

**Writing the Death Zone:
The Slovenian Case**
Pisanie strefy śmierci.
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The article presents the results of a comparative reading of all Slovenian-language books which entail accounts of expeditions to eight-thousand-metre peaks written by members of those expeditions. Each book is read for acknowledgements of mountaineering books, be they within or beyond the corpus, which have helped inspire a given author to take up climbing. The portion of mountaineering books which entail such intertextual references to older representatives of the genre seems surprisingly large and even grows if statements made by the authors in interviews, contributions to their colleagues' books and other kinds of epitexts are added to the corpus. This enables the conclusion that Himalayan climbing, while being the deadliest of sports, is also the most literary sport and, moreover, the sport whose literature inspires many of their readers to join the ranks of Himalayan climbers and, specifically, climbers who write about their climbs.

MOUNTAINEERING LITERATURE,
SLOVENIAN MOUNTAINEERING,
SLOVENIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY, TRAVEL
WRITING, INTERTEXTUALITY

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia wyniki analizy porównawczej wszystkich słoweńskich książek zawierających relacje z wypraw na ośmiotysięczniki autorstwa uczestników tychże ekspedycji. W każdym z tych utworów poszukiwane są odnośniki do innych książek górskich – zarówno z jak i spoza korpusu – które zainspirowały autorów do zajęcia się wspinaczką. Liczba książek górskich zawierających takie intertekstualne odnośniki do starszych reprezentantów gatunku jest zaskakująco wysoka, a dodatkowo wzrasta gdy weźmie się pod uwagę opinie prezentowane przez autorów w wywiadach, ich kontrybucje do książek kolegów oraz inne epiteksty. W świetle powyższego zasadna wydaje się konkluzja, że himalaizm, będący najbardziej śmiertelnym sportem, jest jednocześnie sportem najbardziej literackim. Jest także sportem, którego literatura inspirowała wielu czytelników do wejścia w szeregi himalaistów, zwłaszcza tych piszących o swojej wspinaczce.

LITERATURA GÓRSKA, ALPINIZM
SŁOWEŃSKI, AUTOBIOGRAFIA
SŁOWEŃSKA, PODRÓŻOPISARSTWO,
INTERTEKSTUALNOŚĆ

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For the draft of the novel and for the final travelogue entry, see Kozinc et al.: 37–55 and Zaplotnik 2009: 225–31, respectively.

3

The verses appear at the end of the poem which closes Chapter 1. Both *Pot* and the genre to which it belongs are predominantly composed of prose texts, which may contribute to the fact that even literary scholars tend to cite these two verses as a prose sentence. Of the 56 Slovenian-language books which give accounts of expeditions to eight-thousanders written by the expedition members (see 'Sources' below), there are only two books of poetry, namely Iztok Tomazin's *Iskanje Šambale* (The Search for Shambala) and Jože Zupan's *Tukaj tam onkraj* (Here There Beyond); the introduction to Tomazin's book was written by the Dalai Lama.

A TEXT, A SUBJECT, A NATION

In the spring of 1983, Nejc Zaplotnik was at the base camp of Manaslu, preparing to climb his fourth eight-thousander on a new route while typing his first novel and his first featured travelogue.¹ Both the novel, titled *Peter Simsen*, and the travelogue entries for the prestigious Slovenian weekly *Teleks* were meant to offer a glimpse into the life and mind of a man who, together with his expedition partners, had climbed new routes up Makalu, Gasherbrum I and Everest.² Both *Peter Simsen* and the *Teleks* travelogue remained unfinished, however: on 24 April, nine days after his thirty-first birthday, Zaplotnik's life was cut short by an ice avalanche which came off Manaslu. What was intended as novelistic and journalistic debuts became the last writings of one of the finest high-altitude mountaineers Yugoslavia and the world had seen.

