an egocentric, aesthetic, and analytical attitude towards nature which “oscillates between a desire to anchor oneself in a pleasant place and a hunger for new impressions” (JW 15). Man wants

¹⁷<https://polszczyzna.pl/entuzjazm-co-to-jest-co-to-znaczy-definicja-synonimy/>, date of access: 3 August 2023.

¹⁸“Entuzjazm” [enthusiasm], in: *Słownik wyrazów obcych* [Dictionary of foreign words], ed. Jan Tokarski (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1980), 194.

the landscape to either reflect his emotional state or inspire emotion; mountains constitute a background for the subject's experiences. The goal is not to get to know or to get closer to mountains, but to express one's emotions as best as possible.

Woźniakowski writes that in the second half of the 18th century, what he calls a liminal approach emerged. It combined "the still classical sublime with enthusiasm. It is also unexpectedly picturesque, somewhat sentimental" (JW 15–16). Woźniakowski therefore further distinguishes between the sentimental and the picturesque attitude, explaining that in accordance with the picturesque conventions nature is a raw material of a work of art, and not a source of experiences. "Both the emotions and the mind are to be stimulated; such stimulation may not be found in a beloved little place but rather in a varied landscape that is, objectively, pleasing to the eye" (JW 16).

The above-mentioned approaches led to a romantic breakthrough. The romantic attitude, according to Woźniakowski, is nature-centric – man gets closer to mountains and discovers their true nature. Images of wild and untamed and therefore beautiful mountains appear. Mountains arouse fear and delight. Romantics discover the "terrific charm of wilderness" and began to climb. The sublime plays a very important role. What was groundbreaking was, literally and metaphorically, getting closer to mountains – finding them interesting for their own sake. Paradoxically, however, man also began to move away from mountains. The natural landscape began to be overshadowed by art, which had been elevated "to the status of second nature" (JW 16). Woźniakowski ends his essay just before the threshold of the Romantic breakthrough, stating that "it is enough if in this book we manage to show the paths that led to it" (JW 17).

In describing subsequent attitudes, Woźniakowski explains how the titular concept of immovable mountains had developed. For one, mountains were immobilized in the background of paintings (primarily as part of the classical and enthusiastic approach). Mountains became immovable because they were "arrested" in treatises on paintings, poetic conventions, and clichéd expressions, and as such remained indifferent to human efforts to represent them. Woźniakowski shows how the metaphor of permanence, which perpetuated distance, respect, and awe towards mountains had developed. Mountains were perceived as dangerous only to be seen as sacred, "clothed with mystical light," beautiful, and transcendental. We went from aversion to admiration.

At the end, Woźniakowski writes about Horace Bénédict de Saussure (1740–1799), whom he calls the first "man in love." The dream of the Genevan physicist was to climb Mont Blanc. He was not the first to ascent the highest mountain in the Alps,¹⁹ but he encouraged others and offered a reward for the first ascent, greatly contributing to this historical achievement.

¹⁹The first ascent of Mont Blanc was in 1786 by Jacques Balmat and Michel Paccard. "A year later, Balmat guided Professor H. B. de Saussure to the top with a team of twenty people that was, for those times, perfectly equipped. The expedition had crampons, tents, ladders, and umbrellas. Many studies and measurements were made at the top and along the way, be it barometric, meteorological, geological, botanical, optical, and chemical. The results were published in world literature." Jerzy Hajdukiewicz, *Dzieje alpinizmu – część pierwsza* [The history of mountaineering in the Alps – part one], <http://www.krakow.ptt.org.pl/www3/archiwum/wolanie/nr28/hajdukiewicz1.html>, date of access: 2 August 2023.

