

## 1.

The ethnographer who sets off on a tourist excursion into the mountains will from the professional point of view find himself almost in a desert. There is little material culture and a restricted domain for observing culturally consolidated behaviour. Consequently, the temptation of introspection grows – one may observe own experiences against the backdrop of the majesty, beauty, terror, etc. of the mountains, and then confront them with those recorded in culture, in which the mountains are a source of rapture and Romantic adulation. But how much can one experience? Ultimately, the predominating feature is the arduous labour of ascending and descending - hours, day, weeks on the same slopes, rubble, and scree, in a word - the ennui of the mountains.

The intellect, tirelessly transposing information, seeks in the course of those monotonous wanderings assorted themes for analysis, and wants to extract details and arrange them into entities. In order to supply it with material it is necessary to lower oneself to the level of observations of commonplace, petty, and hap-hazard behaviour that appears in the course of contact with the mountains at the time of mass-scale tourism.

Several years ago, I was in an Alpine hostel getting ready to spend several days on circumventing Massif des Écrins, encircled by the popular tourist footpath G. R. 54. While trekking along it is possible to carry out successively more ambitious excursions to the centrally located peaks (I was particularly attracted by the almost 4 000 metre La Meije, climbed by Wawrzyniec Żuławski, author of, i.a. *Wędrowki alpejskie* and *Tragedie tatrzańskie*, the unforgettable, skilfully didactic books of my childhood). When I asked the person running the hostel about the best way to set off along the circular trail, I heard: "Go together with all the others, because if you head in the opposite direction then *tout le mond* will say *bonjour* and you will be forced to reply to everyone".

True, this is actually the horror of the most popular trails in the Alps - the unwritten obligation to constantly say or at least reply: *bonjour*, *buongiorno* or *salute*, *Gruetzi* or *Grüss Gott*. Naturally, the same holds true for both sides of the Tatra Mts.: *cześć*, *dzień dobry* (depending on the age of the tourist) or: *na zdar!* This is probably the case all over the world reached by tourism: greetings in Russian in the mountains of Central Asia, in Nepalese along the Himalayan trekking routes (the encountered monk or porter will accompany: *namaste* by clasping hands in front of his face), in Japanese in the region of Nagano, the so-called Japanese Alps, where persons admiring *koyo* (golden-red autumn) exchange three standard greetings, depending on the time of day: *o-hayo godzaimasu* in the early hours of the morning, *konnichi-wa* before noon, and *komban-wa* in the afternoon. In turn, *hagni haseio* can

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# Who Says *Bonjour* to Whom on Mont Blanc?

## Attempted Anthropology of Conventional Behaviour

be constantly heard in the national parks of Korea, where, similarly as in Japan, the ideally maintained and easy paths are full of excellently equipped tourists (the ladies only lack toques on their heads, an item *de rigueur* for their Japanese counterparts) who even carry walking sticks, totally superfluous and devoid of the function of providing support since these cheap items were purchased in a souvenir shop at the foot of the mountain.

The same situation prevails in the Western hemisphere. Along the trails of Yellowstone or the Grand Teton National Park we encounter immaculate female tourists in crisp shirts (sometimes even white - after all, the campsite below is outfitted with a laundry), whom one simply must greet with a smile and a *hello!* (the requirement to buy a new set of clothes before leaving on vacation in the States is stronger than anywhere else). Things are slightly different in Yosemite Valley full of half-naked climbers ascending El Capitan. They do not greet us, busy approaching the wall and outfitted with special equipment. But this is already quite a different, alienated world.

## 2.

Why do strangers experience the need to utter or at the very least murmur or growl a conventional greeting instead of passing each other on a mountain path without a single word, as they do in all other life situations? What is the meaning of such behaviour? Does it make any sense to ask about its significance? And, one would like to add, to whom are we supposed to pose this question? At least in the latter case the answer is implied. True, this is a scene of ritual avoidance and thus as if an opposite of the customary greeting, but it can be referred to assorted forms of symbolic behaviour.

Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, act I, scene 5. Tristan on board ship is taking Isolde to her future husband, and his uncle, King Marke. Isolde prefers to die rather than marry Marke, and Tristan is ready to sacrifice his life together with her. The servant Brangäne,

however, changed the vials and instead of poison they drink a love potion. Tristan still tries to maintain his role of an envoy– suitor, and Isolde is angry with him for acting in this manner. Why do you avoid me? – she asks. *Sitte lehrt, wo ich gelebt: zur Brautfahrt der Brautwerber meide fern die Brau* - Tristan replies. *Aus welcher Sorg?* – Isolde wishes to know. *Fragt die Sitte!* – responds the young man, aware of the cultural imperative but not of its determinants.