When Zaplotnik set out to write his first novel and his first featured travelogue, he had already published his first mountaineering book, entitled *Pot* (The Path). *Pot* uses both the epic breadth of a novel and the economical suspense of a travelogue to tell the story of a sickly boy from a small Slovenian village who went on to become a star of the legendary Yugoslav Himalayan expeditions of the late 1970s and early '80s. Makalu South Face, Gasherbrum Southwest Ridge, Everest West Ridge as well as Kilimanjaro, the Alps and El Capitan are revisited by a voice which serves the path rather than the goal:

*Kdor išče cilj, bo ostal prazen, ko ga bo dosegel,
kdor pa najde pot, bo cilj vedno nosil v sebi,*

reads a key passage of *Pot* (Zaplotnik 1981: 23).³ A possible English translation could be:

*Whoever pursues a goal will remain empty once they reach it,
but whoever finds the path will always carry the goal within them.*

Published in nine editions and nine reprints since its publication in 1981, *Pot* has since become the guiding thread of *Alpine Warriors*, Bernadette McDonald's popular history of Slovenian Himalayan climbing. Writing in 2015, McDonald opens the book with a discussion of the common features of Slovenian high-altitude climbers. While, as she notes, Slovenians in general believe that every Slovenian ought to climb Slovenia's highest mountain, Mount Triglav, she finds that most Slovenian climbers are marked by their country's history, culture and nature as well as, oddly enough, Zaplotnik's book. In a strange reversal where a national community is imagined through climbing while a climbing community is constituted by reading, McDonald seems to suggest that Slovenians are expected to climb Mount Triglav while Slovenian climbers are also supposed to read *Pot*:

Finally, another thread binds Slovenian climbers. It seems an unlikely one: a man and his book. [...] Although both Slovenian and both climbers, it's hard to imagine two individuals less alike than Silvo Karo and Tomaž Humar. Silvo, the taciturn pragmatist, and Tomaž, the romantic dreamer. And yet they were both in awe of this book and its author. [...] Nejc's words honoured the poetry of the mountains and of alpinism. They searched for answers to the great human questions, and their simple wisdom was powerful. (McDonald: 9, 10, 13)

But *Alpine Warriors* is not the only book about Slovenian mountaineering which is ripe with passages from Zaplotnik's book. Back in 1998, *Pot* resonated throughout *Pot k očetu* (The Path to the Father), a book about

how Zaplotnik's widow Mojca and their sons Nejc, Luka and Jaka visited his grave at Manaslu in the company of Viki Grošelj. Grošelj was the climber who had freed Zaplotnik's body from the grip of ice and the journey was the fulfilment of a promise he had made to his deceased friend as he buried his body. He produced *Pot k očetu* together with the photographer Joco Žnidaršič and the journalist Željko Kozinc. Kozinc, the main author, writes about the legend of Nejc Zaplotnik as follows:

The legend was created – how typical for us – by a book. It was achieved by Pot, a collection of Nejc's travel writings, a book which has become [...] a bestseller beyond Slovenian bestsellers. All the copies in public libraries are beat up from endless perusing and reading. [...] Pot satisfies the eternal desire within the readers to be able to identify with just the kind of open-hearted, cheerful and brave but also appropriately and timely disillusioned hero that Nejc turned himself into with his gifted writings. (Kozinc et al.: 15)

INTERTEXTUALITY

Hence, the influence of Zaplotnik's *Pot* on aspiring mountaineers in Slovenia has been noted by mountaineering writers in Slovenia (Kozinc) and elsewhere (McDonald). But it has also been acknowledged by the mountaineers themselves. In their own mountaineering books, Urban Golob and Andrej Gradišnik list *Pot* among the formative mountaineering books of their youth: 'It must be a bit difficult – though perhaps nevertheless interesting – to have a son who reads *Sfinga*, Hermann Buhl's *Nanga Parbat*, *Stena* and a diary of our expedition to Everest at the age of ten, and who goes on to read *Pot* three times in a row a year or so later', writes Golob (24); 'I used to read Hermann Buhl,