The ascent of Mont Blanc was for Woźniakowski the culmination of all the described attitudes (epistemic efforts, enthusiasm, sentimental infatuation, and growing appreciation for nature), and at the same time marked a change in the perception of nature. Immovable mountains were finally moved. They were no longer unclimbable, pristine. Explored and studied, mountains began to change, and their representations also became more dynamic, moving beyond the previously established framework. Woźniakowski's typology could therefore be extended to include other approaches, be it scientific, conquest-driven, sports-related, tourist, industrial and economic. However, the Polish art historian does not write about the consequences of the romantic breakthrough; he focuses on the image of the enthusiast who, after many attempts, finally reaches Mont Blanc. Is this the ultimate image of immovable mountains – “a statue of man on the statue of the world” – which can also be found in Juliusz Słowacki's *Kordian* and Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*? Mieczysław Porębski in a very insightful review of *Góry niewzruszone* reflects on Woźniakowski's decision to end his essay at a time when the domestication and taming of mountains “truly began.”²⁰ This seems incomprehensible, because it was then that mountains stopped to be perceived only from a safe distance and only in terms of difficulties or benefits. It was then that they were moved by romantic admiration, inspiring so many masterpieces. According to Porębski, Woźniakowski's essay is somewhat melancholic. *Góry niewzruszone* is an elegy, a farewell to a certain image. The Polish art historian chooses to end his argument when the era of conquerors, which led to the exploitation and desacralization of mountains, began. Mountains were transformed into an object of study, an arena, a sports ground, or a park. They were no longer mysterious and sacred, and instead became something that must be studied, conquered, and defeated. Respectively, Woźniakowski does not write about human impact on the environment, which has left a deep and permanent mark on mountainous landscape (although he addresses such problems in his other texts²¹).

Macfarlane picks up where Woźniakowski left off. While *Góry niewzruszone* shows the factors that led to the romantic discovery of mountains and their sublime beauty, *Mountains of the mind* focuses on the consequences of this breakthrough. Macfarlane quotes de Saussure who is absolutely besotted with the view: “What language can reproduce the sensations and paint the ideas with which these great spectacles [mountains] fill the soul of the philosopher who is on top of a peak?” (RM 159). Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, which brings to mind the ending of *Góry niewzruszone*, is according to Macfarlane still “the archetypal image of the mountain-climbing visionary, a figure ubiquitous in Romantic art” (RM 157). The painting and the general scene seem outdated:

He now looks implausible to us, ridiculous even: the little rock hummocks protruding from the nimbus at his feet, his absurdly clichéd stature – one foot raised; a big-game hunter with his foot upon the cavernous ribcage of his dead beast. But as a crystallization of a concept – that standing atop a summit is to be admired, that it confers nobility on a person – Friedrich's painting has carried enormous symbolic power down the years in terms of Western self-perception. (RM 157)

²⁰Mieczysław Porębski, “Góry w końcu ujrane” [Mountains finally seen], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 26 (1996): 18.

²¹They were collected in the second volume of *Pisma wybrane*, in the section entitled *Interwencje* (1952–2002) [Interventions (1952–2002)]. JW 417–452.

Macfarlane reflects on how a fascination with mountains turned into a mountaineering obsession – a desire to conquer peaks at all costs. Instead of focusing on the “first man in love,” he writes about “the first obsessed man,” that is George Mallory (1886-1924), who took part in the first three expeditions to Mount Everest (in 1921, 1922, 1924). The last one proved fatal. To this day, it remains a mystery whether Mallory reached the summit.

Macfarlane analyzes various “mountains of the mind,” that is he tries to establish why we are interested in mountains and mountaineering. He discusses, respectively, the desire to learn about the history of the Earth (geology), the pursuit of fear (the sublime), looking for traces of the past in mountain glaciers (but also premises for formulating apocalyptic visions of the next ice age), a fascination with heights (the desire to reach the peak and see the world from this perspective), interest in the unknown (“walking off the map”), and looking for “a new heaven and a new earth” (natural theology and secular worship of mountains).

The British writer first talks about mountains as “the great stone book” which tells the history of the Earth (RM 49). Macfarlane writes about the beginnings of geology, which Woźniakowski also drew attention to, insofar as it was a factor which led to the romantic breakthrough. One of the first enthusiasts of geology was de Saussure described in *Góry niewzruszone* (JW 287). Respectively, Macfarlane draws on *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* published in 1681 by the Anglican priest Thomas Burnet, who argued that the current appearance of the Earth is a result of many changes, “»The Image or Picture of a great Ruin«, and a very imperfect image at that” (RM 27). Mountains were created as a result of complex processes; they “were in fact the residue left behind when the Deluge retreated, fragments of the earth’s shell which had been swirled round and pile dup by the colossal hydraulics of the Flood” (RM 27). Burnet’s work, Macfarlane writes, definitely changed, even transformed, how mountains were perceived:

Before Burnet, ideas about the earth lacked a fourth dimension – time. What, it was felt, could be more permanent, more incontestably *there* than mountains? They had been cast by God in their current poses, and would remain thus always and for ever. (RM 25)

Woźniakowski also writes about Burnet, stating that this pioneer of geology “helped pave the way to mountains both in aesthetics and in natural sciences. Mountains, as it turned out, confront man with the naked truth about the world and himself” (JW 283). Respectively, Macfarlane argues that “[g]eology provided a reason and an excuse – scientific inquiry – for travelling to the mountains” (RM 35) and further notes that the pioneers of geology, fossil hunters, were also the first climbers. De Saussure was one of them, and his four-volume *Voyages dans les Alpes* “was both a founding work of geology and one of the first wilderness travel books” (RM 48). The development of geology led to a revolution in the perception of mountains: “Suddenly, these effigies of permanence had acquired an exciting, baffling mutability. Mountains, which seemed so durable, so eternal, had in actuality been formed, deformed and reformed over countless millennia: their current appearance was merely a phase in the perpetual cycles of erosion and uplift which determined the configuration of the earth” (RM 35). In the 20th century, geology confirmed the movement and collision of continental plates and as such confirmed the “intuition that mountains moved” (RM 59).

In the next chapter Macfarlane writes about “the pursuit of fear” (RM 66), explaining that already in the 18th century excitement and risk played a significant role in the exploration of mountains. Edmund Burke in his theory of the sublime combines the beautiful and the terrible. The sublime evoked terror; it was “hectic, intimidating, uncontrollable” (RM 74). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for one, wrote about his love for “precipitous places” (RM 76). In the 19th century, Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection was used to reflect on mountains. Mountains were perceived as a place of struggle where only the fittest would survive. They tested human abilities and condition (RM 90). Macfarlane points out that men today also pursue fear: “Hope, fear. Hope fear – this is the fundamental rhythm of mountaineering. Life, it frequently seems in the mountains, is more intensely lived the closer one gets to its extinction: we never feel so alive as when we have nearly died” (RM 71). The search for risk and adrenaline characterizes contemporary extreme mountain sports.

Power and deep time were embodied in glaciers. In the 19th century, Mer de Glace and other glaciers became popular destinations. A sea of ice reminded one about the destructive force which shaped mountains and valleys, and the frailty of human life. The idea of a glacier as “frozen movement” pointed to the past. Scholars studied glaciers looking for traces of the past and geologists speculated about the role of the ice age in the history of the Earth. Alas, in the 19th century, hypotheses of global glaciation in the future also began to emerge (RM 121). Mountains were part of apocalyptic visions.

Mountains have been and continue to be fascinating primarily because of their height. One of the most important motivations for hiking and climbing is the desire to reach the summit. Macfarlane writes about how the summit came to be perceived as an allegory of fulfillment and success, especially in the 18th and the 19th centuries. The peak was seen as a visible target, and the slopes leading to it were a challenge. Macfarlane states that “[m]ore recently, the mountain summit has become a secular symbol of effort and reward” (RM 142). Reaching the top was seen as a reward for the effort. One could be proud of it. In the past, the view from the summit – the ability to look from an elevated, almost divine, perspective – was also important. Nowadays, when aerial and satellite photography has become so popular, the views from the summit are no longer so impressive. The summits also became a place of contemplation and creation, of looking beyond, not only in the physical but also in the metaphysical sense (RM 160). Woźniakowski writes about heights and summits – seen as a challenge – when he describes the enthusiastic attitude. The Polish art historian states that such a symbolic ancient meaning of summits and valleys may be found in “the depths of various literary, philosophical, and theological traditions, but also in the depths of the poetics of language itself, which unconsciously uses metaphors of climbing and falling, summits and valleys, elevation and humiliation, high and low intentions” (JW 121).

Unclimbed mountains and unknown summits excited the imagination; they were “blank spaces on the map” that could be filled with hope or fear, onto which anxieties and aspirations could be projected (RM 175). Longing for the unknown emerged with full force in the 18th century, and the 19th century was marked by scientific expeditions, which led to

the development of cartography. Macfarlane, writing about how the image of mountains on maps has changed, notes that “[m]aps do not take account of time, only of space. They do not acknowledge how a landscape is constantly on the move – is constantly revising itself” (RM 184).

