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Sublime Visions Architecture in the Alps

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Matthias Boeckl—Foreword

The present book developed out of a dissertation at the University of Applied Arts Vienna and at the École nationale supérieure d'architecture de Versailles. In focusing on the world of the mountains, it examines a central and richly faceted arena within the debates on modern architecture and documents them from the perspectives of very different disciplines. Borrowing from the tradition of the encyclopedias in the Enlightenment, for the first time this complex of themes is dealt with comprehensively, in a publication with the character of a textbook that can be used in a variety of ways, and is graphically presented using all the expertise of a trained architect.

But how did the examination of nature in the Alps achieve this important role in the discussion on modernism? The answer lies in the fundamentally ambivalent nature of this setting. On the one hand, at the very heart of the continent that invented modernism, the unconstrained forces of nature presented modernism's rational side with an enormous challenge: as with urban civilization, there was a perceived need to open up and control a potentially dangerous area of nature by means of large technology. On the other hand, experiencing such elementary natural forces has always provoked in us archaic and intense emotional reactions. Even today, those whisked by cable car in just a few minutes from the valley to rugged precipices and snow-clad peaks at a height of several thousand meters cannot escape these elementary, touching, and deeply unsettling feelings. The traces of such feelings are found throughout European intellectual history, and in the Enlightenment they were gathered together in the complex term of the "sublime." Consequently, despite the growth of industrialization, the European Alps have been able to preserve something of their original primitive quality to the present day. The mountain world transformed from a scenario of fear into a precious, magical resource with healing powers. Very soon it showed modernism where its boundaries lay: technoid civilizations can neither replace nor artificially generate the functions of the brain stem.

This tension had a profound effect on the artistic production of modernism, which has always aimed at designing entire environments for life. In the mountains it is put to the test:

employing intelligent strategies, modernism is called upon to make the powerful but at the same time immensely vulnerable resource usable in a way that does not threaten to destroy it. This demands highly creative technical achievements. Modern architecture has accepted this challenge; many of its leading figures are today still dealing with the theme of building in the mountains. This has led to the development of effective structures and powerful symbols.

On the following pages Susanne Stacher explores the history of this development using the tool of the sublime, in the process moving through a variety of different disciplines from philosophy to medicine to the arts, among which architecture is the central focus of interest. But this book is also a standard work on self-enquiry and the precarious legitimation of modernism against the background of a vulnerable environment which has substantially shaped our DNA for thousands of years and which is under threat today.

Matthias Boeckl, Professor at the University of Applied Arts Vienna

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Philippe Potié—The Alps, or The Sublimation of Urban Life

The Alps that Susanne Stacher invites us to explore are a sublime amplifier of urban life. Far from damping the noise and hectic bustle of the city, the echo of the deep valleys actually doubles their effect and makes them visible like a reflection in a magnifying mirror. The landscape here does not play a calming role; on the contrary its “*super-nature*” appears to stimulate a “*super-urbanism*.” In contrast to the *hameau de la Reine* (the picturesque farm built by Marie Antoinette in Versailles), which imitates rural peace far away from the excitement of the city, the “alpine cities” created out of nothing exaggerate urban passions to the extreme. Curiously, here the Alps function as project accelerators, as emotional amplifiers. It seems as if this exceptional geography makes it possible to work on the boundaries, indeed even beyond the boundaries. On these pages the sublime—a category which, up to now, has had far too many cultural and philosophical connotations to be invoked—finds a new topicality that allows us to rediscover its relevance.

As already suggested by the etymology, this term refers to a struggle with boundaries, which also implies a radical questioning of every function and form. This fundamental danger uncovers the brutality of longings, and of social and architectural forms—and here it is remarkable that, as “super architectures,” the buildings analyzed seem to magnify the obsessions of a century: from the *super-sophisticated* quality of the 19th century grand hotel and the *super-hygiene* of the sanatoriums, to the libertarian cooperative Monte Verità, the Alps stimulate the spread of urban passions which, undisturbed, can be indulged in fully there. The architectures respond in an amplifying way, in the superlative, to the emotional and spiritual revelations that people experience through their bodies: the cantilever of Breuer’s hotel Le Flaine appears to unbalance the static monolith of the church of La Tourette, while Gustav Gräser, naked in the garden of Monte Verità, seems to force Thoreau into the constrictions of naturism, deep into the woods of *Walden* (the forest of the new Robinson Crusoe)—and a few pages further on: the tower of the Fiat children’s summer “colonies” that make Bentham’s panopticon seem like just a faded sketch of centralized bodies and souls.

There is an impulsive quality in the expression of these buildings which, with their triumphant shapes, offer the possibility of a highly charged aesthetic experience. Susanne Stacher invites us to rethink a theory of the sublime, in order to redevelop this art of accentuation and powerful tonalities, of consciously placed contrasts. Because nature and culture contrast strongly with each other there, the Alps offer an opportunity for this kind of expressive power to grow, as here the emancipation from an excessively civilized *superego* is able to develop freely: in this sense the heightened radical nature of the architecture corresponds with bodies that frolic in the sun or are mercilessly exposed to it.

On the following pages we are invited to take part in a crossing of the mountains that captures the vitality of these different kinds of architecture, which rewrite the project of civilization, as they liberate themselves from constraints of any kind with a grand emancipatory gesture that is both vast and libertarian—sublime.

Philippe Potié, Professor at the École nationale supérieure d’architecture de Versailles

Introduction

As an architect and enthusiastic traveler to the Alps, I often asked myself what exactly it is that draws us to the Alps again and again. You go to the mountains to enjoy the partially intact villages and the remaining untouched nature, and destroy these things just through your own presence or with buildings that enable you to enjoy this world in the first place.

Despite mass tourism and the imposing structures that have been built in the Alps since the 19th century, people continue to pour into the mountains: “With approximately five million vacation beds, 500 million overnight stays and 120 million holidaymakers, the Alps represent one of the largest tourism regions on the globe. This is where a quarter of the world’s tourism takes place.” (*BauNetzWoche*, March 19, 2015, in reference to our exhibition “Dreamland Alps.”¹) What are they looking for? What drives them?