Exactly, *look to manners!* – a directive as enigmatic as the words of a prophecy. The ethnographer, who knows that his interlocutor can explain a lot, will agree even though the response does not necessarily resolve that with which he, an outside observer, is most concerned and which he is capable of encompassing only in a general, naïve, and gauche question: why? He is aware of the fact that he must first ask his informer, but cannot stop at that stage since the latter will not, after all, confirm or verify associations appearing in the intellect of a well-read researcher who perceives astonishing analogies and is open to distant determinants. The interlocutor is unable to either reconstruct the historical origin of those cultural contents or discern all their profound meanings. He is capable of recalling folk etymology, devise secondary rationalisation, build the theory of the informer, and present his personal connection with a given praxis, but as a rule he will stop at some sort of: “This is the way our grandfathers and great grandfathers did it, and we do too” or simply: “This is our Mongolian custom”.

In order to understand more one must address the questions to the custom. But how? Let us try to put this recommendation into use. Generally speaking, it is necessary to situate the given issue in the most suitable context, to see it against the background of the whole changing cultural environment without going too far with abstract and arbitrary associations but also without merely registering openly declared meanings. Let us, therefore, start by putting intuitions into order.

### 3.

One can unperturbedly presuppose that the discussed custom that is, after all, a conventionalised and petrified form of collective behaviour and not an individual psychic reaction or an emotional surge, assumed form at a time when mountaineering was the occupation of a few and was accompanied by fears much more serious than is the case today since the risks and threats were also greater. People who rarely met others along a mountain trail let each other know that they could rely on them. If only one could hear those conversations resounding in the mountain air! In a naïve reconstruction of that, which took place in the Alps for, let us say, two and half centuries (and in the Tatra Mts. for not quite two centuries) one can

imagine that at the time of the pioneers such dialogues were composed of longer questions about the course of the trail, the conditions higher up, the lurking peril.

These contacts were preceded by a conventional greeting – naturally, differently uttered by the “gentlemen” and differently by the local guides or highlanders encountered near their huts. All those: *praise the Lord..., may God guide you ..., stay with God...*, and other wishes of good luck ... Did they become the source of some sort of tradition, non-formulated demands of *savoir vivre*? Who should be the first to say: “good day” - the person on his way up (as if the younger addressing the older) or perhaps the one enjoying more comfortable conditions, or - as is always the case – the more polite? After all, in the high mountains uncertainty gives rise to an intensified need for human solidarity as well as a readiness to provide it. A conversation expresses these hopes, even in a form reduced to a one-word greeting (but assuming bilaterality) that is not only a religious wish expressing hope that God will guarantee good fortune, but also carries a communiqué: we have found ourselves in a small group of daredevils entering a dangerous terrain and should help each other – just as you many count on me so I rely on you. The progressing process of taming the mountains obviously resulted in rendering impressions banal and a conventionalisation of the communiqué, thus granting the greetings a stereotype quality.

Walking along well-trodden trails we should not make light of the elements of horror, the unknown, and the unpredictable in the perception of the first explorers. After all, “wilderness” was in their Cartesian minds a sphere of the unaccountable.<sup>1</sup> When on 18 June 1741 the Englishman William Windham accompanied by eight fellow-countrymen and five locals travelling with horses set off from “Chamougni” to the Montenvers glacier (today we take a funicular to Mer de Glace; on the margin, at present this is a banal journey while several decades ago it was regarded as an important event) all the Englishmen carried pistols. An account of this excursion – not a single shot was fired - containing advice and warnings is probably the first modern Alpine tourist guidebook.<sup>2</sup> English gentlemen were for long the pioneers of Alpine expeditions – first tourist, then mountain climbing, but also intellectual, a source of conceptual language to describe the high mountain landscape up to then never seen so closely. One of the most popular concepts was Burke’s aesthetic category of the sublime, overwhelming might, whose immeasurable enormity startles the tiny human figure. Mountains became the image of metaphysical or eschatological scenery: they forced to perceive the first step towards the throne of Supreme Majesty, a vestibule of lands that could be experienced only by spirits freed of the body, as in American metaphysical paintings, e.g. the works of Frederick Church. The

description coined by John Ruskin: *Mountains are the great cathedrals of the earth*, recurs also in Polish litanies of lofty expressions: *the Tatras – the church of the worlds* (J. N. Kamiński), *the Tatra temple* (Zaruski), or *the altars of freedom and testimony of the greatness of God, the nothingness of Creation* (Rautenstrauchowa).

