Vertical Trials: Three Narrative Texts of Slovenian Mountaineering Literature

Doświadczenie pionowe. Trzy teksty narracyjne słoweńskiej literatury górskiej

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The present article looks at narrative mountaineering literature as a hybrid genre that addresses mountain climbing, expeditions to mountain peaks and high-altitude skiing as demanding existential trials and offering liminal experiences. In texts written by climbers of Himalayan peaks in particular, hybridity is mostly formed by the interweaving, confrontation and adaptation of such genres as travel writing, life writing and guide books, as well as by the adoption of elements of narrative genres belonging to canonical literature. In terms of case studies, the article focuses on three Slovenian-language books with a marked aesthetic tendency: Dušan Jelinčič's *Zvezdnate noči* (Starry Nights, 1990), Igor Škamperle's *Sneg na zlati veji* (The Snow on the Golden Bough, 1992) and Bogdan Biščak's *Igra in biseri* (The Game and the Pearls, 2018). Of particular interest are the aesthetic singularity of these three texts as well as the features they share with narrative mountaineering literature in general.

MOUNTAINEERING LITERATURE, TRAVEL WRITING, DUŠAN JELINČIČ, IGOR ŠKAMPERLE, BOGDAN BIŠČAK

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest narracyjnej literaturze górskiej jako gatunkowi hybrydowemu dotyczącemu wspinaczki górskiej, wypraw wysokogórskich oraz narciarstwa wysokogórskiego przedstawionych jako wymagające próby egzystencjalne oraz doświadczenia graniczne. Hybrydyzacja owa jest widoczna zwłaszcza w tekstach autorstwa himalaistów w postaci przeplatania się, konfrontacji i adaptacji takich gatunków jak podróżopisarstwo, życiopisanie, czy poradnik, jak również poprzez wprowadzenie elementów kanonicznych gatunków narracyjnych. Artykuł analizuje jako case studies trzy słoweńskie książki o charakterystycznej estetyce: *Zvezdnate noči* Dušana Jelinčič'a (Gwieździste noce, 1990), *Sneg na zlati veji* Igora Škamperle'a (Śnieg na złotej gałęzi, 1992) oraz *Igra in biseri* Bogdana Biščaka (Gra i perły, 2018). Szczególnie interesujące wydają się estetyczna oryginalność tych tekstów jak również ich cechy wspólne z ogólnie pojmowaną narracyjną literaturą górską.

LITERATURA GÓRSKA, PODRÓŻOPISARSTWO, DUŠAN JELINČIČ, IGOR ŠKAMPERLE, BOGDAN BIŠČAK

INTRODUCTION

Composed of writings on mountain climbing, mountain expeditions and high-altitude skiing, mountaineering literature can be roughly delimited as a subgenre in the wider field of mountain literature.[1] Mountain literature in print media includes writings on hiking on marked and unmarked mountain trails and off-trail hiking, as well as off-piste skiing. In recent years, this literature has also shifted to the internet, where it can be read in blogs, web diaries and forums. Mountain literature in the broadest sense is mostly written in narrative form, although it can also be found in poetic and dramatic forms (see Hladnik and Ščeк). It has a specifically rich tradition in Slovenian culture; while its beginnings can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century, it really flourished in the twentieth century, as evidenced by various surveys (see Munda et al.; Strojin 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1995d; Dobnik; Klinar; Pritekelj; Volkar; Zgubin; Lozar).

In principle, mountaineering literature emerged later than the rest of mountain literature, as it speaks of the ascents to the highest and most demanding peaks of our planet. Due to the dangers climbers face at such heights, their physically and mentally exhausting feats can be regarded as liminal experiences. Such climbing achievements only became possible in mid-twentieth century when, as part of the project of modernity, climbing expeditions made use of technology, strategy and international relations to enable a human presence on eight-thousanders (see Dhar: 345). It is therefore not surprising that the success of Slovenian mountaineers in the Himalaya, Karakoram and the Andes has led to the proliferation of writings focused on their achievements. Beyond Slovenia, Bruce Barcott (65) has called mountaineering 'the most literary of all sports'.