If we examine the variety of motivations that have inspired urbanites throughout history to visit the Alps, the result is a strikingly heterogeneous image that is immediately expressed in architecture. This book presents architectures designed by city dwellers for city dwellers in the mountains: in the 19th century, at the grand hotel, they wanted to taste the experience of the sublime they longed for; at the life reform colony of Monte Verità they strove for the utopia of a radical new beginning in the midst of “wild nature”; with the sanatoriums and solariums, they sought an ideal climatic environment for the healing of the body; in the 1920s and 1930s they enjoyed the rapture of movement, as expressed in the film “White Ecstasy”; in the ski resort towns of the 1960s, as mass tourists,

they experienced the perfect domination of nature; as encapsulated individuals (or as couples) they lie in a transparent glass bubble, as in Ross Lovegrove’s *Alpine Capsule* (2008). All of these approaches, from the beginning of tourism to today, can be considered fundamentally different—but isn’t there something that connects them? Don’t they have a “common denominator,” a kind of DNA that they share with each other?

Upon closer examination, these buildings and projects do not appear “neutral” to me: the underlying, mostly “strong concept” is linked to a precise idea of what our life with and in “wild nature” should look like. Throughout this consciously growing relationship with our natural surroundings, the mountains crystallized as an ideal location for the projection of visions that imply a different form of existence. Moreover, as secluded places, they often have an “insular” character and, like geographical islands, seem predestined as a territory for utopias. Strikingly, there is usually a certain kind of borderline experience that involves the mind and body at the same time. Just through the spatial separation of man and nature alone, the question of dealing with the limit already arises in an essential way.

This question leads us back to the 18th and 19th centuries, when the sublime (Latin, English, French *sublime*; in German *Das Erhabene*) was the decisive factor in the reception of the Alps, as all pictures, travel accounts, and philosophical writings prove. It is based on a mixture of fascination and terror—a transcendental, even ecstatic emotional state that implies

going beyond one's own limits. This is already contained in the etymological root of the Latin word *sub limen*: "under the threshold/limit/boundary, to the limit, in limbo."

If this term is not associated with times gone by but regarded as a crucial component of our existence, then the sublime can be used as a possible interpretation of the architecture in the Alps, which was designed by city dwellers for city dwellers. Since this definition is not rigid but has noticeably changed in the course of history and has always been reinterpreted, the different architectures in the Alps are to be understood as an expression of this change. They shed light on the respective mental attitude of the different epochs and social phenomena.

The Specific Relationship between the Sublime and the Alps

The sublime is a general term that can be applied to oceans, volcanoes, natural disasters, or generally to *all* mountains; nevertheless, in various philosophical writings it has been associated most commonly with the Alps. This has historical, geographical, and political reasons: historically, the Alps were much more traveled than the Pyrenees, the Carpathians, or the Apennines, for they lay on the route of an English aristocrat's Grand Tour to Italy.

In the course of the increasingly more intensive examination of "wild nature," a change of perspective took place toward the end of the 17th century; the "terrible" mountains became the "sublime" ones. In terms of cultural history, the Alps stood at the center of this transformation and likewise played a certain pioneering role in the development of tourism. As I focus primarily on the phenomenological character—not only concerning the choice of the territory studied but also the selection of projects—other mountainous areas in Europe are excluded from this investigation. The phase of the projects—whether construction, plan, or vision—is irrelevant in this context. On the contrary, the different, complementary examples are compared and considered in juxtaposition.

Given the great heterogeneity of the built or planned architectures conceived since the beginnings of tourism, I was interested in the visions underlying the respective projects and the extent to which they are related to the sublime. Because this term has sustainably shaped the cultural-historical development of the Alps, it would have to be reflected in the specific architecture. But how has this process changed over the centuries? To what extent has the sublime altered our

relationship with the mountains, and how far have philosophical views of nature created an ideal terrain for visionary buildings, from the advent of tourism to the present?

An Architecture of the Sublime?

In order to explain the motivations from which city folk have built various architectures in the Alps, we must first take a closer look at the phenomenon of the "experience of the sublime." The focus of reflection is on nature, its culturally determined symbolic meaning, and the human imagination, as well as the body, which plays a considerable role thereby. To comprehend how these factors are interconnected, the theory of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who understood the relationship between the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary as an inseparable unit, is quite helpful.

According to him, the imaginary plays a key role for the body, because it is the first step toward corporeal enjoyment.² Lacan illustrated his thesis by means of the Borromean knot, which, with its complex entanglements, represents the structure of the subject. This is composed of three units that influence one another and are interlocked; the symbolic,³ for instance, is to be found in the imaginary as well as in the real.

Starting from the unity of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary, the question arises as to whether, in addition to the purely intellectual experience of the sublime, a "physiology of the sublime" can also be assumed. Everything here is equally moral and physical: in the sublime, the real communicates with the imaginary. The object itself, such as the ocean, is not qualified as sublime, as Immanuel Kant already determined: "Its aspect is horrible," and one "must have stored one's mind in advance with a rich stock of ideas"⁴ in order to feel such an emotion (as explained in more detail in chapter 1). The sublime presupposes a state of mind, an intellectual constitution and a certain mood, and is always associated with a symbolic meaning (the "higher," the "absolute," the "ungraspable," etc.).

With the power of imagination (the imaginary), *material* nature (the body) has a shattering and, at the same, uplifting effect on us. Expressed analogously, we perceive a limit and, simultaneously, the possibility of surmounting this (in Burke through feeling, in Kant through reason, see chapter 1). The "sublimation" is thus an act of self-transcendence and consists of two stages: first being shattered and then rising

above it (not in the psychological but rather in the transcendental sense).

The sublime is difficult to capture; it cannot easily be asserted that “this mountain (or this architecture) is sublime,” because two components always play along when viewing an object: subjective perception (the way I see it) and objective symbolism (what it stands for in terms of cultural history, and the contents it is loaded with). The sublime is, concurrently, the condition and its experience, the principle and its effect (it can only be experienced through its effect and not through the thing itself). It is the mountain (along with its culture-bound symbolic content) and its experience (the sensation of an exciting shudder, if one is receptive to it). To be able to speak about the sublime, philosophers (including Kant) draw on many an example, and this shows that the tangible representation of the sublime cannot be avoided.

To investigate how architecture contributes to triggering the experience of the sublime, one needs to delve deeper into how it affects humans and generates borderline experiences. Not only do the mind and the disposition play a central role, but also the body. After all, it is the body that travels, hikes, or climbs through the mountains, it is the body that brings us into borderline situations—and architecture is also built for it. Depending on whether the body is sitting or observing, lying sick in bed, or in frenetic or athletic motion, the architecture differs accordingly. It adapts to the diverse needs and always generates new typologies, based on the physical uses to which it is put. The reciprocity between the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary—between architecture and nature (the real), their symbolic content, and our yearnings or visions (the imaginary)—is articulated in a permanent interaction with the body.