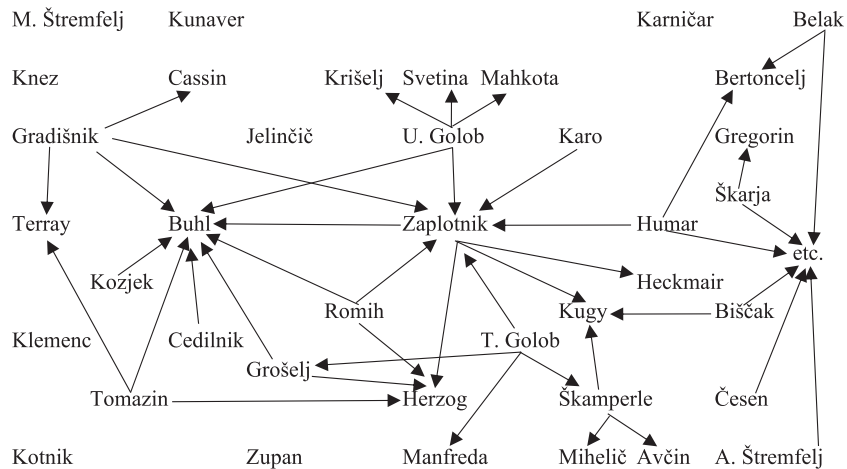
Terray, Cassin and Zaplotnik in my sickbed, using them to conquer walls, to weather storms and inner fears, and to scale mountain peaks in thoroughly suspenseful conditions, long before I would actually return to those heights in person', writes Gradišnik (8).⁴ Tadej Golob and Milan Romih say as much about Zaplotnik's *Pot* in their interviews for the Slovenian alpine journal, *Planinski vestnik*: 'If you ask me about mountaineering literature, I grew up on the classics. I used to read books by Viki Grošelj, Marjon's *Ledeno sonce*, Igor Škamperle's *Sneg na zlati veji* – a book which I still consider proper literature – and of course Nejc's *Pot*. Thanks to these books I became an alpinist long before I took up alpinism.' (Golob: 19);⁵ 'In elementary and high school I read a lot, and some of the books remain my companions to this day, including Buhl's *Nanga Parbat*, Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna* and Anton Ingolič's *Pretrgana naveza* (Broken Rope Team). Their stories, motives and adventures fed my imagination. I began to feel that I would like to experience something similar as well. And then there was of course Nejc's book, a veritable catapult for anyone interested in these things.' (Romih: 19) Even Marko Prezelj, the recipient of no less than four Piolet d'Or awards, expressed his early admiration of *Pot* in an interview for the *Alpinist* magazine: 'The book *Pot* (The Way) by Slovenian alpinist Nejc Zaplotnik was very influential when I began alpine climbing. At that time I was young and interested in everything connected with mountains. *Pot* was almost like a bible for us young alpinists because Nejc was a good climber, skilled in writing and a sort of rebel. We liked his way of thinking and his way of climbing. Everyone read it.' (Prezelj)

However, less than a generation before his book started to exert its inescapable influence on aspiring mountaineers, Zaplotnik himself was one such mountaineer: 'I used to devour Buhl's *Nanga Parbat*, *Trije zadnji problemi Alp*, Kugy, Herzog's *Annapurna*, and these books poisoned

4 With *Sfinga*, *Stena* and the Everest expedition diary Golob refers to Ante Mahkota's 1979 mountaineering book *Sfinga* (The Sphinx), Tone Svetina's 1973 novel *Stena* (The Wall) and Marijan Krišelj's 1979 book *YU3DRL-9N1YU*, *Mount Everest Sagar-matha*, respectively. Gradišnik's Terray and Cassin are Lionel Terray and Riccardo Cassin; Terray's 1961 book *Les conquérants de l'inutile* (*Conquistadors of the Useless*) was translated into Slovenian as *Osvajalci nekoristnega sveta* in 1974, while Cassin's 1977 book *Cinquant'anni di alpinismo* (*50 Years of Alpinism*) remains untranslated.

5 Marjon is the nickname of Marjan Manfreda, the legendary Slovenian mountaineer and author of *Ledeno sonce* (*Sun of Ice*).

FIG. 1 →
The intertextuality of Slovenian autobiographical book accounts of expeditions to eight-thousanders



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Trije zadnji problemi Alp is the title of the Slovenian translation of Anderl Heckmair's 1949 book *Die drei letzten Probleme der Alpen* (The Last Three Problems of the Alps). Julius Kugy is the author of many books, including *Aus dem Leben eines Bergsteigers*, translated into English as *Alpine Pilgrimage* and into Slovenian as *Iz mojega življenja v gorah*.

me completely. I was transported into the bodies of the heroes who had risked their lives to conquer vertical mountain faces and the highest peaks in the world. [...] I wondered what I should do about it, and the path led me to the alpine club.' (Zaplotnik 1981: 13)⁶

However, the otherwise exceptional Zaplotnik is no exception when it comes to the literary origins of climbing. Of the 27 Slovenian climbers who have detailed their expeditions to eight-thousanders in books, as many as 17 mention other mountaineering books as a key source of their deadly obsession, as illustrated by the network in Figure 1.