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Given the rich production of Slovenian mountaineering literature and its subgenres, it is surprising that there are few literary studies in this field. Recently, Miran Hladnik made a significant contribution to the delimitation, documentation and literary analysis of mountain literature (see Hladnik; Hladnik and Šček), and some of Tomo Virk's writings (e.g., Virk 2017a) are also important, including his research into the work, myth and personality of alpinist Klement Jug (see Virk 2014, 2016, 2017b). Despite these contributions, one can agree with Jernej Habjan's recent observation that mountain literature is 'among the most read and at the same time least researched genres' (Habjan: 259). The fact that this applies internationally can be ascertained by a simple internet search. The present article can therefore be seen as a kind of probe into the formal and thematic features of narrative mountaineering literature of a specific historical environment (the Slovenian one) in an attempt to shed some light on this popular genre from the perspective of literary studies.

GENRE HYBRIDITY

When attempting to reflect on mountaineering literature, the question arises as to how to appropriately label and systematise this type of writing, given that the purposes of climbing in the mountains, including expeditions to the highest mountains in the world, can be so different. Sometimes mountaineers are motivated by research, aesthetic, commercial or scientific intentions, while on other occasions they have sports, nationalist, imperialist, religious or other purposes. However, since mountaineering always involves the movement of individuals in space, it has become a matter of course to include such texts in travel writing, with the important caveat that unlike the classics of this

literature, which have expanded the regions of known space horizontally, mountaineering discourse concerns a vertical journey (see Kaliszuk: 52). Mountaineering literature is therefore travel writing, but is itself divided into many genres, some of which border on reportage and journalism.

Mountaineering literature is not, however, just travel writing. Whereas, in its early development, travel writing initially often concerned an externally oriented exotic adventure and the possibility of encountering other people, it cannot be overlooked that, in modern times, it has been characteristically interiorised; thus, much more than a description of unknown places, modern mountaineering literature is perhaps an opportunity for the encounter of the vertical traveller, the climber, with him- or herself, that is, for an inner search and a confrontation with the singularity of his or her own experience, with questions of self-existence and the construction of identity. These are the topics that are most at home in life writing or autobiographical discourse and traditionally fill autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, letters and even biographies and portraits. It is therefore not surprising that some scholars, such as Delphine Moraldo (2012, 2013), have also tried to illuminate mountaineering literature from the perspective of the autobiographical genre, or, like Przemysław Kaliszuk (54), have even emphasised its 'hybrid modality'.

Due to its modern discursive anchoring, mountaineering literature is probably best defined as a hybrid genre bordering on literature, in which the heterogeneous discourses of travel writing and life writing, as well as the utilitarianism of handbooks and guides, intersect, meet and confront one another dialogically. On the other hand, there is an interface with canonical literary genres, especially with the novel in the field of narrative. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, who applied

the concept of hybridity to the theory of culture, the novel is itself largely a product of hybridisation and is a deliberate aesthetic hybrid (see Bakhtin). Mountaineering literature is therefore a hybrid genre.

In the present paper, I will not research the historical development or construct a theoretical model of Slovenian mountaineering literature. Instead, I will discuss texts which may not narrate the most important mountaineering achievements in absolute terms, as such a criterion probably does not exist, nor do they document the world-renowned successes of Slovenian or, at that time, Yugoslav expeditions to the Himalaya. I will focus on three texts which, in addition to Nejc Zaplotnik's *Pot* (The Way)[2] and certain others,[3] strike me as being among the most aesthetically interesting works of this kind. These books are by living authors: *Sneg na zlati veji* (The Snow on the Golden Bough) by Igor Škamperle (born 1962), *Zvezdnate noči* (Starry Nights) by Dušan Jelinčič, who is almost a decade older (born 1953), and *Igra in biseri: kako sem hčerki z alpinizmom razložil življenje* (The Game and the Pearls: How I Explained Life to My Daughter Using Mountaineering) by Bogdan Biščak (born 1958). All of the writers are from the coastal Primorska region: Škamperle and Jelinčič are Slovenians from Trieste, while Biščak is from Postojna. They are all acquainted: they tested themselves climbing together (Škamperle and Biščak), they took part in joint expeditions in the mid-1980s (Škamperle and Biščak, or Biščak and Jelinčič), and in the works discussed they are in fact generationally related writers, despite their differences in years. The books by Škamperle and Jelinčič were first published just a few years after their most active period of climbing – *Sneg na zlati veji* in 1992 and *Zvezdnate noči* in 1990 – while in *Igra in biseri* (2018), Biščak wrote about his climbing career more than three decades after its peak.