We search in vain for descriptions of greetings in portrayals of the Tatra Mts. inspired by the Romantic spirit. After all, people went to the mountains to challenge the Eternal and expected to see views dating from a period inaccessible for the human gaze: *Some sort of chaos stretched all around us. A highlander from Bukowina said that this is the way things looked prior to creation, but it seemed to me that this is the way they would appear after the end of the world.*

One was expected to behave as if under the impact of a personal encounter with the Creator – or at least to describe one's impressions by resorting to a comparison to such a meeting: *I ran out, looked, and dropped to my knees, covering my face with both hands, as if I had seen a reflection of God or at least His throne* (both fragments from a description of an excursion of Łucja Rautenstrauchowa to Morskie Oko Lake in 1839).

Those informing about their "solemn impressions" described experiences suggesting that they had set off into the mountains alone, without meeting another person. There simply is no place for anyone else in such a landscape. *The Tatra Mts. are a rocky desert – wild and dangerous*, Zaruski wrote in as late as 1912, evidently oblivious of hundreds of summer visitors and resort patients on the already well-marked trails outfitted with chains. Even if from such accounts we do find out how people reacted to the mountains (or rather learn about the convention in which they described them) we are still totally ignorant about their reaction to others, inevitably encountered on route, unless they admitted to censoring descriptions of such meetings. *I do not repeat their [shepherds'] conversation since it left an indescribably unpleasant impression. I believed that foulness and misdemeanours would not cross the immense granite blocks built by the hand of God, but the exchange between those highlanders came as a horrendous disappointment! ... Are you, my town dwellers, incapable of restraining yourselves for even single minute so as not to spread our decadence onto this poor and ignorant people and of respecting its innocent simplicity?* – cried out Lucjan Lipiński, a notary from Lwów, who bravely permitted several shepherds to transport him across Morskie Oko Lake (1860).

Such a temple cannot contain any sort of impurity, and such a church has no place for dissenters. Encountering them we should keep silent or burst out in anger. I take the liberty of recalling at least one enraged text although today we find it embarrassing; considering that much worse sins are being revealed there is no need to despair that these are the reflections of the

great Stanisław Witkiewicz recorded in his account of the Tatra Mts., recognised as the most outstanding of its sort in Polish writings.

Before we find out what he had to say, recall that Witkiewicz, who in an introduction to his book was critical of the highlanders and their mythologisation by people from the lowlands (*cepry*), changed his style once he entered a path leading to the mountains. The highlanders now became the protagonists of an epic poem (with Sabała as Homer) as if their villages were located directly near Mt. Kościelec or Mt. Rysy; in this pristine surrounding the author was even more distressed by the presence of an ethnically alien intruder:

*All melts in the air and glimmering light, becoming immaculately clean as if it were pure crystal ... Eyes gaze upon this harmony of translucent hues.*

*A barren desert empty of people, full of ruins of the world, enveloped in soft, purple mist loses its terror and wildness and stretches beneath our feet in the manner of a calm and tranquil sea ...*

*Suddenly, against the blue and opal backdrop, there appears a comical figure wearing a sheepskin jerkin over a long coat and drooping trousers. He takes off his hat, bows, smiles with a trace of humility, fear, and desire to ingratiate himself, marches in front of our group fawning constantly and vanishes like a phantom, leaving behind a trace of a whiff so familiar in the lowlands. How did the Jew find his way here? With whom did he come and whom did he follow? No one knows.*

*A trivial, fantastic phantom, which in a single moment populated Mt. Zawrat with crowds of men named Mishures, tradesmen, small town troublemakers, dirt, stench, the Jewish question...*

*Foul "shadows" gathered soaring across the pure air and invaded our imagination.*

*This polite Jew arrived like the "shadow of the foe", who appears in Wallenrod "to mix blood in the chalices of merriment".*

*Finally, we begin our descent down Mt. Zawrat (...).<sup>3</sup>*

The image of the anonymous Jew, a mixture of a trickster and a *mishigene*, outlined by Witkiewicz could become part of the collections of the National Gallery of the Excluded.

#### 4.

Returning to meetings and greetings exchanged in the mountains, try not to laugh at the "supposed" horror and "untrue" emptiness of rocky trails. The adventure experienced by Hans Castorp in a snowstorm indicates how easy it is to succumb to the temptations of being all alone in the magic mountains, for which one may have to pay the price of, at the very least, a vision of one's death or descent into madness not even half an hour from Sonnenhof Hotel. Each encounter of another person dispels terror and restores normalcy.



