

# Alpine Clichés and Critiques: Developments and Tensions in German-Language Literature

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*This article argues that the role of the Alps in German-language literature is embedded both in a socio-historical context and in the topoi or commonplaces that emerged from that context. Using examples drawn primarily from two very different Austrian authors of the interwar period—namely, Joseph Roth (1894–1939) and Ödön von Horváth (1901–1938)—as well as from their German-speaking predecessors and successors, the aim is to show the literary approaches used to undermine traditional topoi. Today, the Alps are the quintessential defining landscape for the Republic of Austria as well as for Austrian literature, yet they were demystified already in the literature of the interwar period. The themes and literary strategies of these literary works anticipate post-1945 literature, while showing surprising breadth in their approach to the Alps. Much of what is commonly understood today as a reaction to the use of the Alpine and of alpinism for Nazi propaganda belongs in fact to older traditions.*

Keywords: literature and alpinism / Austrian literature / national identity / cultural stereotypes / The Alps / Roth, Joseph / Horváth, Ödön von

## Introduction

It is particularly rewarding in German literary scholarship to study landscape and topography.<sup>1</sup> This area connects the German-speaking countries while also separating them with a mountain range that is difficult to pass: the Alps.

The importance of the Alps for the issues of identity, the self-percep-

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tion of nations and cultures, and the perception of others is shown in the frequent subsuming of German culture under Bavarian culture via such Alpine stereotypes as Lederhosen, wooden architecture, and the Gamsbart; in Austria, one sees the one-cent coin with its Alpine gentian (which evokes the Schilling), the famous picture of Empress Sisi with edelweiss in her long hair, and one hears the Austrian national anthem, *Land of Mountains, Land by the River* (*Land der Berge, Land am Strome*, 1947); the Swiss Psalm (*Schweizerpsalm*, 1840), meanwhile, with the verse about the splendid glow of the Alps places this landscape at the center of yet another instance of identity formation. Many other examples, including Switzerland's political and commercial symbolism—from the politicization of the Saint-Gotthard Massif to the iconic Matterhorn in advertisements for cheese, chocolate, beer, watches, and banks—could be listed.

Clearly, mountains make for excellent landmarks and symbols. And yet this enthusiasm for mountains seems to be a peculiarity of the German-speaking countries. France and Italy, where a significant part of the Alps rests, have never imbued the mountain range with any identity-creating significance. (Slovenia, though, is more interested in the Alps in identity terms—a fact that is evident, not least, in the depiction of Mount Triglav on the state's coat of arms.)

This semantization of the Alps and the notions and ideas accompanying the Alps are by no means static. There have been several—sometimes opposing—trends. Because literature has always played an important role in shaping and changing the image of the Alps, scrutinizing literary works proves more revealing when it comes to the Alps than it is for any other landscape.

## **Formation and Consolidation of Alpine Topoi and Clichés**

The transformation of the Alps from a terrifying landscape to a sublime one began as early as the sixteenth century, and the idea solidified in the eighteenth century. With the rise of tourism, the once dreaded *locus horribilis* slowly became a popular destination for travel and even recreation—a *locus amoenus*. For many, the Grand Tour, leading to the final destination of Italy, necessarily took travelers through the Alps. The Alps generally became a landscape of longing for middle-class and aristocratic audiences—and thus a travel destination of choice. By the end of the eighteenth century, well-heeled English, French, German, and Russian visitors had made the Alps and especially Switzerland

the ultimate travel destination in Europe. (In the eighteenth century, for example, the term “Switzerland” was found even in Bavaria’s “Franconian Switzerland” and Saxony’s “Saxon Switzerland.”) Broader social strata increasingly sought out the Alps for research and educational purposes and as a source of inspiration for artistic pursuits—among them Sophie von La Roche and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose *Letters from Switzerland* (*Briefe aus der Schweiz*, 1775) brought Weimar Classicism closer to the Alps.

This helped consolidate various images of the Alps, and submerged customs were staged as a living tradition. In 1805, only two alphorn players could be found for the Unspunnen Festival near Wilderswil; in 1808, only one player could be found—a stark indication of the degree to which this signal instrument had fallen into insignificance. But the tourism constructed around a supposedly authentic Alpine backdrop prompted a renaissance of the alphorn, so much so that a few decades later an ordinance had to be issued in the Bernese Oberland “against so-called ‘begging players’” (Risi 18).

Literature played an important role in shaping concepts and images of the Alpine. For example, *The Alps*, a didactic poem written in 1732 by the Bernese polymath and Enlightenment poet Albrecht von Haller, found a large audience throughout Europe and, as a kind of literary unveiling of the Alps, became a key text of the eighteenth century. Anticipating many of the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was to cross the Alps himself on foot, von Haller’s poem praises the happiness of the people in the mountains, the simple, pristine life, the beauty and grandeur of the landscape, and the community living under shared arduous conditions, a community whose moral integrity contrasted with that of the townspeople, who were ruled by vanity, envy, vice, abundance, and worries. The poem was an enormous success. Despite the fact that it was obviously not in tune with the reality of life among the Alpine population, *The Alps* went through thirty editions and numerous translations during von Haller’s lifetime alone.