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Nejc Zaplotnik's *Pot* was first published in 1981 and was reprinted many times. It is one of the most popular and most frequently cited Slovenian mountaineering books.

3
Among these aesthetically interesting books is another work by Jelinčič, *Biseri pod snegom* (Pearls under the Snow), first published in 1992 and reissued in a new edition in 2009, which is about an expedition to Mount Everest which ended without summitting. *Kam gre veter, ko ne piha* (Where Does the Wind Go When It Doesn't Blow), Jelinčič's 2007 book about his scaling of Gasherbrum II, is noteworthy in this respect as well.

BEGINNINGS OF THE NARRATIVES

Reading the selected texts, one might expect two basic compositional blocks of the mountaineering narratives: first, an introduction showing the climber's life up to the departure for the Himalaya, and then a climbing-focused mimetic report of the vertical journeys, complemented by the autobiographical details necessary for understanding the experience of mountaineering (see Kaliszuk: 55). In each case, however, contact with the specific text modifies preconceived notions somewhat. The first chapter of *Sneg na zlati veji*, which is Škamperle's first book, is written in the third person, unlike the other chapters with their first-person narrative. It begins with a series of fragments of memories from early youth: the poetically sketched natural environment of Sveti Ivan in the suburbs of bilingual Trieste, holidays with grandparents in Slovenia, skiing lessons in the vicinity of Tarvisio and in Gorje, and so on. The author's most fulfilling early experiences are the first trips with his mother to the mountains, including Triglav. These trips are further encouraged by the popular books of Julius Kugy, which the young Škamperle read passionately. This is followed by the first attempts at climbing and the decision to become a climber himself: 'Climbing is, after all, something more than kicking a ball around. He will be an adventurer in life! A climber. A traveller.' (Škamperle: 38) The chapter concludes with the author entering a new period of life and a decision to study in Slovenia, which is supported by both parents.

In the second, revised and supplemented edition, Jelinčič's *Zvezdnate noči* (Starry Nights, originally published in 1990) begins with an extensive accompanying text which has the character of a foreword and was written by the author himself. In it, the author speaks of his writing career and development, the origins of *Zvezdnate noči* and the reception

of his works by critics and readers. He also recalls the names of all of his fellow climbers on the expedition described. The real beginning of the text follows *in medias rei*, in the Prologue, which is printed in italics, thus even graphically indicating its distinction from the rest of the text. As a kind of prelude, the Prologue speaks of the moments when the author reaches the eight-thousand-metre peak of Broad Peak, which proves somewhat less than triumphant, like 'a kind of contrast between the present moment, which is so insignificant that I doubt its existence, and the one which I imagined adorned in heavenly glory' (Jelinčič: 41). The first part of the book, which concludes with the arrival of the expedition at base camp, again lacks the expected introductory section with a mountaineering narrative illuminating the climber's previous life. Instead, the author, who is also the narrator, finds himself in Pakistan, in the city of Skardu, from where the expedition will depart. Unlike Škamperle's narrative, with its initial series of fragments of memory reaching back to childhood, Jelinčič's work is a more present-day, diary-based narrative with short chapters of just one page or one and a half pages; in the text, which Jelinčič himself refers to as a novel in his accompanying essay, the use of the present tense actually prevails. Rather than being dated, as is customary with diaries, the chapters have clear titles which indicate the content of each entry. An insight into the events from the writer's past life which led to his arrival in Karakoram is established only with brief flashbacks to training and other preparations for the journey.