As we have seen, some mountaineering writers (including Tadej Golob and Romih) pay homage to their predecessors in interviews or are cited to that effect in third-person accounts (like Humar and Karo). Most of them, however, use the pages of their own mountaineering books to reminisce about their early reading habits. We have already seen why Zaplotnik can be represented in the above network

by a node with edges which connect his name to the nodes named after Hermann Buhl, Anderl Heckmair, Maurice Herzog and Julius Kugy; and, in turn, we are able to read the edges leading to Zaplotnik from the nodes representing Tadej and Urban Golob, Gradišnik, Humar, Karo and Romih respectively. But we have also seen that, for instance, Romih acknowledges Zaplotnik's *Pot* alongside Buhl's *Nanga Parbat* (and a book by Ingolič which, however, was not written by a mountaineer) and that *Nanga Parbat* is mentioned also by Urban Golob (alongside books by Marijan Krišelj, Ante Mahkota and Tone Svetina) and Gradišnik (alongside books by Riccardo Cassin and Lionel Terray).

Indeed, *Nanga Parbat*, the Slovenian translation of Buhl's 1954 book *Achttausend drüber und drunter*, appears in seven out of 16 Himalaya-themed mountaineering books by Grošelj as well (see Grošelj 1987b: 39; 1996: 9; 2009: 258; 2010: 9; 2013: 93, 98, 181; 2015: 74, 160; 2017: 106–107), while also being acknowledged in Iztok Tomazin's book account of his North American climbs (see Tomazin 1989: 12–13), in Pavle Kozjek's preface to a book by Tine Mihelič (see Kozjek 2005: 7) and in Krišelj's afterword to Danilo Cedilnik's first mountaineering book (see Krišelj: 114). Kozjek offers perhaps the most characteristic homage to Buhl's book when he writes:

Many years ago, when I was still trying out my first climbing holds, I came across Hermann Buhl's Nanga Parbat. The title didn't tell me much, but once I started to read it everything became clear to me. I was transported into his climbing world, a world presented with such power, excitement and conviction that I simply was not able to fight it. I read the book in one sitting, with a humble wish that one day, 'when I grow up', I too would be able to experience some of what I had read in the book.

These kinds of passages about Buhl's book have allowed Grošelj (2015: 74) to offer the following assessment: 'The book is a bible of world mountaineering. It was a revelation for me as well as for numerous young climbers all around the world. Hermann Buhl's impact on world mountaineering is comparable only to Reinhold Messner's.' And as if to echo Prezelj's above statement about *Pot* being a kind of bible of Slovenian mountaineers, Grošelj adds: 'In the Slovenian context one can compare Buhl to Nejc Zaplotnik.'

In Grošelj's case, there is a second bible, as it were, namely Herzog's *Annapurna*:

One of the first mountaineering books I have read has to be Herzog's Annapurna. It was my favourite one next to Buhl's Nanga Parbat. [...] My respect for the book grew each time I read it, as did my image of the dramatic days spent on the mountain, the heroic feats, the extraordinary comradery and courage, the great victory, and the price with which it came.

Later in life I often experienced similar things myself, and I read many other books about the Himalaya and even wrote a couple of them. But Herzog's Annapurna remained for me one of the classics, a book which does not fall into obscurity over the years but, on the contrary, gains in value. (Grošelj 1996: 9)

As we have seen, Romih and Zaplotnik too list Herzog's book next to Buhl's. The same holds for Tomazin, whose list in the above-mentioned book also includes the Terray book which is also championed by Gradišnik.

Buhl, Terray and Zaplotnik therefore constitute the three nodes with the most edges. To them, one could add a node which represents the genre as such: dubbed ‘etc.’ in Figure 1, this node stands for general acknowledgements of mountaineering literature as they are found in individual books, interviews and third-person accounts. These include the two books in the corpus which, due to their lush colour images, come closest to the genre of coffee table book, namely Tomo Česen’s *Sam* (Alone) and Tomaž Humar’s *Ni nemogočih poti* (There Are No Impossible Paths); they both pay homage to the genre of mountaineering literature within the first two paragraphs (which, due to the many images, are to be found on page 18 in both cases [see Česen: 18; Humar: 18]). Humar is especially clear on the subject: ‘I used to bury my head into every mountaineering book I could find. In the afternoons, I used to admire mountains from afar. Slowly, I would come closer.’ Humar is also one of those authors who single out individual predecessors while also acknowledging the influence of the genre as a whole. Like Bogdan Biščak and Tone Škarja, who reference Kugy (see Biščak: 20) and Janez Gregorin (see Škarja 1975: 7) respectively as well as their common genre (see Biščak: 79; Škarja 2011: 10–12), Humar presents himself – and his mentor, Stane Belak (nickname Šrauf [Screw]) – as students not only of mountaineering books in general but also of one such book in particular, namely Dinko Bertoncej’s 1956 volume *Dhaulagiri*: ‘Bertoncej, Šrauf and I are connected by a book. Šrauf used to get up in the morning and go to sleep at night with Bertoncej’s book in his hand’, he says in a documentary directed by his colleague Stipe Božić (see Božić).