Such rosy perceptions of the Alps soon became a topos. In addition to von Haller’s *The Alps*, Salomon Geßner’s once-heralded *Idylls* (*Idyllen*, 1756) celebrated a Golden Age of undisturbed harmony in Switzerland. Horace-Bénédict de Saussure’s 1799 book *Voyage dans les Alpes* (*Voyage in the Alps*) mingled philosophical contemplations with scientific observations, finding avid reception even in German-speaking lands. The Zurich natural scientist and medical doctor Johann Jakob Scheuchzer also brought the Alps to a broad reading public through his research excursion reports. The mountainous terra incognita thus

became a *terra poetica* (see Raymond 60). Nature offered an escapist retreat from the city, and even scientific studies perpetuated such topoi. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the mountains were to play a central role in the aesthetic discourse about the sublime: sublime nature was mostly associated with highlands, in glaciers, firm and rocky cliffs, which only the rationally and morally acute subject was in a position to recognize as beautiful.

These and similar images of the Alps remain formative to this day. In the context of Romanticism and the Romantics' enthusiasm for nature, an extremely positive aestheticization of the mountains anchored itself in the minds of educated citizens and aristocrats. The beauty of the Alps was enthusiastically celebrated in weekly magazines, travelogues, and novels alike.

### **The Society and Politics Inscribed in the Alps**

The Alps became charged with political, religious, and social significance. Increasingly, the Romantics rediscovered the mythical quality of the mountains that once served as the seat of weather-determining gods and a place of both havoc and salvation. In Hartmut Böhme's words, "[m]ountains lead to transcendence, they are—even visually—a medium of ascent, surpassing, and transgression" (Böhme 48).

Ludwig Tieck imbued his novella *Rune Mountain* (*Der Runenberg*, 1802) with the Romantic natural philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. If the Romantic tale allows for the ambivalence of a demonically destructive and a truly divine view of the Alps, it is clear that the Alps are seen as the gateway to the primal forces of nature. The same applies to Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802). Although the hero, who is on his way to Augsburg to fulfil his vocation as a poet, does not reach the Alps, he heartily adopts the teachings of a hermit living inside the mountain. And while mountains exert a great fascination on the hermit, he never succumbs to greed for the wealth and riches that lay within; he prefers the values of conviviality, light, and air. Joseph von Eichendorff, meanwhile, had his Romantic journey-men wander through the Alps, and Friedrich Hölderlin drew a heroic picture evoking traces of the Swiss Confederates and freedom fighters.

Around the same time, Friedrich Schiller created his last great drama, *Wilhelm Tell* (1804), celebrating the struggle of the Swiss for freedom in their Alpine setting. The mountains are thoroughly inscribed into the play's story and history: it is only in this heroic landscape that the fugi-

tive Melchthal can secretly assemble fighters, the captive Tell can jump from a boat onto a rocky ledge, and the nefarious Gessler must pass through the famous “deep defile” or “hohle Gasse” (Schiller, “Wilhelm Tell” [*Complete Works*] 631; “Wilhelm Tell” [*Sämtliche Werke*] 123). Here, the enthusiasm for the Swiss mountains is interwoven with a thirst for freedom and republicanism. To his son who wants to leave the land of threatening avalanches, glaciers, and mountain peaks, Tell explains that it is better for these threats to lurk behind one’s back than evil men (see Schiller, “Wilhelm Tell” [*Complete Works*] 620; “Wilhelm Tell” [*Sämtliche Werke*] 86).

Later, Bettina von Arnim celebrated not only the landscape but also the struggles of the Tyroleans against Napoleon—and exaggerated this struggle into an expression of the Alpine dwellers’ general love of freedom. To this day, the inhabitants of Alpine lands such as Switzerland and Tyrol are associated with independence and resolute resilience.

In works such as *Rock Crystal* (*Bergkristall*, 1845), Adalbert Stifter presented the sublime, beautiful, and daunting nature of the mountains, while granting much laudatory space to the religious community which copes communally with dangers and is capable of coming together to save two endangered children. The local mountain is the pride of the village and an early site of regional tourism. Below it lies a simple community that lives in solidarity and in accordance with the cyclical Christian calendar. In terms of topoi, this association is married to that of a freedom-loving society.

In addition to the aforementioned positions, more conservative stances on the Alps—especially in Switzerland—have manifested and entrenched themselves. There, the Alps developed into an expansive national symbol, with the Gotthard Military Fortress becoming a primary symbol. Literature was once again at the forefront of the construction of myths. Focusing on the writings of Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, Franz Loquai argues that it is no longer a matter only of “mountain romance, but . . . of downright ‘Alpine theology’” where “the mountain landscape becomes an experience of faith,” with the Alps functioning as “the cathedral of nature.” (Loquai 462) This attitude by no means disappeared in Switzerland in the twentieth century; it was perpetuated by, among others, Leonhard Ragaz and Meinrad Inglin, with the mountain world being positioned not only as a counter-world to the world of modernity but also as a metaphysically charged starting point for a cultural renewal in society as a whole (see Wiegmann-Schubert).

The Alps became a literary point of reference and have remained so. Myths of mountains and mountaineering have taken many forms. In

Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (*Zauberberg*, 1924), a cocoon-like, sickly world is depicted at high altitude. What was originally planned as a satirical counterpart to the tragic novella *Death in Venice* (*Der Tod in Venedig*, 1911) became one of the great epochal testaments of the interwar period, and Mann worked on his novel for ten years. Even if fellow writers such as Bertolt Brecht criticized Mann's having spent hundreds of pages on two pallid young men in a Swiss sanatorium, the book became one of the great sales successes of the interwar period despite the high demands it places on the reader. No other novel of the time could compare with it. The reading public enjoyed the multitude of evocations and allusions, recognizing the familiar ones, including the thematization of stasis and transience against a mountain backdrop. The mountain setting proved a perfect canvas for a playful portrayal of myths—note the many manifestations of the number 7 and references to the Underworld—not least because these environs seemed isolated from contemporary events, while simultaneously offering an apt panoramic view of European society.