Fig. 2. Course of ascent onto Mont Blanc from ChamoniX and Les Houches

Change the context in which we usually examine the titular custom, and from which we expect an answer to the question: “why?”. After all, danger is not the sole context in which there emerges a community expressed by a greeting. The same conventional words can be heard along safe, lowland routes.

Let us descend from the mountains into a nature reservation such as Chincontague Bay along the Atlantic coast of the USA. An idyllic landscape and a paradise not only for ornithologists - nearby there is a secluded beach for nudists, where in a state of undress and resembling Biblical Adam we may return to heavenly conditions. Mature ladies passing by along woodland paths merrily chirp: *hello!* (unless we beat them to it), and although the greeting could be perceived as an American variant of sociotechnical prevention of an unpleasant incident, in this wilderness its basic meanings and contexts differ.

In such bucolic conditions, similarly as on arduous mountain trails, we feel an obligation to demonstrate our better, open, and unselfish side. Why?

More than a decade ago, when paradigms of symbolic anthropology were enthusiastically constructed, I proposed a holistic answer: we act in this way to preserve a place in a certain system. Key importance for comprehending human symbolic behaviour belongs to the fact that, as a rule, it refers to images of an ideal state, either totally impossible to attain (being mythical and straight out of paradise) or non-existent on a daily basis (and difficult to realise); nonetheless, it remains postulated and symbolically recreated, especially in situations of ritual beginnings and festivities. This ideal state has different albeit overlapping levels, and is expressed in several mutually exchangeable and supplementary codes. It possesses a strictly mythological dimension (images of a golden age, which existed and/or will occur), a personal dimension, in which human condition is improved on an individual scale (*via* an idealisation of childhood, specially the embryonic state envisaged as a carefree period in contrast to adulthood), and, finally, a social dimension; in the latter, the ideal condition is attained by attempts at a ritual realisation of *communitas* – a society of equality, based not on domination and the games of roles played according to a rigorous order, but on a community-focused unhampered coexistence of personalities.<sup>4</sup>

The space of Nature, contrasted with the contamination of Culture or the degeneration of Civilisation, is also treated as an ideal domain both in archaic systems, despite the entire ambivalence of “the wild”, and in contemporary mythologies. The ritual realisation of an ideal can take place only in a “pure” and “unsullied” domain.

Nature enclosed in reserves, protected against exploitation and pollution, deprived of its horror by granting it the status of a “national park” (after all, a



Fig. 3. Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Na przełęczy*

park cannot be hostile – it is not a menacing forest), is an ideal environment for implementing the contemporary festivity: Sunday-weekend, school holidays, and vacations, and, at the same time, for improving its social condition. Some sort of an automatism or special cultural coercion is at work here: having found ourselves in natural space (at the time of festivities) we return to our natural/ideal condition: when the obligation to work, social oppression, and dependence come to a halt, inter-personal distances decrease and the feeling of a community comes into being. Greetings and smiles all around.

## 5.

Such reflections as the ones presented above lead to two equally justified albeit basically rather distant targets. The custom of greetings could be perceived both as a reaction to a threat and as a demonstration of a merry, ideal community. Can these conclusions, reached by means of speculations, be put to the test in ethnographic observation, which would confirm one of the hypotheses and, at the same time, endow the findings with more real features? Nothing stands in our way. Let us then set off for Mont Blanc and see where people will say: *bonjour* (non-French speaking tourists, as a rule, say: *hello!*).

From Chamonix we travel several kilometres to Les Ouches, and from here ascend a steep forest path with

the Arandellys ravines to the left. The trail is narrow and shady, with almost no one going down; once or twice we are compelled to say something while passing someone – all other forms of behaviour would be so unacceptable as to become unnatural. We spend the night in the woods, but in the morning, after a brief walk, we finally see the peaks. The path reaches the tracks of the funicular, which several hundred meters further, at the last stop (at an altitude of only 2 327 metres), brings a crowd of those for whom this is the maximum attainable proximity to the White Mountain. It is also exactly here, some twenty meters from the funicular that the *bonjours* start. Parents and teenagers, attractive ladies - hence the necessity for greetings and suitable facial expressions.

Soon the trail grows empty, the arid slopes of Rognes appear, ending with an empty stone *Baraque Forestière* – it is not quite clear whence the *forestière* in view of the fact that the forest ends much lower down. Since someone is planning to spend the night here we are compelled to talk a little and then go on, towards the Tête Rousse hut below the summit. In the morning, departure takes place in darkness; across the snow-covered glacier (where someone is still sleeping in pitched tents) we head for the celebrated Grand Couloir, which has to be traversed.