Like *Zvezdnate noči*, Biščak's *Igra in biseri*, which bears the meaningful subtitle *Kako sem hčerki z alpinizmom razložil življenje* (How I Explained Life to My Daughter Using Mountaineering), begins with an accompanying text, an attempt at a concise explanation of the meaning and ethos of mountaineering. It was written by Igor Mezgec, a member

of the Postojna Four, a climbing group completed by Mezgec's friends Škamperle, Rado Fabjan and Biščak, whose vertical trials and friendships are discussed at length in the core of the book. This is followed by Biščak's own preface, in which he explains certain other personal reasons for writing the book and the circumstances of its creation. The introductory part of the book, again the author's first work, illustrates the two-part structure of the narrative, which is graphically emphasised by the choice of different fonts. The first part at the beginning of the narrative introduces the present conversation between the author and his daughter about life and the meaning of mountaineering and is printed in bold. It starts unfolding on the roof terrace of a boarding house in Peru and runs from early morning to late evening at the end of the book. The conversation forms the axis of the narrative but includes graphically separate, longer retrospective sections printed in a normal font, written mostly, but not exclusively, in the past. These follow one another in linear chronological order and gradually chart the writer's mountaineering career from his youthful beginnings to the formation of the quartet of friends with whom he spent his most carefree period of climbing in the early 1980s.

THE CORES AND THE CONCLUSIONS

The beginnings of the narratives thus already indicate the different narrative strategies used by the authors in their discourses. In the case of Škamperle, who published the book in his thirties, the formative period of his teenage boarding-school years until his departure to study in Ljubljana extends through several chapters. The narrator of these chapters typically switches to the first person and often also uses the present tense. In addition to a series of increasingly demanding and

frequent climbing experiences in the Slovenian mountains, the narrative also includes broader areas of self-searching and trials which form the process of growing up, including spiritual and religious searches, political identification regarding the Slovenian minority and the first experiences of love and sex. The lyrical alpine narrative is thus intertwined with the traits of the *Bildungsroman*. The difficult practice and primary routes on Slovenian rock faces are joined by vertical trials in the Dolomites and the Central Alps. Later, during the author's student years, there are climbing experiences elsewhere in Europe and North America, friendships with fellow climbers, especially Bogdan (Biščak), new experiences with women and a climbing romance with Lidija – the most significant of these experiences, which the author discursively addresses directly, inserting her letters into the narrative – and expeditions to the Andes and the Himalaya. A confrontation with the South Face of Annapurna, which the expedition was unable to conquer due to falling rocks, ultimately brings about the author's decision to bid farewell to climbing. In conclusion, there is the author's accompanying text to the second edition of the book, published some thirty years later.

The central sections of Jelinčič's narrative are, like the beginning (and the Epilogue), constructed with short chapters which carefully escalate the tension, first showing life and events in the base, the tragic accidents of other expeditions close at hand, which increase awareness of the dangers of Himalayan exploits, the narrator's encounters with climbers from other expeditions and acclimatisation ascents, as well as the feelings of triumph and happiness as the first members of his expedition reach the summit of Broad Peak. Jelinčič provides a detailed description of the preparations for his own ascent and the dramatic escalation of physical and mental suffering and strain in ascending to high altitude camps and, finally, to the summit, which he reaches

on his own. The descent with a fellow climber is an even more dramatic ordeal. Despite suffering from extreme fatigue, they have to increase their pace due to bad weather. During the descent, they lose their way and have to bivouac, they are overwhelmed by an avalanche but manage to escape, and they are caught in a snowstorm. They nevertheless finally make their way to Camp 3. Due to the bad weather, they have to make their way down again as soon as possible, and finally, after another night on the mountain spent at Camp 2, they are fortunate enough to complete the descent to the base with the support of fellow climbers. The Epilogue describes the long wait for a helicopter to transfer the climbers back to Skardu and the farewell from Pakistan. There follows a separate appendix with the most important information about the participants and the chronological course of the expedition.