But Belak too references both Bertoncej’s book and the genre as a whole. He does not name Bertoncej, but he has his book in mind when he writes the following:

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See also expedition leader Tone Škarja's citation of a note which Belak made after one of his successful ascents in the Himalaya: Šrauf's entry: "This is how I imagined an ascent of a Himalayan peak in my early childhood when I read books about the Himalaya. [...] Words fail me!" (Škarja 2008: 71)

Ever since I first read about the Argentinian expedition to Dhaulagiri, which was also my first source of information about the Himalaya, the 'Dhaulagiri' story has come with the aftertaste of something unattainable. The Argentinians failed to reach the summit and they 'paid' for their attempt in the north face with the life of their expedition leader, Ibañez. The story and the mountain found a place in my heart, but I had no idea that one day I myself would dare to approach this capricious (capricious even for Himalayan standards) yet wonderful mountain. (Belak: 123)

Conversely, when Belak mentions his debt to mountaineering literature as a whole, he starts by naming a few names: 'Look, there is the South Col, the place where Hillary and Tenzing began their victorious ascent. How far back this is now! Back then, I used to read news and then books about the Himalaya, holding my breath like any child who thinks he is reading about big things. Today, I am standing on the top of an eight-thousander myself!' (Belak: 109)⁷

And it is again Grošelj who provides the best summary: 'Bertoncelj's *Dhaulagiri*, published in 1956 in Argentina, in Slovenian, served as the main anchor and guidance for Belak as he planned his expeditions to the White Mountain. His 1981 expedition was well ahead of its time, and among Belak's students and friends Humar was the one whose solo ascent seventeen years later made Belak's dream and vision a reality.' (Grošelj: 2013: 125)

So, in human terms, 17 out of 27 climbers list other climbers' books as a formative influence on their decision to take up climbing. In terms of books (listed in 'Sources' below), 17 out of 56 books feature such intertextual references.

Finally, beyond the network of authors of Slovenian-language book accounts of expeditions to eight-thousanders, two out of four authors

acknowledged by Zaplotnik revisit their predecessors as well. The first one is Kugy, who opens his 1925 book *Aus dem Leben eines Bergsteigers* (translated as *Alpine Pilgrimage*) with an homage to his father's tales of mountain life but also to 'an entrancing book' about the Alps which he had received for Christmas as a child (Kugy 1934: 1).⁸ The second one is Buhl, who reminisces about the first climbing adventure he undertook with his friend after he took his stepmother's washing line from the balcony, as proper ropes were too expensive for 'small boys with big ideas in their noddles': 'It did not occur to us that we were the least bit ridiculous; we simply saw ourselves as daring heroes of the mountains, like in the climbing books or in such songs as "With a rope around my breast..."' (Buhl: 13) And here is how Buhl remembers himself as a seventeen-year-old boy: 'My constant companions in the evenings were books, periodicals, accounts of climbs, pictures of mountains in foreign parts, stirring my imagination wildly. My thoughts went winging to those distant peaks; among them I enjoyed the most thrilling adventures.' (Ibid.: 43)

In short, the intertextual network far exceeds Figure 1 and its Slovenian corpus, as Buhl's literary influence alone is acknowledged even by such mountaineering superstars as Reinhold Messner, who writes: 'When I was a young lad, no other character from the world of mountaineering fascinated me quite as much as Hermann Buhl. I knew of his ideas and his name even before I read about him.' (Messner 2000: 11; for the original formulation from 1984, see Messner 1984: 7)

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

So, on one side, mountaineering claims lives and gives autobiographies, and on the other side these autobiographies give life themselves.

⁸ Kugy no longer remembers the book title as he writes his own book half a century later, but he subsequently identifies it as *Entdeckungsreisen in der Heimat, I, Eine Alpenreise* (Discoveries in the Homeland. Vol I: An Alpine Voyage) by Hermann Wagner (see Kugy 1925: 311).

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Grošelj was one of Messner's consultants for his book on the most iconic walls in the history of mountaineering (see Messner: 2001).

Writing is here the medium of death, on one side, and the medium of new life, on the other.