Writing these words, with the route already behind me, I am still unable to objectively describe the degree

of its danger. A competent author declared: *It is estimated that some 7 000 people perished on Mont Blanc alone (...). A large number were the victims of the infamous traverse of the great Aiguille du Goûter couloir on the Gouter-Bossse, exposed to rock avalanches despite the metal cables installed here [untrue: there are no cables – J. S. W.]. Guides called this traverse a “Russian roulette”, with rocks difficult to avoid, falling often and quite unexpectedly.*<sup>5</sup>

This is why we are here at dawn, when the rocks are still frozen and the risk of being bombarded is lesser. On the other hand, the shelf along which the path runs is much more dangerous now than during the day – iced over and slippery it creates the threat of falling; this is the first time that an ice axe and crampons are useful as indispensable extensions of our cautiously moving limbs.

No one has arrived yet, so that the problem of greetings simply does not exist, but then everyone is much too concentrated on his movements to notice others. Not until we reached the other side of the couloir, vertical but secured with chains, could we relax and feel just as if we were on Orla Perć (Eagle’s Path) in the Tatra Mts. On the summit, or rather on a stone edge, stands Refuge de l’Aiguille du Goûter bustling with pre-noon activity. Busy, we do not expect to be greeted, but when after a meal we once again set off across the glacier we pass upon several occasions people returning from a stroll and exchange brief, one-word greetings and smiles.

A further route leads across a gentle snowy slope. We are forced to spend the night in the last possible shelter before the summit, the Vallota refuge (4 347 metres). This aluminium tin can, with an Arctic construction, is the target of a hurricane, which a narrow entrance prevents from invading the interior. Inside, some Germans who arrived earlier take photographs of probably the messiest dwelling in Europe: piles of cans, paper, and old and dirty mattresses. Many stay here, but no one cleans up the rubbish – a good chance to have a laugh at the slovenly French. At dawn, still in the dark, we begin the last stage of the climb. The ascent along the summit *arête* is the most beautiful episode of the expedition. Groups of mountaineers, each composed of several persons sharing a rope, are seen from afar as rows of ghosts. Only the lights of the headlamps - firebugs - slowly move upwards. Everyone walks carefully along an edge that would have been as steep as a roof ridge had it not been for a thick layer of snow, in which we create a safe path.

At the top it is already quite bright. A brief moment of triumph, some cries of joy, photographs are taken, but everyone wants to look at the panorama of the peaks and savour success on his own. In addition, the wind is tearing our heads off and at this altitude we are already suffering from a mild headache.



Fig. 3. Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Na przełęczy*

In other words - and in response to the titular question - no one says *bonjour* on Mont Blanc. The same holds true for the hurried descent, when everyone wants to quickly find himself at the bottom since the worst that can happen is the weather changing for the worse on the icy fields with no orientation points and, in addition, crisscrossed by fissures. Once again, the Vallota refuge, with some taking photographs to the accompaniment of conventional half-smiles. The same occurs prior to the arrival at the refuge, where we can finally afford to relax while eating.

Then, on the steep way down no one feels like speaking to the inexperienced and panic-stricken young American women who attach themselves with a short harness to every piece of metal along this laughingly easy trail, because there is only one thought in our minds: what will the traverse of the couloir be like? It is afternoon and rocks could be falling frequently. Will a helmet or a clever evading movement of the body offer protection?

An answer - decisively negative - comes immediately when, after having arrived at the exit of the path, I take a look from behind the couloir at the vertical slope to see a veritable torpedo dashing down - an enormous block falling in leaps and bounds and every few metres bouncing off the wall. One may only hope that now all will be calm for the next few seconds required to rapidly traverse the path, which at this time of the day is unfrozen and well-trodden. No chance to speak to anyone either before or after. At the other end - a moment of relaxation since no more danger looms ahead. Quite a few people probably experience those seconds as a desperate leap by a condemned man - if one succeeds then one has to rush on without looking back. At least this is what comes to mind when gazing at the considerable number of brand-name ice-picks left behind - obviously simply forgotten - at the spot where everyone takes off and puts away the no longer required equipment. I too flee without speaking to anyone.

## 6.

Despite all the obvious faults of the above account and the conventional nature of the accepted "research procedure" we could hazard some sort of tentative conclusions. Once we find ourselves at a more empirical level of studies, closer to reality, we notice that human behaviour and activity (each realisation of a given custom and its practise) are determined by totally different reasons than it seemed when seen from a more distant, idealising, and speculative perspective. One would like to add that at that precise moment psychology triumphs over ethnology.