In the 16th century, “the idea that the world of mountains was a world entirely apart” first emerged, Macfarlane writes, mountains were “an upper realm in which physical laws operated differently and where conventional, lowland ideas of time and space were turned topsy-turvy” (RM 202). Therefore, it was believed that it was impossible to describe the experience of height and endless space to others (RM 204). Natural theology spread across Europe from the 1690s to the 1730s. This influential doctrine held that the world was given to man by God, and discovering and studying nature was therefore a form of worship. Mountains were considered one of God’s greatest creations (RM 207); they were a promise of “a new heaven and a new earth:”

The natural theology movement was crucial in revoking the reputation of mountains as aesthetically displeasing, for it forced intellectual Europeans into a more specific experiencing of the physical world. A new way of looking at wild landscape established itself, which combined sweeping experiences with a close attention to the micro-phenomena – the tiny special effects – of the mountains. (RM 208)

One of the most important descriptions of mountains as “an upper realm” was Rousseau’s *Nouvelle Heloise*, which “created secular mountain-worship” (RM 209). As a result, more and more people began to explore mountains, and there were more and more casualties. Every new subsequent account which praised mountains inspired new people to embark on a dangerous journey.

In the penultimate chapter, entitled *Everest*, Macfarlane reflects on Mallory’s obsession with the highest mountain in the world and comments on mountain metaphors related to madness, possession, addiction, but also tragic love story. The British writer notes that Mallory was “was the inheritor of a complex of emotions and attitudes towards mountainous landscape, devised long before his birth, which largely predetermined his responses to it – its dangers, its beauties, its meanings” (RM 226). The “emotional traditions” he inherited and cultivated “made him so susceptible to possession by Everest” (RM 273).

In the end, Macfarlane draws conclusions about the contemporary significance of mountains. The writer notes: “[m]ountains seem to answer an increasing imaginative need in the West. More and more people are discovering a desire for them, and a powerful solace in them” (RM 274). Mountains make us realize that we cannot control everything: “mountains refute our excessive trust in the man-made. They pose profound questions about our durability and the importance of our schemes” (RM 275). Finally, mountains “return to us the priceless capacity for wonder which can so insensibly be leached away by modern existence, and they urge us to apply that wonder to our own everyday lives” (RM, 276). Such a personal ending, in which the British writer also returns to his childhood memories of the Cairngorms, proves that mountains of the mind cannot compare with *being* in the mountains.

Landscape and imagination

In Woźniakowski's and Macfarlane's complementary histories of fascination, two issues recur, namely landscape and imagination.

Woźniakowski traces the development of the modern landscape, that is a way of seeing nature conditioned by many different factors (including concepts of space). "Landscape is not self-explanatory," the Polish art historian writes, and further quotes Delacroix who said that "Nature is a dictionary; one draws words from it" (JW 79). Woźniakowski, referring to the findings of, among others, Georg Simmel, postulates that we can only talk about landscape when we see nature as a "meaningful whole."

What consciousness builds on the basis of elementary sensory impressions is therefore a creative mental act... We usually see in nature only what we have learned to see in it, and we see it in the way that the style of a given era requires. (JW 79)

Attitudes described in *Góry niewzruszone* show such ways of seeing – the eye creates a whole, which, "melted into artistic" (JW 79) as well as literary visions, give rise to mountains of the mind in the respective eras.

Macfarlane, who emphasizes that our responses to mountains as a form of landscape are largely culturally conditioned, seems to agree with Woźniakowski:

That is to say, when we look at a landscape, we do not see what is there, but largely what we think is there. We attribute qualities to a landscape which it does not intrinsically possess – savageness, for example, or bleakness – and we value it accordingly. We *read* landscapes, in other words, we interpret their form in the light of our own experiences and memory, and that of our shared cultural memory. (RM 18)

Macfarlane emphasizes that "[w]hat we call a mountain is thus in fact a collaboration of the physical forms of the world with the imagination of humans – a mountain of the mind" (RM 19). *Mountains of the mind* "tries to plot how those ways of imagining mountains have altered over time" (RM 19); it is not a history of climbing but "a history of the imagination" (RM 21). The book argues that mountains "exert a considerable and often fatal power of attraction on the human mind" (RM 16) and points to the gap between the imagined and the real:

Stone, rock and ice are significantly less amenable to the hand's touch than to the mind's eye, and the mountains of the earth have often turned out to be more resistant, more fatally real, than the mountains of the mind. (RM 19)

Macfarlane strongly emphasizes the differences between the physical form of the world and its image, which he became aware of during his climbs, when he nearly lost his life:

[...] the mountains one gazes at, reads about, dreams of and desires are not the mountains one climbs. These are matters of hard, steep, sharp rock and freezing snow; of extreme cold; of a ver-

tigo so physical it can cramp your stomach and loosen your bowels; of hypertension, nausea and frostbite, and of unspeakable beauty. (RM 19)

The role of the imagination is emphasized in the subtitle of Woźniakowski's essay: *O różnych wyobrażeniach przyrody w dziejach nowożytnej kultury europejskiej* [The images of nature in modern European culture]. The Polish art historian, like Macfarlane, draws on his personal experience and writes about the difference between real and imagined mountains:

It has always been a great joy for me – especially in the spring, when the snow begins to melt and the streams begin to thaw, and also in the fall, when the beeches turn golden – to travel to the mountains. I have also always liked to look at paintings for a long time. But these two passions rarely came together. (JW 9)

Woźniakowski adds: “However, I did not find mountains in painting” (JW 9). Like Macfarlane, he explores the difficulties of representing this form of landscape and highlights the differences between the mountains he explored physically and the mountains that were represented in art:

How can we convey in oil or watercolor the crystalline resistance of the rock, the jagged line of the ridge, the striking whiteness of the snow, the stark color contrasts, how to enclose the colossal differences in size within the frame? (JW 10)

Woźniakowski notes that the attitudes towards mountains he described are both – scientifically and academically – factual and accurate and “symbolic, idealistic, imagined” (JW 16), because, as he further writes, “imagination takes over what reason has abandoned” (JW 292). This seems to resonate with Macfarlane's belief that apart from mountains which we do not always understand and see, there are mountains that “have been *imagined* into existence” (RM 19).

Conclusions: An anatomy of passion

Woźniakowski and Macfarlane show a fascination with mountains from two different perspectives (Polish and English culture), focus on different metaphors (immovability and obsession), and analyze different examples (de Saussure and Mallory). Differ as they may, a parallel reading of both essays proves that they are for the most part complementary not only in terms of timeframes explored but also in terms of questions addressed. Woźniakowski's and Macfarlane's reflections complement one another, and the combination of both gives one a better insight into the phenomenon. The critical focus is more than analytical; I would say that both essays may be read, in their respective ways, as an anatomy of fascination with mountains. They dissect the experience and the phenomenon. Macfarlane's essay is also a kind of vivisection, because the British writer also analyzes his own infatuation and obsession with climbing. He actually says that this book is his farewell to mountains and the dangers of climbing.²²

²²Robiński, 95.

Both books tell a dramatic story of disgust and reluctance which eventually leads to a fascination that borders on obsession and madness. Woźniakowski and Macfarlane, in fact, present an anatomy of passion, because passion, as in both desire and suffering, seems to best reflect the essence of the relationship between man and mountains.

Finally, I would like to reflect on the significance of the analyzed essays in the wider context of contemporary mountain studies.²³ Both books draw attention to the humanistic dimension of man's relationship with mountains, exposing the mutual relations between nature (landscape) and culture (imagination). As such, they can be read in the context of the dynamically developing cultural history of mountains.²⁴

When it was first published, Woźniakowski's essay, as an interdisciplinary comparative piece of research with a unique thematic focus, was considered innovative. There had been no other such extensive and reliable studies on mountains in Poland before. Indeed, very few had been published in Europe (the exception is Marjorie Hope Nicolson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*,²⁵ which Woźniakowski repeatedly quotes). The comparison between *Góry niewzruszone* and Macfarlane's book confirms the pioneering nature of the Polish art historian's book. His theses and the proposed typology of attitudes are still valid and, in the light of new contexts, have been further confirmed and expanded.