As a consequence, we can focus our inquiry as follows: In what way did the mental dimension of the sublime successively shift to a physical borderline experience, and how does this change manifest itself in architecture?

We are interested in architecture not only as a structural “framework” for a contemplation of nature but also as a “covering” for a body seeking protection and, equally importantly, as a “dynamic *dispositif*” that confronts the body with nature. Architecture should not only be regarded as the *result* of a thinking, yearning, projecting society, but also as a *medium*

that has an influence on us. In that sense, architecture is not just a reflection of an ever-changing society that gives us information about how it is changing, it actively contributes to it.

Structure

Six overlapping themes show to what extent the sublime is “declinable”:

“The Emergence of the Sublime”, the introductory chapter, outlines how the sublime has shaped our view of the Alps and what contribution architecture has made to it.

The second chapter, “Crystal, Crystallization,” investigates how the principle of the “crystalline” spread from cultural and art history to architecture, and looks at the role the natural sublime played as a basis for the transcendental aspects of the crystalline.

The following chapter, “Therapeutic Landscape,” examines the Alps as an ideal terrain for recovery and the development of new architectural typologies that served the body. What relationship did the various healing methods have to the sun, the mythical symbol of the sublime, and how does this find expression in architecture?

Chapter Four, “Contesting for the Child,” is dedicated to children’s colonies constructed under various political auspices in the Alps. By means of comparative analysis I examine the extent to which ideological programs ranging from reform to dictatorship express themselves in architecture. In this context, the meaning of the “sublime,” which fascism incorporated for political purposes, is questioned.

The chapter “Movement, Rapture, and Vertigo” addresses a different “experience of the sublime,” which is evoked by the body, preferably in the Alps. Here, the focus lies on the rapturous borderline experience, which is enabled and staged by various architectures.

Finally, “Sublimation of 30,000 Beds” goes into mass tourism from the 1960s onward. The central question is how consumer society, which makes a flawless domination of nature possible, has changed our relationship to the mountains, and what is left of the “sublime” in these “urban transplants.”

This book should make us aware of our current visions in regard to nature and how they are articulated in concrete terms. Alpine architecture is employed as a basis to point out how the relationship between man and nature has changed

throughout history in order to stimulate reflection on the present and the future—because, after all, nature’s resources are limited and threatened by ever-increasing tourism.

1 The exhibition “Dreamland Alps” was developed by Susanne Stacher together with her students in the context of teaching at the École supérieure nationale d'architecture de Versailles (ENSA-V). Since 2013 it has been shown at various locations in and around the Alps (Innsbruck, Merano, Munich, Chambéry, Salzburg, Saalfelden, Bellinzona, St. Jean-de-la-Maurienne, Modane, Annecy).

2 Jacques Lacan, RSI Seminar, March 18, 1975.

3 In Lacan’s work the symbolic stands not only for language and discourse but also for power.

4 James Creed Meredith, “Analysis of the Sublime, § 23, Transition from the Faculty of Estimating the Beautiful to That of Estimating the Sublime,” in *Kant’s Critique of Aesthetic Judgment, translated, with Seven Introductory Essays, Notes, and Analytical Index* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911) [=Kant (1790) 1911], 245f.

Baldine Saint Girons—The Sublime as a Principle of Self-Transcendence: Can We Create It without Betraying It?

Writing about the effervescence into which we can be thrust by the sublime—doesn't that already mean betraying it, weakening its nature, robbing it of its original might and tremendous autonomy? How can we assimilate the sublime or grasp it in a work? Assuming the sublime is what penetrates me and things, what goes beyond my comprehension and overwhelms me, it is what leads me to experience my limits not as a boundary stone that delimits and ends my existence, but quite the contrary: it is what challenges my very being in a profound way, calling for a beginning, a new beginning.

The difficulty of the sublime has to do with the fact that it thrusts us somewhere else, into a different place—even though we sometimes perceive it as a kind of hell—which ultimately proves to be a "new paradise": this alpine paradise which Rousseau described so unforgettably. The inanimate things then assume an as yet unknown realm in our soul, the impressions become stronger and ideas come and go when they like, "when they please, and not when I call for them." The self is suspended, on the one hand, while the place becomes "supra-natural," atopic, unclassifiable, on the other. Impossible to grasp it all—in the moment or thereafter. The desire for renewal predominates over the simple pleasure of conservation. "[Impressions and ideas] come when they please, and not when I call for them; either they avoid me altogether, or rushing in crowds, overwhelm me with their force and number. [...] how then should I find time to write them? In stopping, I thought of nothing but a hearty dinner; or departing, of nothing but a charming walk; I felt that a new paradise awaited me at the door, and eagerly leaped forward to enjoy it."¹

It is impossible to become aware of everything that can suddenly be seen—and not just seen, but foreseen as tremendous: "The horizon presents more objects to the eye than it seems able to contain; [...] the spectacle has something indescribably magical, supernatural about it that ravishes the spirit and the senses; you forget everything, even yourself, and do not even know where you are."²

Do we exist in a more intensive way or do we completely cease to exist? Do we still see or do we no longer see?

A Chinese saying alludes to the disappearance of what appears with maximum intensity or to the formal collapse of

what emerges from a dynamic that makes any assimilation impossible: *jian shan bu shi shan; jian shui bu shi shui*, which could be translated as follows: "You no longer see the mountains as mountains; you no longer see the water as water." What has happened? The sublime renounces any reification of transcendence; at the same time, it calls for sublimation, extinction, an overcoming of the *Ego*. There is no more substance, there are simply flows. Rousseau thus claims to only really "see" what he can remember and to no longer have any other "understanding," in the social and abstract sense of the word, "except in [his] recollections."³

Writing is only a stopgap solution, an intervention not worthy of the object. Even if it serves to present an image of its author, which resembles him even more ("Had I been present, my worth would never have been known"⁴), there is something servile, obsequious about the process, to which Senancour, Rousseau's worthy successor, points: "I should have to write down what I felt, but in that case the mood of exaltation would have soon deserted me. In the very act of recording one's thought for future reference there is something that savours of bondage and the cares of a life of dependence. In moments of intensity one is not concerned with other times and other men."⁵ "To think in an extraordinary way," finding access to the "moment of intensity"—what does this mean? It does not mean thinking without images and words but rather thinking with images and words that are captivating. It does not mean filling oneself with constant intensity but rather feeling a higher energy flowing through us. Rousseau and Senancour influenced our sensitivity. Like them, we also lay claim to an immediate way of relating to an alpine landscape which is not overbuilt and is accessible to the senses, one that offers us an opening, allowing us to be greater than ourselves and facilitating the development of an extraordinary way of thinking. However, there is nothing less lonely and less mediatized than our approach to high mountains today: what is left of this wonderful "alpine freedom" which was exalted in the second half of the 18th and at the beginning of the 19th century, as an alternative to an all too socialized, regulated, and standardized life? Is the sublime of Rousseau and Senancour already obsolete, even passé?