### **The Tendency toward Kitsch and the Trivial**

Enlightenment aestheticization of the Alps also resulted in an often exaggerated romanticization of the landscape. As early as the nineteenth century, the Alps were increasingly viewed as “a pre-civilizational, wildly Romantic, melancholic, enjoyable, primal poetic wonderland” (Loquai 443). Such an image not only suited the emerging tourism industry, it was also adopted by locals and infused the collective self-image.

Literary trivializations of this staging can be found early on as well, from Heinrich Clauren's *Mimili* (1815–1816) to Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1880), Wilhelmine von Hillern's *The Vulture-Maiden* (*Die Geier-Wally*, 1881), and Jakob Christoph Heer's *The King of Bernina* (*Der König der Bernina*, 1900). Overall, in this type of light fiction, the homeland and with it the community purportedly made up of mountain dwellers unspoiled by modern civilization continues to evoke and steer the topos of the Alps in a problematic direction. “Writing about mountains is a tightrope walk; there is always a risk of falling into pathos and kitsch,” wrote Emil Zopfi as recently as 2009 (Zopfi 18).

## **Alpinism: Self-Awareness and Male Heroism**

Another important literary approach went hand in hand with the emergence of mountaineering or alpinism. In addition to luring guests who came to stare flabbergasted up from the valleys, the Alps have also long attracted mountaineers from all over the world. They function, furthermore, as a kind of meeting place at high altitude, and the term alpinism has become internationally recognized. The fact that alpinism, especially hiking in the mountains, can take on symbolic meaning and is considered an intellectual experience is already shown in the travelogue of the poet Francesco Petrarca, dated 1336, about his ascent of Mont Ventoux in Provence, which serves as an allegorical representation of a life journey. Conquering a mountain—in contrast to dealing with the bland mediocrity of the city—has for centuries been a symbol of solitude, ingenuity, perspective, perspicuity, and farsightedness.

Friedrich Nietzsche has also reflected on wandering in the mountains, as one reads in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “I am a wanderer and a mountain-climber,’ he said to his heart. ‘I do not love the plains, and it seems that I cannot sit still for long. And now whatever may come to me yet as fate and experience—a wandering will be in it and a climbing of mountains.” (Nietzsche 131) Here, wandering and climbing become symbols for the enrichment of life, for clarity of thought and action, while also serving as expressions of an ascetic attitude and a means of escaping from everyday life.

Mountains, moreover, are often seen as nature pitted against the mountaineering individual. Individual heroism comes into its own on the mountain, though, tellingly, these individuals are rarely mountain dwellers. Alpinism begins to emerge in mid-nineteenth century as a sport that also serves as a platform for liminal experiences. Predominantly English climbers—accompanied by local guides—first ascended Mont Blanc, and later the peaks in German-speaking regions of the Alps. A broad public followed the first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865, when only two of the six participants made it back alive. Literature, too, has contributed to the image of the mountaineer as a modern hero. Moreover, from Edward Whymper to Reinhold Messner, well-read alpinists have written exciting reports themselves. As Zopfi quips, “Whoever climbed a mountain for the first time during the research phase of alpinism in the first half of the nineteenth century wrote a book. Even if he didn’t quite reach the summit...” (Zopfi 15).

After the Alpine peaks had become largely accessible, within a few decades those mountaineers who no longer relied on guides gained



interpretative dominance over alpinism. The idea prevailed that the dangers of the high mountains both make tangible and bolster friendships, resulting in a reconfiguring of Alpine heroic masculinity. This gave rise to bonds of masculinity, which laid the foundation for the heroization of mountaineers in World War I and later invited close links to the Nazi ideology (see Backhaus).

After 1850, soon-to-be influential Alpine clubs were founded, among them, the British Alpine Club in 1857, the Austrian Alpenverein in 1862, the Swiss Alpen-Club and the Club Alpino Italiano in 1863, the German Alpenverein in 1869, and the Club Alpin Français in 1874; the first Ladies' Alpine Club was not established until 1907. "Mountaineering was and is not a gender-neutral cultural practice," writes Dagmar Günther (Günther 155). Indeed, in Alpine discourses, the mountain world is still often portrayed as a female nature that is conquered by men.

The symbolic world of the mountains has helped spin various topoi into patriotic ideals. The summit represented higher goals and motives for a united nation. It is therefore hardly surprising that during World War I, when the most terrible mountain war of all time was waged, mountaineers were portrayed as heroic defenders of the homeland.

Literature retained its essential role here, and it has proven to be dangerous. Christian Luckscheiter uses the example of the biography of Hans Ertl, the war correspondent and cameraman for Leni Riefenstahl and Erwin Rommel, to illustrate the causes of his enthusiasm for the mountains (see Luckscheiter). The military imagery and the sacralization and sexualization of the Alps in these works call for loyalty to men who are ideologically close to Nazism.

The concrete politicization of mountaineering reached many spheres, including the expeditions to Nanga Parbat, the so-called mountain of destiny for Germans after the failed expedition led by Willy Merkl (see Höbusch). In the 1930s, German and Austrian mountaineers carried flags adorned with the swastika to various peaks, including the summit of the Eiger via its north face in 1938. These extraordinary Alpine climbs were exploited for propaganda purposes in the years leading up to the war. Under National Socialism, mountain literature and mountain films flourished in works by Arnold Fanck and Leni Riefenstahl, among others, and this association brought the genre into further disrepute. Siegfried Kracauer was right to notice pro-fascist tendencies early on. Alpine literature, especially the trivial Heimatroman or homeland novel, provided the film industry with ready-made images and narratives, with the mountaineering writer and actor Luis Trenker acting as



the driving force behind this. That said, during World War I, the view of the mountains lost its innocence as terrible mountain warfare raged in the Dolomites and along the Soča or Isonzo River.