While Jelinčič focuses on a single major achievement in his book, the central part of Biščak's narrative, which is interrupted by somewhat maieutically guided conversations with his daughter, tells of his own mountaineering achievements and those of his quartet of friends, and a way of life which lasted several happy years. Accompanied by Škamperle, Biščak seriously engages with the sport of free climbing, but after some top achievements they realise that their real path is in the mountains. Step by step they string together a series of climbing achievements in the Dolomites and in the routes above Chamonix, and then they depart on their first expedition to Aconcagua. The most difficult ascent of the quartet is a route on the south-western rock wall of Burel, which for Biščak represents a kind of turning point in life and a farewell from youth. The four friends then gradually go their own ways. On an expedition to the Himalaya, none of the participants manage to conquer the summit of Annapurna, but a Patagonian expedition to Fitz Roy and Cerro Tore is successful, despite its participants

experiencing a dramatic encounter with white death during a hurricane-force snowstorm. Biščak's reports on the expedition to Karakoram and the ascents to Broad Peak and Gasherbrum II are initially more fragmentary, but he then supplements his impressions with a more sober, rational assessment of the expedition. The narrative concludes with a report about the events in the French Alps and the Italian Dolomites which caused him to stop climbing for fifteen years, and a loving morning farewell from his daughter.

AUTHENTICITY

An important component of all three of the mountaineering narratives discussed is the striving for authenticity, the writers' effort to use narrative strategies which encourage a referential pact and guarantee the clarity and credibility of the narration. The books are characterised by the intersection of documentary details with an autobiographical perspective, with memories and self-analysis, as well as the stringing together of precise descriptions of ascents, along with the climbing techniques and logistical procedures used during the vertical trials. All of these strategies hybridise the stylistic models of literary and utilitarian non-literary text genres. First-person narration seems to be an almost inevitable choice of the narrator and at the same time the author of the narrative, although exceptions are also sometimes possible, as we have seen in the case of Škamperle. The narrator's I must actually experience that which is shown and establish itself as a witness to the reality of the mountaineer's story. For instance, Jelinčič reflects on one evening at base camp:

> *In the evening, by the dim glow of a candle, I write a diary. I want to commit what I have experienced that day to paper. I'm not satisfied. [...] I strain my brain but barely manage to bring to mind a single event which would be worth rescuing from oblivion.*
>
> *I want to understand and finally come up with an explanation: words, seemingly so full of meanings and values, are often empty and false. [...] All day we were engaged in discussion and I thought these beautiful words were illustrating great ideas and sublime thoughts. Now it has all drained away and disappeared. [...] If I want to fill my diary with events, I have to experience them, too! How simple that thought was, but how difficult it was to unearth. (Jelinčič: 130)*

The mountaineer's story is more or less intimate and, due to the very nature of language, often resists objectification. Only that which has been experienced can authentically convey the unique experience of the agreeable horror of vertical travel. In support of the referential and autobiographical pacts in the narratives, readers also encounter the mountaineering sociolect, the amassing of data on weather and climbing conditions, the quality of the rock, snow or ice, descriptions of interpersonal relationships and mishaps with equipment, and the mountaineer's information about his or her own physical state and the changes in feelings which transpire during the journey. Such inventories seem to be a genre constant of mountaineering narrative, but they can become tediously repetitive for readers with different genre expectations. In this regard, an anecdote reported by Škamperle in the accompanying text to the reprint of his book after thirty years is interesting:

> *Before the first publication, I had the text read by a well-known Slovenian writer and asked for his opinion. He had a favourable opinion about the style, but thought the descriptions of the climbing ascents were repetitive and overabundant. To him, they seemed unimportant. Of course, I understood him, but at the same time it seemed to me that there were not enough specific descriptions of climbing ascents. I had actually omitted numerous important tours due to the internal structure of the narrative, which demands its own rhythm, even though the omitted tours were, viewed as a whole, important. […] In this respect, the updated version of the text is enriched with some new entries. With regard to the opinion expressed, it seems to me that the book does not contain enough genuine descriptions of climbing, which are almost too modest from today's perspective. (Škamperle: 236–37)*

It was probably the desire for authenticity which prompted Škamperle to revert to the real names of the characters in the reprint, rather than using the fictional names from the first edition. The figures in the books by Biščak and Jelinčič are, of course, referred to with their real names and not fictitious ones. In addition, the books include photographic material (by Biščak and Škamperle, for instance) not necessarily related to the author's personal memories, biographical information about certain diseased fellow climbers who appear in the text (Škamperle), and various documents to support the authenticity of the author's discourse, for instance, an excerpt from a fellow climber's diary (see Biščak: 146–47). Alternatively, the main text, in which more subjective impressions of the exploit are collected, is supplemented by an objective chronicle of the expedition, where general data is presented along with information about the participants and the chronological course of the expedition (see Jelinčič: 281–83).