On one side, death is the mediator between the living. It mediates between climbers and the widows of their climbing partners whenever these survivors enter into a kind of modern version of levirate marriage where, in its original version, the brother of a deceased man is supposed to marry the latter's widow. This can be said, for example, of the marriage of Edmund Hillary and June, the widow of his climbing partner Peter Mulgrew; Conrad Anker and Jennifer, the widow of his partner Alex Lowe; Tomaž Jamnik and Mojca, the widow of his partner Nejc Zaplotnik; and Tomaž Humar and Sergeja, the girlfriend of his deceased climbing partner Danilo Golob. But even more often than between climbers and the widows of their climbing partners death mediates between the surviving climbers themselves. In this sense, Zaplotnik acted as a kind of Jamesonian vanishing mediator not only between Jamnik and Mojca Zaplotnik but also between Messner and Grošelj: when Zaplotnik died in 1983, Messner took care to pay his respects to Grošelj already in Kathmandu, thus meeting one of his future writing partners.⁹

On the other side, death is the mediator between the living and the dead. As noted above, many of the best climbers have taken up climbing under the influence of books written by climbers who wrote about their death and who sometimes were dead by the time their book was published. Needless to say, no future mountain climber wants to become a dead climber; instead, what he or she usually wants is to become a climber worthy of the legacy of a dead climber, in other words, worthy of the membership in the community of climbers. 'I sense an affinity with him as with few other climbers', writes Messner of Buhl (2000: 12), 'not as a kindred spirit, but rather because of his willingness to commit

himself completely.' As such, a future climber tends to be awakened by a book about a climber who is not necessarily the kind of climber he or she wants to become but rather the kind of climber in whose name he or she wants to become a climber.

This difference between the other with whom I identify and the other in whose name I identify with someone or something is, in Freudian terms, the difference between the ideal ego and the ego-ideal, the difference between imaginary and symbolic identification, that is, in Lacanian graphemes, between $i(o)$ and $I(O)$:

[I]maginary identification is identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing 'what we would like to be', and symbolic identification, identification with the very place from where we are being observed, from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love. [...] The fact that should not be overlooked in this distinction is that $i(o)$ is always already subordinated to $I(O)$: it is the symbolic identification (the point from which we are observed) which dominates and determines the image, the imaginary form in which we appear to ourselves likeable. (Žižek: 105–108)

A mountain climber is therefore formed by a book about the ego-ideal: a book about a climber in whose name the reader in question wishes to become a climber. Mountaineering books talk about the reader-ship's ego-ideal rather than ideal ego; the ideal ego in turn is narrated in the novel, the genre which, according to Benedict Anderson, serves together with the newspaper as one of the main mediums in which a national community imagines itself (see Anderson: 9–36). As such, mountaineering literature is the medium in which a community

is imagined which is national only potentially; its potential imaginary identification with a national imagined community is overdetermined by its symbolic identification with a climbing imagined community. A member of a national imagined community needs imagination because the community is simply too large to allow physical encounters with all its members. To some degree, this also holds for a climbing imagined community, 'a virtual community of like-minded individuals' constructed in no small part by mountaineering literature, as Alan McNee writes (64); but beyond numbers, the reason that members of a climbing community can never be fully encountered is that they have the habit of being lost to mountains. While it took, for instance, Bernadette McDonald (2013: 10) one visit to the Katowice Alpine Club back in 1994 to meet '[m]any of the surviving great Polish Himalayan climbers [...]': Zawada, Wielicki, Hajzer, Lwow, Majer, Pawlovski, [...] there was also a palpable sadness in the room' – not because the room was too small for the other members of the Polish golden generation but because these members were already dead.

INTERNATIONALITY

Hence, instead of distant compatriots, one should imagine ghosts; and when it comes to what one can see rather than just imagine, instead of more or less tolerated minorities, one sees invited guests. Some of the most legendary national Himalayan expeditions – and, as a consequence, some of the biggest bestsellers written by Himalayan climbers – have their international members to thank for their place in climbing history. The British conquest of Mount Everest in 1953 was in fact executed by an Indian Nepalese and a New Zealander, namely Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary. Seventeen years after the conquest