## **The Critical View in the Twentieth Century**

In the twentieth century, especially in works by leading Austrian writers, a critical view of the Alps came to predominate. Everything, from the stereotyping of society to alpinism, was questioned—but not defeated.

The mythologization, romanticization, trivialization, and heroization of the Alpine, of the Alps, and of alpinists had been parodied or ironized before, but only occasionally (e.g., by Heinrich Heine, Ferdinand Raimund, and Johann Nepomuk Nestroy). However, it was not until such currents as Viennese modernism that Alpine topoi were thoroughly scrutinized. Arthur Schnitzler himself had a lifelong fascination with the mountains and with the great Austrian mountaineers of his time, and he even completed a number of demanding tours. During his medical studies he became close friends with the avid climber Emil Friedmann and his brothers.

Some of Schnitzler's Alpine-loving friends have fictional counterpoints in his works, especially in the 1911 tragi-comedy *The Distant Land* (translated as *Undiscovered Country* in Tom Stoppard's adaptation), which premiered simultaneously in eleven cities and with which the author—in contrast to his other works—stated that he was actually satisfied. The third act takes place in one of the monarchy's most beautiful mountain landscapes, the Rosengarten group in South Tyrol. Doctor Franz Mauer adores the young Erna Wahl, who in turn is in love with the married industrialist Friedrich Hofreiter. The battle between two men over a woman in a mountain setting is of course a commonplace, but the lack of heroism is not. In Schnitzler's only tragi-comedy there is absolutely nothing of the supposed grandeur of the mountains; here, too, society remains caught up in its usual intrigues and interests (see Haase). There is no moral autonomy among Alpine dwellers, and no ascent can offer a superior perspective on life.

In what follows, examples from two very different Austrian authors from the interwar period—Joseph Roth and Ödön von Horváth—will be used to show how their literary approaches undermined traditional topoi.

## Joseph Roth and the Alps as a National Refuge, an Obstacle, and a Place Removed from Culture

In the works of Joseph Roth, who liked to reside in hotels far away from the Alps, the mountain range is never allotted a positive role. On the contrary, the Alps always function as a birthplace of evil or as an obstacle on the way to the sunny and cultivated south. The traditional literary topoi are taken up only to be subverted and undermined. For this seminal Austrian author, the Alps become a hostile breeding ground of nationalism. He turns the tables on the old Austrian habit of blaming Slavic populations' statehood appetites for the fall of the monarchy. He places the blame mainly on the German-speaking Austrians—represented by inhabitants of the Alps.

In the novel *The Emperor's Tomb* (*Die Kapuzinergruft*, 1938), Roth's "mouthpiece" (Pfabigan 16) Chojnicki inveighs against the Alpine dwellers as follows:

You didn't want to understand that those fatheads from the Alps and the Sudeten Germans, those cretinous Nibelungen, had insulted and damaged our two nations for so long that they actually began to hate and betray our Monarchy. (Ihr habt nicht sehen wollen, dass diese Alpentrottel und die Sudetenböhmern, diese kretinischen Nibelungen, unsere Nationalitäten so lange beleidigt und geschändet haben, bis sie anfangen, die Monarchie zu hassen und zu verraten.) (Roth, *The Emperor's* 117; *Werke* 315, VI)<sup>2</sup>

For Roth, the German-speaking inhabitants of the Alps are not only responsible for the fall of the old regime, they also strive for the end of the First Republic and for the Anschluss with Germany. Roth himself came to have a positive stance towards the monarchy, not least because of the threat posed by National Socialism. According to Chojnicki, it is through and due to this German national mindset that the inhabitants of the Alps hope to find their homeland in Germany; the idea of an independent nationality in Austrofascism is therefore stillborn. Chojnicki quotes his brother Joseph: "On the mountain top dwells stupidity. (Auf den Bergen wohnt die Dummheit.)" (Roth, *The Emperor's* 146; *Werke* 337, VI) And in a feuilleton piece titled "Requiem Mass" ("Totenmesse," 1938), Roth rails against the "geographically conditioned and rarely perceptible goitre (geographisch bedingten, selten sichtbarem Kropf Behafteten)" and "the Alpine

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<sup>2</sup> Here and throughout, Arabic and Roman numerals respectively refer to page numbers and volumes in Roth, *Werke*.

halfwits on the right (rechten alpinen Trottel)” (“Requiem” 35; 797, III). His aggressive manner anticipates the hate-fueled tirades of a Thomas Bernhard.