It is quite feasible that those concrete determinants do not annul general ones; it must be honestly recorded that mountain greetings do not take place at



Fig. 3. Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Na przełęczy*

moments of danger or while admiring Nature (in both situations a person concentrates on himself), but upon the occasion of fleeting meetings. They are not the outcome of profound experiences, but a way of reacting to contingency in a situation generating dilemmas and calling for arbitrary decisions.

Inconvenience consists of the fact that in the conditions of surrounding emptiness even a fleeting encounter with another person assumes the features of a meeting. For a single moment a stranger becomes physically close and outright the sole encountered person, a fact that has to be noted by greeting him and entering into a relation. Actually, this differs little from situations with which every day abounds: in an elevator, in a corridor, at a table. The emergent social micro-relation could be either silently ignored or conventionally accentuated with some sort of a laconic communiqué: *thank you, pardon me, bon appetite, oops*, etc. Universally accepted standards of personal culture end this dilemma by following some sort of psychic economy: it makes more sense to smile at a person sharing a lift than to peer at the tips of one's shoes. Personal culture tells us to accentuate the social dimension of such a situation even though comfortable egocentrism would prefer to ignore it.

The process of greeting is connected with the reception of a given situation as social, even in the cat-

egories of some sort of obligation. This is why parents with children, concerned with the latter's suitable upbringing, will always say: *bonjour*, as will good-looking women and aspiring beginners, attaching importance to appropriate forms of behaviour more than old hands are wont to do.

The gesture of greeting is also connected with recognising a given situation as an inter-personal relation and not as a fragment of an impersonal crowd. I would be inclined to explain the existence of this perceptive differentiation by the fact that it is not customary to greet and thank, e.g. a person sharing a ski lift chair (this habit is totally absent in overcrowded Alpine conditions and is rapidly vanishing also in Poland). On the other hand, persons skiing in the woodlands of Warsaw suburbs greet each other. Naturally, this is not the case of sharing all-human values in empty high mountains but a temporary experiencing of kinship with scarce aficionados and perhaps something more than conventional *savoir vivre*.

## 7.

Or is it possible that conventional, desultory behaviour – I treat this expression already as a technical term both obvious and understandable, although as far as I know no one has as yet used it in anthropology – conceals some sort of a more profound mystery? Could it be that it contains something recorded in an ancient illegible script understood only by an ethnologist?

The American folklore expert Alan Dundes tells us on the margin of his study on beliefs about liquids and moisture as the essence of life to pay attention to expressions and greetings used in the course of a group meal, functioning up to this day in assorted European traditions.<sup>6</sup> Let us, therefore, ask why sitting down to a table or seeing people eating we say: *enjoy your meal*, *bon appetit*, *buen provecho*, *Guten Appetit*, *smacznego*, *priyatnogo apetita*, etc.

At the onset of the contention we should recall the conception formulated by George Foster (who inspired Dundes) and concerning the existence in the traditional mentality of assorted European cultures of the following "folk idea": the conviction that the world has a limited number of goods, and hence the fear that each object that feeds, grows, and develops does so at the inevitable cost of another adjoining object, depriving it of strength. Hence the belief in the failure of two men sowing simultaneously, the evil impact of an embryo upon the child held by an expectant woman, the joint initiation of consumption. It is upon the basis of this principle, claim Foster and Dudes, that in traditional beliefs a shared meal must pose the threat of an unequal benefitting from limited goods. (The reader who finds such theses unconvincing is requested to recall Frazer's material in *The Golden Bough* about magic threats in the course of joint meals and the ways of

their avoidance). One method involves a verbal declaration of good will – a wish expressed aloud that the people sharing our meal would benefit from it, even more obligatory when one does not eat and thus acts as a potentially envious witness, e.g. walking past the table.

This sort of a witness, Foster noticed, is predominantly the person serving the meal, i.e. in restaurants it is the waiter who creates the threat and whom the diners deprive of the magic power to grow. Some sort of compensation is required. What should it be? A tip! Not by accident does this word in various languages refer to the fact that the waiter could buy himself something to drink for the received money. Characteristically, the beverages vary and the expressions refer to their general character: *Trinkgeld*, *propine*, *gorgeta*, *napoynitsa*, low alcohol content: *pourboire*, or non-alcoholic properties: *na chaj*, *chayeviyе* (*dien'gi*). The proposal pertains to beverages since it is precisely liquids that (as Fundes showed in a separate argument) constitute the element of life.