From the Poetic and Rhetoric Sublime to the Naturally Sublime

In order to answer this question we must take recourse to a very old sublime: the poetic and rhetoric sublime of Greek-Latin antiquity. This reference has a two-fold advantage: it allows us to understand that what we refer to as the “naturally sublime” is not something unique but rather a cultural-historical development; it forces us to introduce “machines of the sublime” between us and it, prostheses of any kind. However, it was only later that “nature” (in the sense of all beings and things that were not created by man) was seen as important. The sublime, which Longinus sought in the first century AD can already be grasped as the culmination, the peak of rhetorical discourse. The idea of altitude, as a physical dimension, in contrast to latitude and longitude, already exists in the Greek *hypsos*. It also already is expressed in the Latin adjective *sublimis*, which is derived from *sub*, alluding to an upward movement and *limis* (oblique, diagonally upward) or also *limen* (boundary, threshold). In both cases the vertical and the idea of altitude, which is associated with depth, dominate. However, we find ourselves in the register of metaphors—and for this reason we must be careful not to unduly naturalize the old sublime—and this for two reasons.

On the one hand, the symbolism of the naturally sublime already appears in Longinus but only in a parenthesis in chapter 35 of his epistolary treatise: not simple rivers, but rather enormous rivers like the Nile or the Danube can trigger the awe of the sublime; not simple mountains, but rather volcanoes. The vast expanses, the unforeseen and terrifying, are the basic principles whose illustration through the natural elements is secondary.

Even though Longinus praises “the invincible love that nature has instilled in us for the great and the divine,” he notes that “not even the world in its totality is wide enough for the soaring range of human thought.”⁶ The peak of sublime discourse is the echo of a great mind. The sublime also resides in the natural ability of the rhetorician and in the principle of self-transcendence.

The Naturally Sublime as the Result of a Cosmological Humiliation

We should bear in mind that the subject of the naturally sublime only emerged toward the end of the 17th century, in

Burnet, Dennis, or Shaftesbury, in connection with the Galilean-Copernican Revolution. At the time Euclidean and Ptolemean space appeared inadequate, wrong, and too narrow; we must take leave of it to open up spaces befitting of the new sciences.

This need was also spawned by scientists who like Horace-Bénédict de Saussure turned the actual view of Mont Blanc into a morphogenetic vision (“I look at this primitive mountain range made up of individual layers [...]. I saw how these materials structure themselves horizontally in concentric layers”⁷): a new spatio-temporality reveals itself to intuition just like the materialization of a scientific dream suddenly unfolding. Yet this need is also that of the ordinary man who strives to find, if not an illustration, at least a vision of the world that overlaps better with the new cosmology. Indeed, this is not something to be taken for granted as Théophile Gautier emphatically asserts:

“If you live in cities or on the plain, you easily forget that you are moving through a space that cannot be grasped, carried away by a planet that circles the sun with amazing speed. [...] The data of astronomy, as precise as they may be, still appear almost chimerical and you almost wish you could return to the Ptolemean system that made our puny inner space the core of the universe.”⁸

Injury or cosmological humiliation—this first, fundamental new beginning of the subject, the injury that Freud mentions in connection with the progress of culture—is an attack against self-love or better, against “secondary narcissism.”⁹ The illusion of the omnipotence of ideas is shattered. This is the trauma we must return to in order to grasp the profound impact of the revolution. Man, in fact, has not just “lost his place in the world, or, more correctly perhaps, lost the very world in which he was living and about which he was thinking, and had to transform and replace not only his fundamental concepts and attributes, but even the very framework of his thought,”¹⁰ as Alexandre Koyré reflects.

What does the “thrill of the Alps” mean under such circumstances? When Rousseau and Senancour, each in his own way, call into question writing, and even the word, then they are doing this to the benefit of a new sublime which is all too quickly confused with an ineffable hypostasis, in that it is identified with an autonomous existence. This sublime is the sublimity of solitude that one willingly accepts: it allows us to

discover the power of our body, which is confronted with steep slopes and overcomes its exhaustion—a profound stimulation resulting from the inhalation of fresh, cold air; the excitation of animated thoughts, triggered by magnificent, constantly changing views and vistas. The peak to be reached is no longer that of discourse. Instead, it is about reanimating an intensive physical and mental life, giving it meaning, leaving behind an increasingly complex, artificial world so as to be able to find something of our primal unity within ourselves. “For never did I exist so completely, never live so thoroughly, never was so much myself, if I dare use the expression, as in those journeys made on foot.”¹¹ Rousseau explains, recalling how much walking—the long and lonely trails through the mountains or on the plain—moves thoughts and gives them rhythm.

The Sublime as Principle and Effect

The reference to Greek-Latin antiquity not only makes the effects of the cosmological revolution on the renewal of the concept of the sublime more understandable; it also compels us to reflect on the relationship of the sublime to the instruments and vehicles it favors (which are not infallible but are relatively unimportant in themselves)—in short, a reflection on the principle and effect of the sublime.

Why is the question of the sublime so difficult? I believe that it can be explained by the fact that the sublime is both a principle and an intervention—an inherent principle that also relies on the tools that it uses: language, painting, architecture, nature, etc. On the one hand, there is the original sublime, the more or less mythical principle; on the other hand, there are the means, all the “machines” that it “uses” to become manifest: the various discourses (poetic, rhetorical, historical, philosophical), the various arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, music), and the various landscapes.