Since Roth is interpreted or appropriated as a central figure of Austrian literature, it is fascinating how little he thought of the country in its post-1918 form. Roth’s Austria is the only multicultural state in Central Europe. Not even an emperor, to whom Roth was later committed, could guarantee the continued existence of the Habsburg state model in what was now a small Alpine state. In 1934, Roth wrote to the composer Ernst Krenek, who was of similar mind: “I know for sure that the Emperor of Austria, if he were to remain only Emperor of the Alpine imbeciles, wouldn’t be the Emperor we have in mind. (Gewiß weiß ich, daß der Kaiser von Österreich, bliebe er nur der Kaiser der Alpentrottel, nicht der Kaiser wäre, den wir meinen.)” (qtd. in Bronsen 390) As the protagonist Chojnicki so clearly puts it in *The Emperor’s Tomb*, “Austria is not to be found in the Alps, where you can find edelweiss, chamois and gentians but never a trace of the double eagle. (Österreich ist nicht in den Alpen zu finden, Gensen gibt es dort und Edelweiß und Enzian, aber kaum eine Ahnung von einem Doppeladler.)” (Roth, *The Emperor’s* 17; *Werke* 234–235, VI)

A disinclination for the mountains manifests itself also in Roth’s acerbic comments on hiking and climbing. Even in his early journalism he clearly sees alpinism as the essence of stupidity. He leads off one piece thus: “To each his own. Some look for salvation through telepathy and pretend to be asleep or to solve puzzles; others meet to play cards and to distract themselves in that way; yet others again climb mountains in order to fall off. (Man muss den Leuten ihr Vergnügen lassen: Die einen suchen in der Telepathie ihr Heil und spielen Einschlafen oder Rätselraten; die anderen versammeln sich beim Kartenspiel, um sich ebendasselbst zu zerstreuen; die dritten steigen auf die Berge, um abzustürzen.)” (Roth, *Werke* 78, I)

In the novel *Zipper and His Father* (*Zipper und sein Vater*, 1928), the sport becomes a symbol of fruitless, foolish ambition (see Roth, *Zipper* 158; *Werke* 538, IV). And in the novel *Flight without End* (*Die Flucht ohne Ende*, 1927), Franz Tunda strolls through a mid-sized German town, assembling irony-filled impressions: “A group of cyclists sped by ringing their bells. Men with dignified bearing and childish clothing, carrying rucksacks, hiked off to the mountains. (Eine Gruppe hurtiger Radfahrer glitt klingelnd einher. Würdig, mit Rucksäcken, wanderten kindlich gekleidete Männer in die Berge.)” (Roth, *Flight* 76; *Werke* 445, IV)

The despised glamorous world of the stars is also tellingly depicted as they relax in the mountains. The calculating Erna Zipper in *Zipper and His Father* makes use of the highly touted backdrop, complete with Alpine attire. Roth exposes the role of the Alps in the media as an environment that can no longer represent a flat and mendacious down-to-earth attitude and that testifies to the cultural emptiness of the performers and consumers.

The Alps provide the backdrop for seedy events throughout the German-speaking world. In Berlin, Roth encounters a bock beer festival with an Alpine theme, at which patriotic verses are sung. The columnist Roth describes a picture that today could be placed somewhere between a Volksfest and the Musikantenstadl:

They build Alps out of cardboard in the hall, with narrow passes, gorges, peaks, and artificial snow. A few try to climb the mountains. Born in the lowland, they are inexperienced. They are inclined to mistake plains for mountain ranges. If one of them manages to climb to the top of a paper-snow covered peak, he falls down the other side, in an avalanche of flesh and bock beer. (Man baut nämlich Alpen aus Pappe in den Saal, mit Engpässen, Schluchten, Zacken und künstlichem Schnee. Manche bemühen sich, die Berge zu ersteigen. Es sind Tieflandgeborene und Ungeübte. Sie sind ohnehin schon geneigt, Ebenen für Gebirgsketten zu halten. Gelingt es einem, eine papierschneebedeckte Spitze zu erklimmen, so stürzt er auf der andern Seite herunter, eine Lawine aus Fleisch und Bockbier.) (Roth, *Werke* 343, II)

Transferred to an urban stage, the Alpine becomes a backdrop for barbaric behavior. For example, Cuneus, a pseudonym of the journalist Roth, writes the following about some evening entertainment in Saarbrücken:

I go into a restaurant where some sort of Bavarians or Tyrolians make music dressed in shirt sleeves, Yahoo, Woohoo, Yookhaydeedelday! (Ich gelange in ein Restaurant, in dem eine Art von Bayern oder Tirolern Musik macht, in Hemdsärmeln, Juchhei, Huchho, Juchheidideldei!) (Roth, *Werke* 785, II)

The patrons in shirtsleeves may be yodeling away, but the yodeling remains drab in these cultureless environs so far away from mountains. The Alpine becomes a generic metaphor for the staged aspect of such festivities—it can even be exported into realms devoid of culture:

This city is growing rapidly. That cabaret, that Tyrolean is a reminiscence. This floor on which we are now yodeling is hollow. (Diese Stadt wächst rapide. Jenes Kabarett und jene Tiroler sind ihre Reminiszenzen. Dieser Boden, auf dem wir jetzt jodeln, ist hohl.) (786, II)

Roth's use of the adjective "hollow" is ambiguous: on the one hand, coal has been dug in Saarbrücken for 500 years, but above all Roth comes across a hollow and empty culture.

### **Identification of the Idyllic Backdrop and Submission to Nature in Ödön von Horváth**

Another well-known author of the interwar and exile period who demystified the common Alpine topoi through his texts is Ödön von Horváth. Although Horváth, in contrast to Roth, often climbed and hiked in the mountains, he was equally critical of idyllic portrayals of the Alps. He viewed the illusions of the hale and hearty Alpine world as so many fantasies of townspeople who have grown tired of civilization (see Vejvar).