Mountains of the mind was so successful because it combined compelling storytelling, autobiographical confession, a comprehensive take on anthropology and cultural history, and non-fiction with literary studies. Comparing the British bestseller with the Polish essay from the 1970s allows us to identify new cultural phenomena and new trends in mountain studies. A critical approach to mountaineering, especially competitive and extreme mountaineering, seems particularly significant. Macfarlane turns the spotlight on the metaphors related to madness and obsession, emphasizing that mountaineering can be a deadly passion. The British writer highlights what the Polish art historian did not say directly, namely that tourism – the rise of the climbing industry – has changed mountains. Mount Everest:

²³ Mountain studies in Poland have been popularized as part of the Seria Górska [Mountain Series] published by Universitas: "Seria Górska is a response to the growing interest in mountains, as well as the multifaceted, global reception of mountains, defined as a space and unique culture, in literature, art, and social life. In recent decades, a separate field of study devoted to mountains has appeared in the global academia – mountain studies. Conducted primarily from an ecological perspective, mountain studies confirms the importance of mountains, seen as natural and cultural enclaves crucial for the development and survival of modern civilization. As such, we need to expand this perspective, tapping into the broadly defined humanities and related fields, because the history of the discovery, exploration, and conquest of mountains (alpinism, Andeanism, Himalayanism) plays a very important role in the history of civilization and culture. See, for example, Jacek Kolbuszewski, *Góry. Przestrzeń i krajobrazy. Studia z historii literatury i kultury [Mountains. Spaces and landscapes. Studies in the history of literature and culture]* (Kraków: Universitas, 2020), fold-out page, inside back cover. The editor of the series, Ewa Grzęda, writes about mountain studies and mountain methodology, in: "Wstęp" [Introduction], in: *Od Kaukazu po Sudety. Studia i szkice o poznawaniu i zamieszkiwaniu gór dalekich i bliskich [From the Caucasus to the Sudetes. Studies and sketches about discovering and living in mountains near and far]*, ed. Ewa Grzęda (Kraków: Universitas, 2020), 7–15.

²⁴ See, among others, Veronica della Dora, *Mountain. Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books Reprinted, 2016).

²⁵ Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory; The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1963).

is now a gargantuan, tawdry, frozen Taj Mahal, an elaborately frosted wedding-cake up and down which climbing companies annually yo-yo hundreds of under-experienced clients. Its slopes are studded with modern corpses: most lie within what has become popularly known as the Death Zone, the altitude bracket within which the human body enters a gradual but unstoppable process of degeneration. (RM 17–18)

Macfarlane is also critical of the mythologization and idealization of climbers, especially those who died climbing, because contemporary culture sees such men as heroes (RM 6). He also writes about racism, sexism, snobbery, and egoism in mountaineering (RM 6) and about the tragedy of those who are left behind – orphaned children, widowed spouses, and devastated loved ones (RM 98, 271). Last but not least, Macfarlane points out that that the expeditions to Mount Everest in which Mallory participated were essentially imperial and nationalist (RM 239, 241).

A parallel reading of Woźniakowski's and Macfarlane's essays proves that mountains play a significant role in the past and present culture of many different European countries (not only Alpine countries!) and the entire continent. This also points to an issue that is particularly important in contemporary mountain studies. Both works are clearly Eurocentric, and do not really engage with the significance of mountains in other cultures. Challenging Eurocentrism is therefore a task for the next generation of scholars.²⁶

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

²⁶Julie Rak, *False Summit: Gender in Mountaineering Nonfiction* (London–Chicago: McGill-Queens University Press, 2021).

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KEYWORDS

Jacek Woźniakowski

mountains

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ABSTRACT:

Mountain studies in the humanities concentrates on the relation between people and mountains. Robert Macfarlane explored that topic in *Mountains of the Mind* (2003). In this article, Macfarlane's bestseller is compared with Jacek Woźniakowski's *Góry Niewzruszone* [Immovable Mountains] (1974). The Polish art historian writes about the history and the place of mountains in culture and art since Antiquity to Romanticism. Macfarlane's book picks up, as if, where Woźniakowski left off. Both works are complementary in this regard, and allow one to reconstruct a history of a fascination, which starts with aversion and often leads to a deadly and dangerous obsession. Both authors dissect a passion for mountains: Woźniakowski comes up with a typology of cultural approaches to mountains, and Macfarlane lists and explains the reasons for the fascination with height. These two approaches are also complementary.

Robert Macfarlane

mountain studies

IMAGINATION

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