The methodological difficulty that appeared in my studies on the sublime is to be found in the fact that we are moving in a circle. *The sublime emerges from the already sublime; it has the quality of applying itself.* The sublime produces the experience and the meanings that allow it to appear. We must thus distinguish between the sublime as a principle that triggers an experience and the sublime as an experience that facilitates the discovery of the principle. The two overlap, and the latter invariably partakes of the sublime, is already possibly sublime itself. It generates the experience and the meanings (signifiers) that

make it possible to be experienced; and everything that it makes tangible invariably partakes of this process and is thus already sublime. This is very clear in Longinus: the first source of the sublime lies not in general thought but in the power of conception that reaches its goal effectively (*to peritastonôseis adrepêbolon*). Its second goal is not passion in general but rather the vehement passion that triggers enthusiasm (*sphodron kai enthousiastikon pathos*). As for the technical sources, it is not just about simple rhetorical figures but about those that are in themselves successful; not the expression as such but rather the already noble expression; not the mere synthesis or orchestration but one that already has dignity and elevation. We must thus grasp a constant back and forth between a *principal use* of the sublime and a *differentiated and specific use*, in keeping with the respective type of actualization—here and now.

The Alpine Architectural Sublime: Three-Dimensional Invention/Verbal Invention

There are three main protagonists in Susanne Stacher’s book: the sublime, the Alps, and ... architecture. The central focus is not literature and philosophy but architecture and the alpine projects that were created between the 19th and the 21st century, all wonderfully backed by drawings, painting, dance, photography, or film. The idea is to confront architecture with the so-called “natural architecture of the Alps”—even if, at first, the latter seems to overshadow and destroy the former, it may also challenge, stimulate, and inspire. These two phases are actually characteristic of the sublime: on the one hand, there is awe and inhibition resulting from this process; on the other, we have the mobilization of physical and mental energies—of what Susanne Stacher calls “the DNA of the sublime,” a spiritualized DNA.

Let us join Susanne Stacher in juxtaposing Caspar David Friedrich’s “Wanderer above the Sea of Fog” with Friedrich Hodler’s “View to Infinity.” The former is shown from behind, standing perpendicular to a rocky elevation that forms a kind of pedestal—that of great men who have been immortalized in sculptures but also one that prevents the viewer from seeing a large part of the landscape. The wanderer shows the majesty of a threshold, in the truest sense of the word—but it is also a threshold that is both paradoxically impassable and movable. The wanderer “architecturalizes” the landscape and tends to

reify it. Seen from the back—and thus robbed of his main expressive elements, he leads us into the landscape—or does he rather create a blind spot? Does he initiate or does he block something? At first, we oscillate between the two positions. The sublime emerges from a conflict that we must overcome—ultimately, though, it is the aspect of initiation that prevails. This dark and heavily clad “figure from behind,” planted firmly on a black rock and propped on an alpine stick, is juxtaposed with Hodler’s frontal figure of a naked young man who rises up from a flesh-colored stone with his arms crossed. This figure is not centered: it is that of a still fragile “new man” in a stage of becoming, as Susanne Stacher reads it. What have we lost, what have we gained? Answering this question could be seen as one of the objectives of this book.

A second diptych emerges between Friedrich’s wanderer and Lovegrove’s surprising Alpine Capsule, which is described in greater detail at the end of the book. Two types of a “new man” seem to appear at the beginning of the 20th and 21st century: the former appears before us in a mirrored effect just as created by nature: naked, completely stripped of all clothing, and without any tools; the latter, by contrast, is revealed completely equipped to master the world. If there is something sublime in both of these more recent examples, then it is certainly not the same as in the Romantic Age, which primarily aims at a viewer and not at an actor who is naively, or by contrast, completely armed. What is the relationship between Hodler’s regression and the architectural progress represented by the capsules in endless space? To answer this question could be seen as another objective of this book.

However, the objective that is expressed most clearly in this study seems to be the attempt to link six basic aspects of our relationship to the Alps by viewing them through the “prism of the sublime.” Susanne Stacher tries to reveal strange affinities between philosophical endeavors, the desire for crystallization or growth based on geometric formulas, the perfection of therapeutic devices, the development of educational agendas (of more or less fascist leaning), the revalorization of climbing and racing sports, or the structuring of hotel facilities. Sundry concrete descriptions, like that of the Fiat towers in Sauze d’Oulx, the Monte Verità life reform colony, or the sculpted rocks and crystalline domes of Bruno Taut, will please the reader—it is as if the entire history of man were being retraced at the crack of dawn when the exploitation of the Alps sets in.

The Sublime Passes: You Accept It and It Absconds

The sublime provokes the search and the invention of figures of itself, which can rise up to its heights. It thus appears structured like a risk: the risk of the horrific, the grotesque, the obscure, the rudimentary, etc. Without any doubt absolutely nothing except for the raised awareness that what we develop out of it can save it from being used for despicable ends. However, this does not keep it from constantly confronting us with new challenges.

The strength of Susanne Stacher’s book lies in the way it shows the sublime as a veritable principle that prompts completely different efforts which, however, can be diverted from their goal by an obsession with profit, megalomania, over-adaptation, coquetry, etc. When the Alps still make up almost a quarter of world tourism, isn’t it ultimately also because the call of the mountains—as muted and distorted as it may be—still resounds in us, in both a literal and figurative sense?

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- 1** Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau, complete, in 12 Books*, trans. W. Conyngham Mallory, privately printed for the Members of the Aldus Society (London, 1903; repr. The Floating Press, 2012) [=Rousseau (1903) 2012], bk. 4, chap. 1, 188. The original text was written in 1769 and first published posthumously in 1782.
- 2** Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Héloïse: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*, trans. Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché, vol. 6 of *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England), 65
- 3** Rousseau (1903) 2012, 133f.
- 4** Ibid., 135.
- 5** Etienne Pivert de Senancour, *Oberman* (1804), ed. Fabienne Bercegol (Paris: Flammarion, 2003), 95.
- 6** Longinus (1674), chap. 35. Translated by H. L. Havell as *On the Sublime* (London & New York: MacMillan & Co., 1890) [=Longinus (1674) 1890], 68.
- 7** Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, *Premières ascensions au mont Blanc* (Paris: François Maspero/La Découverte, 1979), 151f: “Je voyais cette chaîne primitive composée de feuillets [...]. Je vis ces matières s’arranger horizontalement par couches concentriques.”
- 8** Théophile Gautier, “Vue de Savoie et de Suisse,” *Le Moniteur universel* (June 16, 1862), in *Impressions de voyage en Suisse* (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1985), 83f.
- 9** See Sigmund Freud, *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse* (Vienna, 1916/1917; Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1969), chap. 18, and *Eine Schwierigkeit der Psychanalyse*, 1917.
- 10** Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1957), 2.
- 11** Rousseau (1903) 2012, 187.