IN SEARCH FOR (THE) MEANING (OF CLIMBING)

Among the prominent features of the works in question are the writers' attempts to make sense of both their own climbing activity and mountaineering in general, although certain interesting differences between the three writers can be observed. For Škamperle, the youngest of the three, a successfully completed climbing expedition is closest to a kind of mystical experience. When he delves into the secret of one of his exploits (together with Biščak), the friendship with his fellow climber is very important to him, but he also says:

> *You forget about everything: time, hunger, thirst, all external worries. You approach an unknown world within yourself, which seems to be the only real place to inhabit, compared to which everything else is superfluous. Especially in difficult stretches, where your concentration is most heightened, it seems as if you have reached the world of nirvana; without thought and memory, with nothing but an inner voice. At the summit, you experience fulfilment, satisfaction. Although it only lasts a short time, it is powerful enough for you to feel how, from tired limbs, it spreads to the soul, soothing, calming. You don't know whether time is departing now, too, or perhaps you have caught it and you are both waiting, with eternity placed in your lap. [...] Then, in the midst of the long purple lines which have fallen to the ground, I could sense the image to which I have aspired in an eternal approach. It rested in me and at the same time called me unfathomably far away; an image which was not even aware that I had been walking towards it from an incomprehensible distance, persistent and alone. (Škamperle: 131–32).*

Jelinčič is focused more on the physical and emotional side of the vertical trial than the spiritual side. At the same time, he notes the paradoxical nature of his feelings: on the one hand, he is fascinated by the feeling of freedom in climbing, but on the other, he is aware that he is trapped in his passion, driven by an irreconcilable longing:

> *I'm increasingly filled with a sense of freedom. This time until departure is exclusively and completely mine. The tea is in the flask, the food and the backpack are ready. Soon we will be in the grip of exertion, snow, perhaps wind and, after a few hours, a feeling of helplessness, as well. I, on the other hand, will act as if I am completely free, as if I have chosen my path entirely on my own. And yet this is not true. […] Could you make your way to the summit in just an hour or two? No! This means that I am not free in my choices after all. What binds me to the shackles of this sweet slavery? This damn passion, this unbridled desire, this eternal longing! (Jelinčič: 182–83)*

At the end of the book, when the author attempts, in an imaginary conversation with the stars, to determine why he set out on the expedition in the first place, readers learn that among the strongest motivations for mountaineering is escapism, escape from routine, the emptiness of everyday life, a departure from the well-trodden path:

> *Because I wanted to escape from everyday life, at least for a short Himalayan dream, to go to my Garden of Eden and feel the fullness of life for a few unrealistic weeks. For a cosmic second, I wanted to give up our world of tedium, where everyone thinks, reacts and speaks the same. But whoever strays from the well-trodden path is a fool, or at least a freak. […] We do not seek death in the mountains; on the contrary,*

> *we seek the fullness of life. But life is fuller where everyday life fades. More people die from the emptiness of this everyday life than from finding a way out of it. How many have succumbed to boredom, depression, a life without goals! (Ibid.: 264)*

Compared to the previous two authors, Biščak's self-reflections on climbing are more extensive and can be found both in the main text and in the discussion with his daughter Anja. Of the three authors, it is Biščak who explains his youthful decision to climb in the most rational way. In addition to the central existential reason for climbing, he joins Jelinčič in expressing the importance of the radical avoidance of the routine of everyday life:

> *My decision to take up climbing was no coincidence. I still remember those sleepless nights when, as a sixteen-year-old, I was unable to come to terms with the conclusion at which I had arrived over and over again in my nocturnal deliberations: that human life in itself has no meaning whatsoever, that there is no general principle that determines its value. I realised that I was completely alone in searching for meaning, and was immediately aware of the responsibility this brings. […] I somehow instinctively felt that the first thing I had to avoid was the daily routine which slowly draws you in, sucks out your youthful dreams, and gradually transforms you from a young man dreaming his life into an adult whose life is tossed around by coincidence and circumstances. […] I loved the mountains. I had spent some of the most exciting days of my life in them, and so I chose mountaineering. (Biščak: 21)*

Climbing not only has an existential dimension, but is also an aesthetic and sporting experience co-created by fear, with which the climber has to seek some kind of coexistence:

> *In the beginning, fear constricts the spirit, and with it the body, as well. It was the same with me, which is why I initially had to make an incredible effort in every respect. In such a state, it is impossible to talk about freedom of spirit and the beauty of movement in the rock. Moreover, all the way to the top of the rock face there was a complete lack of will to admire the beauty around you. It was only over the years, when fear had become an old acquaintance, when I got used to living in his company, sometimes even making fun of him, that my body relaxed, and only then did the really beautiful moments in mountaineering begin. […] The fear remained, only our relationship changed. (Ibid.: 47)*

The most beautiful component of Biščak's climbing experiences are moments of complete calm or peace, as 'a mixture of meditation and contemplation' (ibid.: 128) after the ascent. He describes them quite differently from Škamperle, like a kind of secular version of mystical experience:

> *In those ten minutes or so after exiting the rock face and before starting the descent from the summit, I had peace from myself, peace from the imperative that forced me to action and danger. I could surrender myself to the satisfaction of the ascent, I could observe the beauty of the mountains, of which I was all too often deprived during the climb, when I had to focus only on the metre in front of me. These were brief moments. Soon they were vanquished by the thought of the descent, and immediately*

> *after that by the plans for the next ascent. But they were wonderful while they lasted. Today, it seems to me that the greatest value of my mountaineering is concealed within them. (Ibid.: 127)*

At the end of the book, in an extensively elaborated intertextual connection to Hermann Hesse's *Glass Bead Game*, the writer compares the mountains with glass beads, and mountaineering with a game, especially a game of chess, which requires reason and intuition. According to Biščak, every game requires passion, and this is especially true of mountaineering, which, for him, is the game of all games:

> *Mountaineering is a much bigger game than a game with life. It is a complex game. You could say it is a game of chess, a game for which you need intuition and rational reflection. It is a game played with countless variables: weather, time, orientation, knowledge of the rock face, knowledge of yourself and your fellow climber, route selection, equipment, and so on. You have to navigate towards the summit between all of these variables. (Ibid.: 195)*

THE BOOK TITLES

All three of the texts discussed have carefully chosen titles which, along with other features of genre and composition, design and content, as well as style, indicate careful literary design. Škamperle explains the title of his book, *Sneg na zlati veji* (The Snow on the Golden Bough), in the accompanying text for the reprint issued thirty years after the original publication. He connects it to the literary or mythological tradition: the golden bough, mentioned by Virgil in the *Aeneid*, grows on a tree in a miraculous forest and, for the one who tears it off, opens

the door to an unearthly underground world. However, not just anyone can break it; only the one for whom it is intended can enter the mythical world in the parable, and this is a condition for ascending to the true heights of the world and the spirit. The author himself says: 'With the parable of the snow on the golden bough, I wanted to say that snow had fallen on the bough which enabled me to descend into the mythical land of the underworld and its fairy-tale habitats. Beneath the snow was the key to this mythical underworld. It also suggests that time has now changed and the reality is different.' (Škamperle: 230)

Jelinčič is an admirer of the stars, and in the moments of peace which he sometimes consciously seeks out during an expedition, he is their solitary observer. This motif is repeated several times in the book. *Zvezdnate noči* (Starry Nights) is not only the title of the book, but also of one of its concluding chapters, the one in which the author tries, after the night 'again gave him its most beautiful gift: the shining stars' (Jelinčič: 260), to make sense of his participation in the expedition in a conversation with them. Structurally, this chapter therefore has a teleological function and completes the narrative.