Since 1924, the family of this genuinely Austro-Hungarian and Central European writer (born near Rijeka and raised in Belgrade, Bratislava, Munich, Vienna, and Budapest) had, in addition to a residence in Munich, a summer residence in Murnau am Staffelsee in Upper Bavaria. Horváth remained connected to his Bavarian abode over the years and spent a considerable part of the year there even after his theatrical success in Berlin. It was from Murnau that he departed for many climbing tours in the nearby Wetterstein mountains. The popular tourist destination often offered him raw material for his literary texts. Due to his many allusions to the area, researchers have even referred to "Murnau as a model" (Tworek-Müller 38). According to Horváth biographer Dieter Hildebrandt, "[i]n Berlin he got the 'evil eye', in Bavaria the opportunity to apply it to the ideal world" (Hildebrandt 63). Though this assertion is somewhat off the mark (see Vejvar 205), there is no doubt that Horváth saw the Alpine region as an illuminating environment for his "Volksstücke" or popular plays about ordinary characters and for his prose works. Even the sports tales ("Sportmärchen," 1924) that launched his literary career in the Munich satirical magazine *Simplicissimus* deal, in part sarcastically, with hiking and climbing.

In Horváth's first "Volksstück," the 1929 piece *Die Bergbahn* (*The Mountain Railway*)—which was also his first stage success and the reason for his generous general contract with the Ullstein publishing group—the mountain is a protagonist of sorts. A conflict is shown between workers, the strength of capital represented by a supervisory board, and the engineer during the construction of a mountain railway high up in the mountains.

Class struggle in the high Alpine environment imports an unfamiliar tone to the genre tradition of the “Volksstück”—as well as to the representation of the Alps. The supervisor is the only character that views his surroundings with rose-colored glasses. While the workers are toiling on the ridge, he sits in front of the hut, eats pork chops and vegetables, and ruminates:

Good morning! Listen, comfort looks different than this. My poor knees. It's terrible! Sports everywhere. But believe me: in spite of my best efforts, I envy even our lowliest of workers. Always in glorious mountain air, in the midst of immense nature! (Na guten Morgen! Hören Sie, bequem ist anders. Meine armen Knie. Nein, schrecklich! Überall Sport. Aber, glauben Sie mir: trotz aller Anstrengung beneide ich selbst unseren letzten Arbeiter. Immer in herrlicher Höhenluft, inmitten gewaltiger Natur!) (Horváth, “Die Bergbahn” 113–114)

What matters most to him is dominating and subduing nature in order to create a resort.

A sentimental song about the beauty of the Alps in the barracks becomes a foreign body and is shown to be fraudulent in the course of the play. In the showdown between worker and engineer on the mountain, the Alpine panorama is spectacularly staged and a snow storm is used as a dramaturgical device.

The very construction of the mountain railway refers to contemporary discourses of tourism and nationalism. Cable railways were the most visible metaphor for Alpine progress (see Tschofen 208), which assumed an ambivalent position between tourist-driven economic hopes for the future, technology-based domestication of unspoiled nature, and an ideology of the homeland. A worker, speaking in dialect, offers this trenchant perspective:

You read everywhere about the progress of mankind and the people heap praise on the engineers, like they're prize bulls, the directors bring the bags of cash to the bank, and tourism flourishes for the farmer. Every little screw becomes a “marvel of technology,” every cesspool becomes a “healing spring.” But if somebody sacrifices his life up for this, the blood will be sopped up! (Da liest überall vom Fortschritt der Menschheit und die Leut bekränzn an Ingeieur, wie an Preisstier, die Direkter sperrn die Geldsäck in d’Kass und dem Bauer blüht der Fremdenverkehr. A jede Schraubn wird zum “Wunder der Technik”, a jede Odlgrubn zur “Heilquelle”, “Aber, daß aner sei Lebn hergebn hat, des Blut werd ausradiert!”) (Horváth, “Die Bergbahn” 102)

The concerns with blood are even worse than those mentioned by the worker. Rather than being hidden away or immediately cleaned up,

blood is raised to an indication of quality, providing evidence of the technical difficulty of the undertaking. The deaths in cable railways, tunnels, and dams are meticulously listed, and not entirely without pride. The cableway that serves up tourist offerings for the rich, the enthusiasm for technology which proves harmful to nature, class conflict, and nationalism combine to create a visibly monstrous Alpine panorama.

Far from merely inviting a whimsical satirical scene, the Alpine world triggers a particular discourse that imbues the play as a whole. Horváth, like Roth, unmasks the superficiality of the scenery; the Alps become a facade, a paltry stage that is propped up by media images.

In his prose works, too, Horváth subverts the positions of tourism and politics and does not associate the Alps with recovery or healing. On the contrary. The “fairy tale of Fräulein Pollinger,” told by the narrator in *The Eternal Philistine*, begins with the fairy tale phrase “Once upon a time.” Once employed as an office girl in a rental car company, Anna Pollinger later turns to prostitution. A partner named Fritz immediately takes her on a strenuous mountain route to the Wasserkar Spitze—on All Saints’ Day, no less—so that the physical exertion of the descent might stave off pregnancy (Horváth, *Eternal Philistine* 49; *Der ewige Spießler* 790)

Hiking in the mountains for the purpose of recreation is thus linked to the ending of a life. The gender relationship exposed in the narrative foreground to the story, the access to the female body in terms of goods, and the dependence of the “Fräuleins” on the men are literally taken to great heights.

The Alpine backdrop is laid bare in Horváth. It serves as a facade behind which one can peek. It is not a transposable place of action. A perfect mountain world is only superficially perfect, appearing only as an idea that has always been mediated. Horváth’s texts are therefore not texts about the Alps but texts about how the Alps are spoken about.