of Everest, a German expedition to Nanga Parbat, the so-called German mountain of destiny, ended with the tragic traverse by South Tyrolian Italians Günther and Reinhold Messner. *Alpine Warriors*, Bernadette McDonald's book about Slovenian Himalayan climbers, boasts on its cover a group photo of two Slovenians and two Croatians, with one of the Croatians, Stipe Božić, being a regular member of Slovenian Himalayan expeditions ever since the so-called Slovenian route on Everest in 1979 and up to the solo climb of Dhaulagiri South Face which was done in 1999 by Tomaž Humar (the protagonist of McDonald's other book about Slovenian Himalayan climbers [see McDonald 2008]). Still in Slovenia, Steve House, a contemporary of Humar from the United States, took up climbing as an exchange student in the northernmost republic of Yugoslavia and went on to climb some of his, and his generation's, greatest climbs with Marko Prezelj, a contemporary of Humar from Humar's hometown; incidentally, Prezelj received his latest Piolet d'Or for a climb he made together with an American (Hayden Kennedy), a Frenchman (Manu Pellissier) and a Slovenian (Urban Novak). And if Slovenians introduced House to the Himalaya, they hosted some of the last Himalayan climbs of Carlos Carsolio, the Mexican Himalayan legend who, like Messner, contributed a preface to the first edition of Humar's book and a postface to the second, posthumous one. As for Carsolio's early big climbs, they were hosted by the great Polish expeditions of the 1980s. At the same time, the proverbial isolationism of real-socialist Poland was regularly breached from the opposite side as well, as these expeditions rarely included Wanda Rutkiewicz, who tended to turn to international expeditions in her attempt to achieve in the female category what her compatriot Jerzy Kukuczka did not really have the resources to accomplish in his unofficial race with Messner for the status of the first person to summit all 14 eight-thousanders.

But if one of the two men who were the first to set foot on Everest was an invited guest, the other one was a hired hand: Tenzing joined the British expedition as a sirdar, or organiser of porters. Moreover, Tenzing is just the most famous of the numerous Sherpas whose contribution to Himalayan expeditions as high-altitude guides and porters is such that, as Amrita Dhar writes (39), ‘few of us know the extent of the climbing community’s century-long debt to the Sherpas’. This is the dark side, if not the truth, of the internationalism of Himalayan mountaineering.

Returning to the ideal ego and ego-ideal, in the difference between mimicking the hero of a national novel and acting in the name of the hero of a climber’s autobiography might lie the explanation for the strange fact that mountaineering literature is as popular among general readers as it is under-researched in academia. For the kind of literature which, despite all the post- and transnational turns, still gets the most attention in mainstream academia is a far cry from any literature that inspires its readers into acts worthy of ‘conquistadors of the useless’ or ‘life at the limit’ (to cite the titles of books by Terray [1963] and Messner [2014]). While neither mountaineering nor literature can be denied their nation-building achievements, or crimes – depending on which side of the post- or transnational turn we find ourselves on – their amalgam, mountaineering literature, still seems to be too Socratic, too much invested in corrupting youth, to be accepted into the literary canons of nations; too Socratic – and not aesthetic enough, not elevated enough to the level of aestheticism, where pre-national vernaculars can be overridden by and merged into a national language. To keep to the Slovenian case, this is the kind of aestheticism that Rastko Močnik (7–9, 51, 219–26) traces in France Prešeren’s 1847 book *Poezije* (Poems), whose Romantic verses could not be farther from the documentary prose of Zaplotnik’s *Pot*.

But if we return to the level of the text, we must admit that the author is structurally absent both from a mountaineering text and from a canonical literary text. However, only in the former case is this absence thematised as the hero's potential or even actual death, a death due to which the readers cannot act according to the hero's deeds but only in the hero's name. This is quite different from a canonical literary text, where the author is absent simply in the sense that his or her text is irreducible to his or her biography and as such worthy of canonisation in the first place; a canonised literary text is irreducible to its author's biography insofar as it is precisely an aesthetic text. But forget the author's biography while reading a book like *Pot*, and you will forget the book itself. In this kind of book, mountaineering is not just a topic, a theme as susceptible to aesthetic transformation as any other theme the author happens to select: to an author like Zaplotnik, mountaineering is the very praxis that informs his narrative; it is the narrative's end rather than means. As such, the author of a mountaineering text is absent not only from the world of his or her living readers but, paradoxically, also from the canon itself. This paradox is bound to persist as long as it is not explained, which is something which literary studies can be called to do simply as a theoretical practice of explaining paradoxes. And as soon as literary studies does respond to this calling it will become capable of undoing a certain insufficiency of its own, namely the already mentioned academic anonymity of an extremely popular literary genre.