John C. H.
The Liberty
Justice
The Liberty

1 The Emergence of the Alpine Sublime

*Qu'on se figure d'énormes prismes de glace, blancs, verts, violets, azurés [...].
On dirait une ville d'obélisques, de cippes, de colonnes et de pyramides, une cité
de temples et de sépulchres, un palais bâti par des fées pour des âmes.¹*

Victor Hugo, *Fragment d'un voyage aux Alpes*, 1825

Let the reader imagine enormous prisms of ice, white, green, violet, or blue [...].

*The scene suggests the idea of a town constructed of obelisks, columns, and pyramids;
a city of temples and sepulchres; a palace built by fairies for disembodied spirits.*

From the early 18th century onward, the Alps developed into an ideal location for the projection of philosophic, utopian, or visionary thoughts. The changes in the way of looking at the world triggered by the Galilean-Copernican revolution had also introduced a paradigm shift in regard to nature: from the "terrible" to the "sublime mountains." The sublimity of nature was the result of the questioning of geocentrism, the transition "from the closed world to the infinite universe," as Alexandre Koyré (1892–1964) formulated it; "since the human being has [...] lost his place in the world, or, more correctly perhaps, lost the very world in which he was living and about which he was thinking."² The sublime made it possible to conceptualize the new world that had emerged from the ruins of the ancient cosmos. We can infer from a quote by Théophile Gautier (1811–1872) that the mountains played a vital role: "Living in cities and on plains, we tend to forget that we are whirling through fathomless space, carried away by a planet that revolves around the sun at a prodigious speed."³ But this is not the case in the mountains, since "grand mountains help us understand that the earth is actually a heavenly body floating in the ether."

Toward the end of the 17th century, three categories of the sublime in nature evolved: the gigantic, the high, and the demi-urgic, since nature seemed to be provided with an enormous

energy, which its cosmic activity and mobility testifies to.

Through the positive revaluation of the mountains, the Alps moved into the forefront of aesthetics, accompanied by the emerging passion for scientific investigation and physical conquest that was later combined with the enjoyment of sports.

Wild nature—especially the one that impresses through infinitude, such as the vastness of the ocean or the grandness of the mountains—became an expression of an intensive feeling ranging between horror and fascination. These contrasting emotions evoked by the confrontation of the extremes of a borderline experience constitute the basis of sublimity, as can be gathered from the word's Latin origin *sub limen* (up to the threshold, to the threshold, in limbo). The term thus implies the confrontation with one's own threshold and the crossing of it. This was articulated over the course of centuries in all possible forms and is still current today.

Pseudo-Longinus: The Sublime Strikes Like a Bolt of Lightning

The philosophical term of the "sublime" originally came from ancient Greek rhetoric before it was used to denote a certain way of observing nature. The sublime was first theorized in

De sublimitate (Greek *Peri hypsous*), inscribed by Dionysius-Longinus, a hitherto unknown ancient Greek author and rhetorician, who went down in history as Pseudo-Longinus.⁴ He was fascinated by those discourses or poems that broke the rules of rhetoric and captivated the auditors: the sublime “gives Discourse a Noble Vigour, an Invincible Force that ravages the Souls of all that hear us.”⁵ It concerns a type of oratorical force that convulses beyond rational borders and evades the criteria of criticism because it can only refer to the conventional rules of aesthetics. The learned technique of the orator is not the determining factor here but rather his natural talent. Pseudo-Longinus was fascinated by the power and effect of such discourses, narratives, and poems that strike “like a bolt of lightning”: “For the effect of genius is not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves. Invariably what inspires wonder, with its power of amazing us, always prevails over what is merely convincing and pleasing. [...] A well-timed flash of sublimity shatters everything like a bolt of lightning and reveals the power of the speaker at a single stroke.”⁶ The sublime elicits extreme emotions alternating between horror and fascination, whereby emphasis is placed on the feeling of “suspension.” Pseudo-Longinus identified “five sources of sublimity”⁷ and, in addition to an elevation of the mind, pointed to pathos and enthusiasm as essential factors that lend the orator fire: “The second [source of sublimity] lies in pathos: what I mean is the enthusiasm and natural vehemence that touches and moves us. [...] It is this type of enthusiasm and noble fury that animates the discourses and lends them fire, as well as divine force.”⁸

He occasionally held the view that naturalness is an important aspect of the sublime (in reference to the use of the rhetorical figure of the hyperbaton). Art must step back behind nature: “For art is then perfect when it seems to be nature, and nature, again, is most effective when pervaded by the unseen presence of art.”⁹

Despite earlier translations of Pseudo-Longinus’s treatise, the version translated into French by Nicolas Boileau (1674) proved to be groundbreaking, possibly because he published *L’Art poétique* in the same year, making the properties of the sublime properly conceivable for the first time (in this guide to poetry, the sublime has a special significance, because, in the spirit of Longinus, it enthuses and emotionally moves the

reader).¹⁰ In his preface to Pseudo-Longinus’s treatise, he points to the fact that “under the term ‘sublime’ Longinus does not mean what rhetoricians call the ‘sublime style,’ but the unusual and the magnificent qualities of a discourse which ultimately make a work uplift, enthuse or move.”¹¹ Pseudo-Longinus’s notion of the sublime thus came into play toward the end of the 17th century, as did his concept of nature, which led above all in enlightened England to the positively connoted idea of a “wild nature.” In this new perspective, the Alps were to also assume a role—the way there, however, had to first be paved.

The run-up to the emergence of the natural sublime is first illustrated through mountain experiences by Francesco Petrarca and Conrad Gessner, among others.¹² In their descriptions, the interplay of body, mind, and soul is especially interesting, since the feeling of sublimity does not appear as a purely intellectual experience but in implicit connection with the body.