### **Adoption of the Traditional Strands after 1945**

As we have seen, the Alps have been completely demythologized in the literature of the interwar period thanks to writers such as Roth and Horváth. The themes and literary strategies mentioned above show that a critical view of the Alps anticipates the literature published after 1945—and does so with surprising breadth. Much of what is understood as a reaction to the use of the Alpine and alpinism for Nazi propaganda has older traditions. Austrian authors such as Ernst Jandl,



Gerhard Roth, Thomas Bernhard, Werner Kofler, Felix Mitterer, Elfriede Jelinek, Christoph Ransmayr, and Josef Winkler have continued these lines of thought and critique from 1945 to the present. This approach is accompanied by the new construction of and reflections on a critical and positive concept of the homeland.

The Second Republic's need for identification reintroduced some of the familiar Alpine metaphors, and not only in Paula von Preradović's lyrics for the Austrian national anthem. Traditional strands of the Alpine topoi were thus used on both the conservative and the critical side.

We find the national and National Socialist attitude of the Alpine population—with a semantically charged space—in many more recent authors. Political discourses on war, National Socialism, and the Holocaust are interwoven with the criticism of the exploitation of the Alpine landscape and culture for tourist purposes—the Anschluss by tourism being one of the tropes. In contemporary Austrian literature in particular, a demythologization is being promoted, and the Alps are becoming the locus of the displaced, of catastrophes, and of the dead—they represent a continuation of fascism. The landscape is, to use the vocabulary introduced by Martin Pollack, perceived as contaminated and linked to the Nazi era (see Pollack). Already in Hans Lebert's 1971 novel *Der Feuerkreis* (*The Fire Circle*) we hear the following during an interrogation: "Dead! Dead! Dead! Dead everywhere! ... From the silence I hear their roaring rising like mountains! Our mountains are mountains of the dead!! Do you understand?! Those winter sports enthusiasts are sliding down mountains of corpses!! (Tote! Tote! Tote! Überall Tote! ... Aus der Stille hör ich ihr Gebrüll wie ein Gebirge wachsen! Unsere Berge sind Berge von Toten!! Verstehst?! Die Wintersportler rutschen von Leichenbergen herunter!!)" (238) In her 1995 novel *Die Kinder der Toten* (*The Children of the Dead*), Jelinek writes about a "rug made of human pulp (Teppich aus Humanmus)" (191) and "body meadows (Körperwiese)" (111). The sexualization of the Alps and of alpinism play a major role in Jelinek's writings.

We also find Roth-like views of the Alps as an obstacle. The Swiss Punks, for example, disturbed the tranquility of Zurich in the early 1980s with their Dada-like demand: "Down with the Alps—a clear view of the Mediterranean!" This youth movement took aim at a central Swiss mark of identification: the mountains. The demand was arguably neither mere nonsense nor a conscious reference to Roth, but an expression of the desire to make the Swiss open their eyes to that which lies beyond the Alpine border.

Roth's negative perspective on the narrowly defined Alpine Republic, which for him stands in contrast to the bygone, open, multicultural Danube Monarchy, can be found in different guises, for example, in the Nobel Prize winner Peter Handke, who reflected on his Carinthian perspective in an interview:

Sitting on a terrace in Völkermarkt, or Velikovec, when you look into the Jauntal valley and see the River Drava, and beyond that the Karavanke mountains, and behind them the even higher mountains, the Kamnik-Savinja Alps, with Mount Grintovec, looking incredibly beautiful in the distance—that wasn't Slovenia for me, but the start of the great country of Yugoslavia. And suddenly I am struck by the thought that it's so disappointing that it's only Slovenia now [...]. And now the Slovenians make themselves out to be Alpine dwellers [...]. Slovenia isn't an Alpine republic. Suddenly they want to become as stupid as the Austrians with their idiotic Alpine republic. (Handke 80–81)

### **From Remoteness to a Meeting Place and a Fragile Ecosystem**

In addition to the ongoing distancing from the traditional topoi and the unmasking of the Alpine idyll, a preoccupation with the fragile ecology of the region has begun to play a prominent role in contemporary literary thematizations of the Alps. The many negative consequences of mass tourism are well known. In addition to transit transport and the massive exploitation of hydropower, mass tourism is tearing apart the culturally constructed facade of the Alpine idyll and contributing to the image of an unstable, endangered ecosystem. The mountain landscape, once difficult to access, has become a space that can be visited and shaped by the masses. Indeed, streams of tourists have followed in the footsteps of the pioneers. Already after World War I, Austria established Alpine skiing as an identity-forming popular sport boasting school ski courses and a dense network of ski homes, huts, and youth hostels—an undertaking that went so far that prices of the lifts and accommodation became the subject of public debate.

Other forms of alpinism have in the meantime combined with an interest in health, fitness, and nature, culminating in trendy sports such as paragliding, mountain biking, and snowboarding. The Alps are becoming a sports arena.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, more and more attention was paid to ecology and environmental protection. The mountains serve as a location for the early literature of the anthropocene, including Marlen Haushofer's 1963 dystopian novel *The Wall* (*Die Wand*), a

story about a woman who is isolated while being surrounded by nature, as she begins a new life in an Alpine hunting lodge together with a dog, a cow, and a cat. The novel is critical of civilization as it approaches nature as the object of care and concern rather than exploitation. The book's continued popularity is evident not least in the 2012 film adaptation by Julian Pölsler.

In his 1979 novella *Man in the Holocene* (*Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*), Max Frisch uses landscape to accelerate desubjectivation, the physical and mental decline of the protagonists. The threatening Alps are no longer experienced in parallel with self-discovery and self-assertion, but with a loss of subjectivity. In addition, erosion evokes the coming disappearance of human beings—in the eternal advancement of nature.