## 8.

Admittedly, we no longer live in times to which such *folk ideas* are applicable. What is, therefore, the most contemporary and, desired or not, super-modern and postmodern context of the Alpine greeting custom? After all, its backdrop and scenery were not only the Alps bereft of people but also social Alps, civilised and outright cultured. At this point it is impossible to even outline the history of this process, but let us at least put certain obvious findings into order.

The natural landscape of the Alps has been for centuries subjected to a transformation into its cultural counterpart. If one were to write a history of human work and material means applied for this transfiguration of the mountains then we could accept as its symbolic onset the famous wine vinegar applied by Hannibal to crush rocks on his way to Italy. In later epochs use would have been made of picks and various other tools belonging to miners, alchemists, and treasure hunters.<sup>7</sup>

I would happily read an *opus magnum* containing an anthropological summary of subsequent periods: the process of rendering mountains accessible *via* a network of roads with impressive tunnels, gigantic hydro-technical ventures, the creation of a colossal skiing and tourist infrastructure, anti-avalanche protection devices, etc.

Who should be appointed the symbolic patron of those undertakings? Forget Hannibal and his elephants, for whom the Alps were only an obstacle and not an objective, although we should add to his credit that he chose beautiful Chamonix for his passage way. Actually, this is probably only a legend: today, it is ac-

cepted that Hannibal and his animals crossed Alpes Cottiennes, probably by way of the Petit Mont Cenis Pass; all told, there are about thirty similar hypotheses.

Perhaps we should go back to the Bronze Age – making use of a discovery made 12 years ago on a pass above the Ötztal Valley along the Austrian-Italian frontier – and give pride of place to that perfectly preserved man who for reasons totally unknown ventured onto eternal snow at an altitude of 3 200 metres? This astonishing episode probably has a logical explanation: since Ötzi was killed there (he was wounded in the back) then he probably died as a victim of assault – perhaps during an attempted robbery of grazing sheep.

Sheep farming, poverty, and a sparse population – the history of human penetration of the Alps symbolically starts with these motives that will remain its symbols until the contemporary invasion of mass-scale tourism. Reinhold Messner, born in a poor Tyrolean village, repeats *ad nauseam* in his most recent book containing reflections produced by meetings with highlanders on all continents, that his childhood took place in conditions not very different from the life of the Sherpas and the Dardic and Kalash peoples – hence his excellent communication with them. Everywhere in the mountains he saw the same paradoxical phenomenon: progressing tourist exploration accompanied by demographic and ecological regress, i.e. the lowering of the limit of permanent settlements, the abandoning of arduous and risky sheep raising, the depopulation of villages caused by seeking employment in the all-absorbing tourist industry<sup>8</sup>.

We are probably unaware of the multiple changes that are the outcome of the last half a century. In 1949 the village of Saas Fee, today: a resort near Zermatt and the destination of a mass-scale influx of visitors, was connected with the rest of the world only by a narrow mule trail and its wooden houses seen in pre-war photographs resemble Nepal or the Balkans. On the other hand, we also have to remember what could be paradoxically encountered in those houses. Professor Dynowski told me how already before the war he once entered such a cottage (*you wouldn't give three groszy for it, sonny*) from which one could hear a steady rattle: inside, a bearded highlander using a foot-propelled lathe made cogwheels for watches probably commissioned by some less renowned firm. An historian of mentality should be asked about the significance for the onset of Swiss watchmaking of Protestant thoroughness and respect for time among the highlanders from the region of Geneva; an ethnographer will add that another consequence of such attitudes was lacemaking or the production of music boxes – ideal occupations for long winter months.

Someone might claim that these are mere anecdotes and individual examples. But a tourist for whom particular observations could create an identical pattern: modern accessories with an archaic foundation, might say something quite different. After all, even at the height of 3 200 meters above sea level he still encounters the same sheep as those from the era of *homo tyrolensis*, the only difference being that their ears have plastic triangles with a barcode. The sheep are probably managed by great companies, such as Danone or Bridel, and soon there will come a day when a geostationary satellite will read those codes and use a computer to steer the movement of the flocks. The spiritual culmination of the cultural conquest of the natural environment involves placing in the mountains material props of the cult. Here closes the largest circle in history – from the 20 000 years-old enigmatic signs in

Val Camonica and many other places in the Alps, shrines on the spot of old pre-Christian cults, and crosses towering over valleys to contemporary art on the peaks. Spiritual experiences in the mountains were always assisted by religious sets – today, they assume increasingly often an extra-confession and abstract form. Along the route to Roterthorn near Zermatt there appeared recently a set of five quasi-shrines – contemplation objects. Metal stands support colourful glass sheets with brief inspirational texts, enigmatic but arranged in a legible order: the first, at the foot of the summit, is about geological beginnings, the next are about Nature and living creatures, and the one at the very top is the loftiest and most general. An example of complete universality, and in four languages to boot: French, German, English, and Japanese.