Francesco Petrarca: Ascending with the Body, Mind, and Soul, 1336

Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) wrote one of the first accounts containing thoughts about the experience of ascending a mountain. It has been passed down to us in the form of a letter. In it Petrarch described his ascent of Mont Ventoux in the year 1336 and his intellectual and physical experience to a friend. In order to get an overview, he had decided, together with his brother, to climb the steep, pyramidal mountain. Doubt overcame him on the difficult trails, which he sought to surmount by drawing on the metaphor of virtue and comparing the physical exertion with the spiritual one “on the stony path to virtue”: “What you have so often experienced today while climbing this mountain happens to you, you must know, and to many others who are making their way toward the blessed life. This is not easily understood by us men, because the motions of the body lie open while those of the mind are invisible and hidden. The life we call blessed is located on a high peak. ‘A narrow way,’ they say, leads up to it. Many hilltops intervene, and we must proceed ‘from virtue to virtue’ with exalted steps. On the highest summit is set the end of all, the goal toward which our pilgrimage is directed.”¹³ Petrarch’s comparison between the physical and spiritual path of suffering is interesting. Just as the body

suffers during the ascent, so too does the soul suffer on the path to virtue. After the arduous scaling of the mountain, he asks himself whether it would not be more difficult in the end to raise the body than the winged soul: "Would that I might achieve with my mind the journey for which I am longing day and night as I achieved with the feet of my body my journey today after overcoming all obstacles. And I wonder whether it ought not be much easier to accomplish what can be done by means of the agile and immortal mind without any local motion 'in the twinkling of the trembling eye' than what is to be performed in the succession of time by the service of the frail body that is doomed to die and under the heavy load of the limbs."¹⁴

He nevertheless did succeed in completing his strenuous climb, as his mind "leapt rapidly from corporeal to incorporeal matters." When he reached the peak, he was impressed: "At first I stood there almost benumbed, overwhelmed by a gale such as I had never felt before and by the unusually open and wide view. I looked around me: clouds were gathering below my feet."¹⁵ He subsequently described the clouds and the snow-covered mountain peaks in the distance, as well as the landscape on the Italian side, his home county, which he had left ten years earlier and was now yearning for. Absorbed in thought, he nostalgically recalled his eventful, happy past and wrote: "I admired every detail, now relishing earthly enjoyment, now lifting up my mind to higher spheres after the example of my body, and I found it fit to look into the volume of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*."¹⁶ The book was a gift of his friend for whom he (posthumously) penned this letter.¹⁷ Petrarch described how he coincidentally opened to the famous passage in which Augustine calls for introspection, instead of indulging in the admiration of nature: "And men go abroad to admire the heights of mountains, the mighty billows of the sea, the broad tides of rivers, the compass of the ocean, and the circuits of the stars, and pass themselves by."¹⁸ Petrarch referred this to his own experience: "I was full of surprise as if touched by lightning,"¹⁹ he wrote, and consequently did not let himself be seduced by the overwhelming view of the landscape: "I was completely satisfied with what I had seen of the mountain and turned my inner eye toward myself. From this hour nobody heard me say a word until we arrived at the bottom."²⁰

Reading Augustine had changed his perception of the mountain, which suddenly appeared small to him as he descended: each time he turned back to look up to the summit, it seemed to be hardly higher than a cubit. Afterwards he compared the smallness of the mountain to the height of human nature, "were the latter not plunged into the filth of earthly sordidness," as he quickly added. Augustine had addressed the seductive attraction of infinitely grand nature and called for moral-religious introspection—against *vana curiositas* (vain curiosity) and *concupiscentia oculorum* (visual lust).²¹ In his day, Petrarch was still willing to follow this, since natural sublimity first arose with the heliocentric view of the world.



Conrad Gessner: Four Seasons in One Day, 1541

Two hundred years later, in 1541, the humanist Conrad Gessner (1516–1565) from Zurich wrote in a letter about the "grand spectacle of the universe," from the wonders of which the human being "recognizes something higher, indeed the highest being itself."²² In a similar fashion he observed the spectacle of the mountains, which deeply moved him because he saw the work of the grand architect (*summus illius architectus*) in them. Together with Benedict Marti (ca. 1522–1574), he climbed Mount Frakmont (Pilatus) (1,920 meters), Mount Stockhorn (2,192 meters) and Mount Niesen (2,366 meters), whereupon, full of enthusiasm, he desired "each year to ascend a few mountains, or at least one, [...] when the vegetation is flourishing, partly to become acquainted with it, partly for the sake of bodily exercise and the delight of the Spirit. For how great the pleasure, how great, think you, are the joys of the Spirit, touched as is fit it should be in wondering at the mighty mass of the mountains while gazing upon their immensity and, as it were, in lifting one's head above the clouds? In some way or other, the mind is overturned by the dizzying height and is caught up in the contemplation of the Supreme Architect [*in summi illius architecti considerationem*]."²³

Gessner not only mentions "bodily exercise" but also the "delight of the Spirit" in an attempt to comprehend the world of the mountains, still to be explored, as a part of the cosmos. He emphasized that by studying nature, not only can the interplay of the elements be understood but the perception of the senses will be stimulated to the highest. He admired the "variety of nature which in the mountains is shown within a single peak," whereby "the pleasure of the mind joins into a harmonious pleasure of all the senses. Which other type of delight within the boundaries of nature [...] will you indeed



find that is truer, grander, and more complete than any whole number is?"²⁴ He regarded the mountains as part of a perfect order and compared them to the abstraction of "whole numbers." As a component of nature, however, the mountains would outdo numbers in terms of size and completeness, since unlike these, they touch the senses. His companion Marti wondered how anyone could possibly not love the mountains and stressed their timelessness and unusualness:

"If you yearn for something old, you have the monuments of ancient pedigree, precipices, cliffs, rocks suspended in the air, deep crevices and the astounding openings of mountains, hidden caves: hardened ice, also in the midst of the blazing sun. Enough! There is the theater of the Lord, enduring monuments—without distinction—apprehending the delights of marvelous wisdom and the extraordinary."²⁵ In their unusual enchantment, the mountains were an expression of divine wisdom for Marti and of the higher order of the "wise architect" for Gessner. When both ascended Mount Pilatus (2,132 meters), Gessner was impressed by the altitude levels at which the plants showed various developments, as they do in different seasons: "We can thus divide the high mountains of the Alps into four regions. At the top altitude, a constant winter, with snow and ice and cold winds, prevails.