Jelinek, likewise, furiously attacks the exploitation of nature in *Die Kinder der Toten*, the three plays she published in 2002 under the title *In den Alpen* (*In the Alps*), and in the 2003 play *Das Werk* (*The Plant*). Criticism of tourism and of the destruction of nature can also be found in Ilja Trojanow's 2011 novel *EisTau* (*IceThaw*), whose spatial representations are an essential contribution to the inner structure of the novel as they connect the local with the global. The juxtaposition and superimposition of the Antarctic and the Alps demonstrate the global dimension of the problems of the Alpine region. These important questions are likely to become the main focus of literary thematizations of the Alps in the future.

## Conclusion and Outlook

Today, the Alps are more central to literature than ever before. In the last few years in particular, the Alps have experienced a renaissance in literature and culture in general. A new Alpine vogue can be observed, one which is accompanied by conspicuous overlaps—an Alpinization of urban space (mountain film festivals, climbing gyms, Alpine architecture and clothing) and an urbanization of the Alps (restaurants, mountaintop techno parties). Testifying to this in the realm of media beyond literature in the strict sense there are, for example, successful broadcast formats such as “Berg und Geist” (“Mountain and Spirit”), in which, since 2004, Swiss intellectuals, including numerous writers, have been interviewed on a Swiss mountain of their choice, thus tying their mountain to their biography. At the same time, however, the Alps are still associated with a counter-world that can withstand the upheavals of modernity.

In any case, the Alps remain a central point of reference for literature to this day. Recent novels by leading authors, such as Christoph Ransmayr's *The Flying Mountain* (*Der fliegende Berg*, 2006), Roman Graf's *Niedergang* (*Decline*), and Thomas Glavinic's *Das größere Wunder* (*The Greater Wonder*), both from 2013, evince the continued interest in the Alps and alpinism. Even Alpine crime novels, which are very popular today, have occasional instances of critical irony and ruptures in the idyllic fabric.

One Austrian peculiarity stands out to this day, though. The deconstruction of myths, disillusionment, an aversion to the mountains, and a longing for mountainless regions remain a veritable doctrine in Austrian literature. The Alps seem to have been set as the crime scene in the literary Austria; the World Wars, among other things, have inscribed themselves deep in the Alps. The myth of the mountains and their exploitation have a special meaning for both the conservatives and the critics. Even in an Austria of the third millennium, an Austria of the European Union, these fronts seem to have become entrenched.

Although individual upcoming German and Swiss writers dare to pen relaxed, neutral, transcultural views of the Alps—one thinks of Arno Camenisch from Graubünden or Thomas Willmann from Munich—such a stance seems much more difficult in Austria. Veá Kaiser's debut novel, the 2012 bestseller *Blasmusikpop oder Wie die Wissenschaft in die Alpen kam* (*Brass Instrument Pop, or How Science Made Its Way to the Alps*), was heavily criticized in the otherwise rather lenient Austrian literary review scene for drawing a benignly affectionate picture of an Alpine village. Neither Switzerland nor Germany seem to have to deal with the same thing as Austria. The current political significance of right-wing populists has its role here: as early as 2000, the *Tageszeitung* wrote: "With the entry of the Freedom Party of Austria into the Austrian government, the Alps have come a little closer to us again." Indeed, Party leader Jörg Haider was fond of celebrating his parties on mountain pastures, and the Party uses rustic, rural Romantic imagery at its meetings. Haider's successors, such as Herbert Kickl today, have followed suit. But so have some of the other parties: before this abrupt departure, chancellor Sebastian Kurz liked to let himself be seen on mountain hikes and in Alpine milieus—and Austrian voters seemed to have rewarded the youngster for it. Even the Greens successfully positioned their 2016 presidential candidate, Alexander van der Bellen, between the concept of homeland, Lederhosen, and mountains, although this positioning was also made easier by the fact that van der Bellen hails from Tyrol. All of this is in stark contrast to Germany,

and to a large extent also to Switzerland. So, it is probably not entirely unfounded that a primal fear of Austrian intellectuals, which has obviously existed since the culture wars of the 1920s, obviously remains: the fear of the country becoming corrupted by the Alpine.

Translated by Jason Blake

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## Alpski klišeji in kritike: procesi in napetosti v književnosti v nemščini

Ključne besede: literatura in alpinizem / avstrijska književnost / nacionalna identiteta / kulturni stereotipi / Alpe / Roth, Joseph / Horváth, Ödön von

Članek analizira podobo Alp v literaturi v nemščini z gledišča njenega družbenozgodovinskega konteksta in literarnih toposov, ki so se razvili v tem kontekstu. S pomočjo primerov iz opusov dveh zelo različnih avstrijskih literatov medvojnega obdobja, Josepha Rotha (1894–1939) in Ödöna von Horvátha (1901–1938), pa tudi njunih nemško govorečih predhodnikov in naslednikov se članek osredotoča na literarne postopke spoprijemanja s tradicionalnimi literarnimi toposi. Alpe, ki so danes najpomembnejša identitetna pokrajina tako Republike Avstrije kakor avstrijske literature, so demistifikacijo doživele že v literaturi medvojnega obdobja. Teme in literarne strategije teh literarnih tekstov tako napovedujejo povojno književnost in obenem ponujajo

presenetljivo raznoliko podobo Alp. Tako se izkaže, da velik del tega, kar nam danes velja za odziv na izrabo pojma alpskega in alpinizma za nacistično propagando, v resnici pripada starejšim tradicijam.

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