



# Writing the Himalaya in Polish and Slovenian: Introduction

Pisanie Himalajów po polsku  
i słoweńsku. Wstęp

✉ JERNEJ HABJAN • [jernej.habjan@zrc-sazu.si](mailto:jernej.habjan@zrc-sazu.si)

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Mountaineering literature is a genre which is as popular as it is under-researched.<sup>1</sup> Book accounts of high-altitude mountaineering expeditions written by mountaineers themselves are under-researched even though, if not precisely because, they engender not only new books but also new mountaineers. For mountaineering literature engenders readers some of whom go on to become the next global legends of mountaineering – legends who in turn write the next bestselling mountaineering books. As such, mountaineering is the sport which takes more lives than any the other sport, while also giving us more non-ghostwritten autobiographies than any other sport – autobiographies which in turn give us new mountaineers.

Not unlike Socrates, then, mountaineering literature corrupts the youth into taking up something as dangerous as mountain climbing themselves. Could this ability to corrupt be the reason that mainstream literary scholars privilege books about mountains written by their national poets rather than by mountaineers themselves? Aesthetic literature which quietly builds a nation rather than life-writing which so often preaches a better world? In any case, in search of ideas of what it is that mountaineers do in their books one has no choice but to turn to these books themselves. In the absence of a sustained scholarly interest, mountaineering books seem to be the best starting point of any research on mountaineering books, if only by default. To do that without either succumbing to their self-image or joining those who prefer to research the mountains in canonical literature – this is the ambition of the present collection of essays.

As literary scholars generally privilege thematisations of mountains by canonical authors, while non-fiction writers tend to prefer non-scholarly dimensions of literature written by mountaineers, this kind of literature remains a lacuna in literary studies. In literary

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studies, then, mountains remain mainly a theme, instead of becoming a form-giving element. In literature written by mountaineers rather than poets, however, mountaineering is not just a topic, a theme as susceptible to aesthetic refraction as any other theme the author happens to select; instead, it is the very praxis which informs the narrative, the narrative's end rather than means.

But if literary scholars tend to look at the literary canon even when it comes to mountains, this begs the question, Can the mountaineers speak? If we address this question we can gradually also pose the question to which it alludes, namely Gayatri Spivak's groundbreaking question to subaltern studies, 'Can the subaltern speak?' In other words, only if we are able to question literary studies in its favouring of poets over mountaineers in matters of mountains can we question the ways in which mountaineers speak for Sherpa guides and porters and their widows (to finally approximate Spivak's ultimate case of subalternity, Hindu widow sacrifice [see Spivak: 36–78]).

To this end, this issue of *Slavica TerGestina* focuses on the twentieth century as the period in which the single-authored book became the main medium of the mountaineering culture. This was the century in which the focus shifted from the Alps to the Himalaya and the Karakoram, and from climbing Alpine peaks to climbing even more difficult peaks in the same, so-called alpine style. If the first decades of the century were marked by the so-called last problems of the Alps, these were solved and replaced with Himalayan problems by mid-century, which in turn were superseded by the same Himalayan problems tackled in alpine style, the light and fast style which had been limited to the Alps at the beginning of the century. Thus, climbing the Eiger North Face was negated by climbing the Lhotse South Face, which was negated by climbing the same South Face as if it were Eiger

North Face: the Alps, the object of the first negation, returned in the second negation as the very style of climbing. The Hegelian sublation, *Aufhebung*, resulted in a style.

But once the style of the climb became key (with climbers doing alone and quickly what in mid-century the previous generation had been doing army-like and slowly), style no longer seemed to matter in literary accounts, as these gave way to documentaries and social media posts (with even Reinhold Messner recently following his project of Messner Mountain Museum with Messner Mountain Movie). The short form of early twentieth-century accounts written for prestigious national Alpine journals (*The Alpine Journal*, *The American Alpine Journal*, *La Montagne*, *Mitteilungen des Deutschen und Oesterreichischen Alpenvereins*, *La Rivista*, *Taternik*, *Planinski vestnik*...) returned by the end of the century as the short form of accounts posted on social media.

Thus, between the journal article and the Instagram story unfolds the history of the mountaineering book. If the century started with accounts written mostly for Alpine journals, its first half ended with one of the first classic book accounts, Anderl Heckmair's *Die 3 letzten Probleme der Alpen* (The Last Three Problems of the Alps). A dozen years later, Lionel Terray launched the term 'conquistadors of the useless' ('les conquérants de l'inutile' in his original French) in a book tellingly subtitled *From the Alps to Annapurna* (*Des Alpes à l'Annapurna*). In 1986, Reinhold Messner became the first person to climb all 14 eight-thousand-metre peaks, and published *Wettlauf zum Gipfel* (Race to the Top). And four years later, Tomo Česen tackled Lhotse South Face, a problem for the twenty-first century according to Messner (see McDonald 2012: 175), who quickly became Česen's most famous fan, but who also quickly joined the doubters because Česen had little

proof and did the climbing alone. ‘Alone’ (or *Sam* in Slovenian) is also the title of the book which Česen wrote in the same year.

A year earlier, in the spring of 1989, Messner himself had led an all-star international expedition to that same wall, and failed. By the autumn of that year, Lhotse South Face took the life of Jerzy Kukuczka, the mountain climber who had lost the so-called Crown of the Himalaya to Messner when he finished his project of scaling all eight-thousanders one year behind the much better equipped South Tyrolean. So, in 1989, Messner had lost his greatest challenger; in the aftermath of Česen’s 1990 attempt, he will have lost his perhaps greatest successor.

Nevertheless, in the new millennium Messner would assess the end of the 1980s as a time when the course of Himalayan climbing began to be dictated by Česen’s Slovenian compatriots after a decade of outstanding achievements by the Polish compatriots of Kukuczka. ‘Between 1980 and 1989, Polish climbers were giant, worldwide leaders as high-altitude climbers, especially in the Himalayas’, reads Messner’s endorsement of Bernadette McDonald’s book on Polish Himalayan climbers (see McDonald 2010). ‘Finally, after the Polish, Slovenian climbers took traditional alpinism one step further’, reads his blurb for McDonald’s book on Slovenian Himalayan alpinists (*ibid.*). More importantly, of the seven popular-history books which McDonald wrote on Himalayan mountaineering five focus on either the Poles or the Slovenians.

This volume disputes neither Messner’s nor McDonald’s assessments of Polish and Slovenian achievements in Himalayan climbing. It simply aims to show how these achievements went hand in hand with the seemingly incompatible activity of writing. In one way or another, the articles which follow all shed light on the genre of mountaineering literature at a crucial moment when its extralinguistic topics reached

their Himalayan apex while its linguistic structures included those offered by Polish and Slovenian. ♡

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