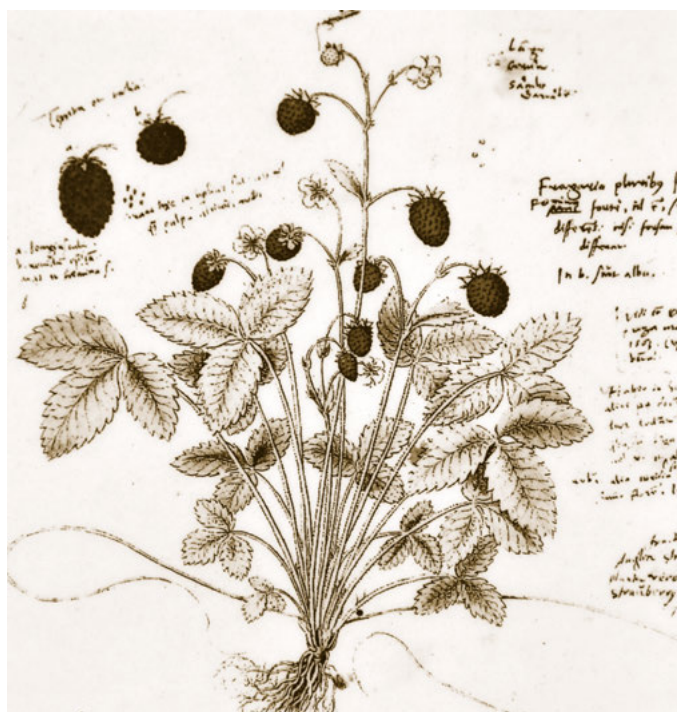
Then follows the spring region [...], then the autumnal location where three seasons occur, winter, spring, and something of autumn; and finally the lowest depth, where a brief summer is also found, therefore, all four seasons."²⁶

Gessner noted that while the cherries are ripe in the lower zone (as in spring), farther up it is the blackberries (as in autumn). This impressed him greatly as he was able to experience all four seasons at the same time at one location and on a single day. From this phenomenon he derived a cosmogony, a general theory about the functioning of the world, its building plan.

While the scientific study of nature was associated with the Neo-Platonic idea of God, Gessner had helped give positive connotations to the mountains in an emotional sense. Nevertheless, his experiences and research were not incorporated in the encyclopedia being compiled at that time in Basel, the *Cosmographia universalis*²⁷ by Sebastian Münster (1544), which included all of the geographical, botanical, mineralogical, and anthropological knowledge. In it, however, mountains were still described as a "topos horribilis."²⁸ Gessner's research found no consideration, because in his admiration for the "grand spectacle of the cosmos" and the "unreachable height of the mountains" he was ahead of his time. Not only did he lay the ground for all cosmogonies in which the mountains played a central role, he also paved the way to sublimity.

The Advent of the Natural Sublime

Two years after Gessner's letter, Nicholas Copernicus (1473–1543) publicized his seminal discovery in 1543 that the Earth is one planet among others and revolves with these around the sun. Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) realized in his work *Astronomia Nova*, which appeared from 1609 to 1618, that the movement of the planets around the sun occurs in elliptical orbits that follow mathematical rules. Through his observations of the supernova in the year 1604, he put an end to the belief in a stellar vault. In *De motu corporum in gyrum* (1684) and *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica* (1687), Isaac Newton (1643–1727) was able to mathematically prove the Keplerian Laws. He placed the laws of gravity prevailing on Earth into a generally valid formula that describes the mutual attraction of two bodies, which is also applicable to the



universe and the planets. The Earth now stood, as had been proven, in a universal correlation with an all-embracing, moving cosmos. This was considered as a well-ordered system by the Neo-Platonists, held in perpetual motion by the *Demiurgos*. The Christian concept of God transformed; God henceforth operated in nature and in mankind. As a result, the previous relation to wild nature, and thus to the mountains, changed: everything on Earth, even uncontrollable nature with the attendant storms, avalanches, and other natural catastrophes, was now regarded as a part of the moving cosmos.

With the conception of a "harmonic cosmos," a novel feeling for nature arose, one that went hand in hand with a certain type of religiosity. As soon as wild nature was viewed as a part of the cosmos kept in permanent motion by the demiurge, the grand architect, a passion could be felt for "the high mountains, the vast floods of the sea, the huge streams of the rivers, the circumference of the ocean and the revolutions of the stars,"²⁹ which Augustine had warned against. The introspection he demanded transitioned into self-reflection, which found an expression in the natural sublime. Since aesthetics were still inseparable from science, philosophy, ethics, and religion, the natural sublime was first able to emerge with the heliocentric view of the world.

"New Science" and the New Concept of Nature

Wild nature increasingly moved into the forefront of aesthetics, borne by the disciples of the enlightened English New Science Movement (1640–1700, also called New Philosophy), based on the doctrines of antiquity.³⁰ Although the first translation of Pseudo-Longinus's treatise by Francesco Robertello³¹ followed in 1554, in Gessner's time, in Basel, the sublime first made a breakthrough with the second, widely read translation by Nicolas Boileau in the year 1674, which smoothed the path from the horrible to the sublime mountains.

Pseudo-Longinus's idea of nature ("nature is the highest art") was taken up at the end of the 17th century in revolutionary England, where, linked to a notion of identity and freedom, it broke through in aesthetics as an antithesis to the geometric austerity of absolutist French gardens. The new concept of nature expressed itself in the English landscape garden, where the natural character replaced the perfectly domesticated one, and wild nature became the setting for new experiences and feelings, concomitant with an enlightened mindset.

In England, John Milton, who came from a Protestant family and was close to the Anglican Church at the beginning of his career, published *Paradise Lost* in 1667. In this epic poem he put the expulsion from Paradise in a positive light, since the self-determination of humanity would only have become possible thereby. (The Archangel Michael tells Adam of the possible redemption of humanity from original sin through Jesus and says to him consolingly when he is expelled from Paradise: Perhaps you will find "a paradise within thee, happier far."³²) By contrast, the cleric Thomas Burnet insisted on the doctrine of original sin and in 1681 depicted the mountains as God's punishment for the banishment from Paradise. For John Dennis, however, these were already the "wonders of the new World" in 1693. The transformation of the concept of nature also became apparent in the writings of the Neo-Platonist Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, who saw wild nature as an expression of God, as a part of the harmonic cosmos. Joseph Addison associated the Swiss mountains with a concept of freedom that symbolically stood for England's constitutional monarchy, which was established in 1688.

Excerpts from texts by these four English philosophers illustrate how, within the space of only fifty years, a negative conception of the Alps tainted with original sin transformed into a topos of liberty. It is interesting that the allegory of flight