So, just as canonical literature breeds not only new canonical literature but also new members of a nation, mountaineering books engender not only new mountaineering books but also new mountaineers, that is, not only new authors but also new heroes. These heroes, however, far from belonging in the hall of national heroes, are

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See Roeder 2020 for Roeder's enlightening article on the paradoxical co-existence of nationalism and internationalism at work in the establishment of the Union internationale des associations d'alpinisme in 1932, known today as the International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation.

the heroes of the people and as such potential international heroes; the climbing community is a community of the people resembling less a nation than a new International. After all, the very birth of the sport of mountaineering demanded that borders be crossed; to cite the incipit of a blog post by Carolin Roeder (2014): 'To climb is to travel. Even the inventors of the sport of mountaineering had to leave their flat British islands to be able to let themselves go in the heights of Swiss Alps.'¹⁰ And beyond the Island, if not beyond the continent, the idea of 'a European rope' emerged, as Heinrich Harrer writes in *The White Spider*, immediately after the Second World War:

It is at this point that I should like to remember a man who first conceived the notion of 'A European Rope' – Guido Tonella, the Italian climber and journalist, who lives in Switzerland. In 1946, at a time when nobody was thinking of reconciliation, when the world was still quivering with hate and bitterness against the war and those who were responsible for its origin, he uttered the following message, loud and clear: 'Mountaineering transcends all everyday matters. It transcends all national frontiers. Mountaineers are a band of brothers. They are all one party on one rope.' (Harrer: 162)

Indeed, if the readers of Prešeren's Romantic *Poezije* make for good Slovenians, the readers of Zaplotnik's *Path* make for good climbers. ♡

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Povzetek

Članek predstavlja ugotovitve primerjalne analize vseh slovenskih knjig, ki vsebujejo opise odprav na osemtisočake izpod peres članov in članic teh odprav. Analiza teh knjig se je osredotočala na omembe drugih alpinističnih knjig (bodisi iz ali pa onstran tega korpusa), ki so avtorja ali avtorico določene knjige navdihnile, da sta se lotila alpinizma. Delež alpinističnih knjig, v katerih lahko najdemo tovrstne intertekstualne reference na starejše predstavnice žanra, je presenetljivo visok in se celo poveča, če korpusu dodamo primerljive izjave, ki so jih avtorji podali v intervjujih, v dokumentarnih filmih, v spremnih besedilih h knjigam njihovih soplezalcev in v drugih vrstah epitekstov. Med 56 knjigami, ki tvorijo korpus, namreč tovrstne medbesedilne sklice vsebuje 17 knjig oziroma, izraženo z gledišča avtorstva, med 27 alpinisti, ki svoje izkušnje z osemtisočaki popišejo v knjigah, jih 17 omenja knjige drugih alpinistov kot pomemben dejavnik pri odločitvi za življenjsko pot alpinista (edina avtorica v korpusu tovrstne izjave ne poda). Od tod se ponuja sklep, da je himalajizem ne samo šport, ki bržkone zahteva več življenj kakor vsi ostali športi skupaj, temveč tudi šport, ki nam nemara da več avtobiografij kakor kateri koli drug šport, pri čemer prav v teh avtobiografijah del bralstva najde spodbudo za alpinizem in celo za pisanje alpinističnih avtobiografij.

Se pravi, knjige o alpinizmu porajajo ne le nove knjige o alpinizmu, pač pa tudi nove alpiniste; avtorji alpinističnih knjig porajajo ne le nove avtorje, temveč tudi nove junake. Kolikor pa bralec in bralka nočeta umreti za alpinizem, temveč želita postati vredna dediščine ponesrečenih alpinistov in alpinistk, ju pogosto formira knjiga o alpinistu, ki ni alpinist, kakršen bi rada sama postala, pač pa alpinist, v imenu katerega bi rada postala alpinista. Od tod navsezadnje protislovje,

da je alpinistična literatura med najbolj brani in hkrati najmanj raziskanimi žanri. Raziskovanja je namreč še zmerom deležna predvsem t. i. narodotvorna književnost, ki pa je seveda vse kaj drugega kakor literatura, ki bralstvo navdihuje k dejanjem, vrednim osvajalcev nekoristnega sveta, kakor je alpiniste označil eden najbolj branih med njimi, namreč Lionel Terray. Zato bralci Prešernovih *Poezij* postanejo dobri Slovenci, bralci Zaplotnikove *Poti* pa dobri plezalci.

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