A stay in the mountains obviously intensifies the need for mysticism. This can be seen in particular in resorts in the Italian Alps, where bookshops are full of titles about local mysterious rituals (masqueraders, demonology, the Carnival), but also the mysticism of Tibet and hermetic mythologies of the mountains spanning from the esoteric-Himalayan interests of the founders of the SS to works about mystical lands: Shambhala, Shangri-La and Agartha. It is there, in the book stores, that one should examine present-day spirituality and then construct a new definition of culture to replace the old proposals made by Taylor or Malinowski: culture is a system of measures used for the production and, predominantly, sale and distribution of goods.

The times of kitschy statues of the saints, such as the monstrous gold Madonna on the much-frequented Monte Moro Pass above Macugnaga, have come to an end. Now it is not the popularity of a site that qualifies it for installing a statue but its inaccessibility. In the rocks of Congo Star, a difficult peak soaring above Mer de Glace, there stands on the edge of a

chasm a large figure made of rust-free steel glistening in the sunshine; its hand hurls into the air an object resembling an airplane or a bird. It was placed in a spot inaccessible and even invisible to all but the most experienced climbers (a TD+ trail).

What theoretician of postmodernism should we ask for an apt characteristic of phenomena that comprise the new aestheticization of the Alps? I hazard the observation that even an advertisement placed in Alpine scenery (billboards, posters showing luxury jewellery, watches, and sweets) causes some sort of consequences reverse from the ones anticipated up to now. It is not the mountains that are adding attraction to the consumer goods advertised against their backdrop – it is the attractiveness of those gods that is transferred onto the peaks in whose scenery they are demonstrated (advertised in funicular stations, displayed in shops with the best location, or with views of the mountains in the background).

Chocolate with the regular-shaped pyramid of the Matterhorn on the wrapping adds a certain nobility to an, after all, extremely rocky and avalanche-prone mountain, which thanks to the product becomes easier to tame. Omnipresent depictions of Swiss watches, all set at the smiling hour of 10.09 a.m., magnified on advertisement posters and thus greatly evocative, endow the mountains with additional gracefulness, especially if the makers are Breguet, Blancpain or Vacheron-Constantin (to mention only those among the most exclusive brands established in the eighteenth century; after all, Onegin wore a Breguet, albeit still made in Paris, before the firm moved to Vallée de Joux in the Swiss Jura). Associated images of punctuality, infallibility, and sophistication are transferred to the surrounding landscape, encircling it - just like K-2 with

metal cables in the famous photograph illustrating the ecologists' slogan: "Free the mountains" - with a net of associations domesticating it and robbing it of its wild and unpredictable features. Only a person with the character of Diogenes would not succumb to the pressure of those icons of elegance and refuse to notice that they elevate the status of the traveller, add finesse to his sojourn, and render the Alps more dignified.

The mountains are becoming increasingly elegant and they expect the same of all those who have found themselves in their midst. They make us pay for our stay not only with a plastic card but also with the conventional coin of good upbringing.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> M. Oelschlager, *The Idea of Wilderness*, New Haven 1995.
- <sup>2</sup> W. Windham, *An Account of the Glaciers or Ice Alps of Savoy*, London 1744.
- <sup>3</sup> S. Witkiewicz, *Na przełęczy*, Warszawa 1891, p. 147.
- <sup>4</sup> J. S. Wasilewski, *Tabu a paradygmaty etnologii*, Warszawa 1989.
- <sup>5</sup> G. Hattingh, *Najpiękniejsze drogi wspinaczkowe świata*, Katowice 2000, p. 82.
- <sup>6</sup> A. Dundes, *Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye. An Essay in Indo-European and Semitic Worldview*, in: *Interpreting Folklore*, Bloomington 1980, pp. 102-105.
- <sup>7</sup> It is worth recalling the charming publication by Jacek Kolbuszewski: *Skarby króla Gregoriusa*, Katowice 1971 and a collection of studies by Józef Szaflarski: *Poznanie Tair*, Warszawa 1972. An unequalled erudite work about the perception of the mountains is still: *Góry niewzruszone. O różnych wyobrażeniach przyrody w dziejach nowożytnej kultury europejskiej* by Jacek Woźniakowski (Warszawa 1974).
- <sup>8</sup> R. Messner, *Bergvoelker. Bilder und Begegnungen*, Munchen 2001.



Afganistan. An route to Jalababach. Photo Anna Beata Bohdziewicz