Biščak, too, finds the title for his book *Igra in biseri* (The Game and the Pearls) in a literary connection to Hesse at the end of his mountaineering narrative, when he tries to retrospectively express the meaning of mountaineering and his engagement with it. Similar to Jelinčič, his reflection has a teleological function; on self-reflection, the point of the book's title also crystallises. In the conclusion, the author points out the essential difference between mountaineering in his mature years, that is, the moment of talking with his daughter, and at the peak of his climbing as shown in the previous narrative: 'Above all, [mountaineering] is no longer the only thing in my life. And I am no longer the conqueror of a useless world, but more its grateful visitor.' (Biščak: 205–206)

CONCLUSION

Zvezdnate noči, *Sneg na zlati veji* and *Igra in biseri* all focus on the specific characteristics of vertical travel in the mountains, especially those characteristics that shed light on this activity, which the individual undertakes at will as an extreme sport and an adventure, and which unfolds as an escape, or at least a retreat, from the monotony of everyday life. Kaliszuk also recognises avoiding the routine of everyday life as one of the fundamental characteristics of mountaineering literature and of any literature dealing with extreme feats (ultramarathons, high-altitude climbing, long journeys on foot or by bicycle) in hostile environments. According to him, the narration of these voluntary, usually individual ventures, which are nevertheless often practised in large or small groups, intones a kind of 'promise that we can take control of our own existence' (Kaliszuk: 61). Judging by the enthusiasm for this type of writing in both print and digital media, this promise, as uncertain as it may be, appears to be of great interest to Western middle-class readers in the twenty-first century. In addition to belonging to the genre of travel writing, each of the books discussed is, in a unique way, an example of life writing, which speaks of their genre hybridity. I have tried to show this through a close reading of the texts, which, with their tendency towards the authenticity of a direct presentation of the experience of vertical trials, as well as with other formal, thematic and stylistic features, reveal their borderline position between literary and pragmatic texts without concealing their sympathy towards aesthetic literature.

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Povzetek

Članek se ukvarja z literaturo o plezanju v gorah, o odpravah na gorske vrhove in o (ekstremnem) alpinističnem smučanju kot podžanrom širšega sklopa planinske literature, ki je večinoma v pripovedni obliki, najdemo pa jo tudi v pesemski in dramski formi. V slovenskem kulturnem prostoru ima planinska literatura razmeroma bogato tradicijo z začetki v drugi polovici 19. stoletja in z velikim razmahom v drugi polovici 20. stoletja. Članek podrobneje obravnava alpinistične pripovedne spise slovenskih alpinistov Igorja Škamperleta (*Sneg na zlati veji*, 1992), Dušana Jelinčiča (*Zvezdnate noči*, 1990) in Bogdana Biščaka (*Igra in biseri*). Gre za spise, ki tematizirajo plezanje v gorah in odprave na gorske vrhove kot zahtevne eksistencialne preizkušnje in mejne izkušnje. Osredotočajo se torej na specifične značilnosti gorskega vertikalnega popotništva, zlasti na tiste, ki to dejavnost osvetljujejo kot ekstremni šport in hkrati kot pustolovščino, ki poteka kot beg ali vsaj kot umik pred enoličnostjo vsakdanjega življenja. Tudi Przemysław Kaliszuk prepoznava v izogibanju rutini vsakdanjosti eno temeljnih značilnosti alpinistične literature oziroma vsakršne literature o ekstremnih podvigih (o ultramaratonih, o visokogorskem plezanju, o dolgih pohodih itn.) v človeku neprijaznih okoljih. Pripovedovanje o teh prostovoljnih, običajno individualnih podvigih, ki sicer večkrat potekajo v večjih ali manjših skupinah, po Kaliszuku intonira nekakšno obljubo, da lahko sami prevzamemo nadzor nad lastno eksistenco. Sodeč po izpričanem navdušenju za to zvrst pisanja tako v tiskanih kakor v novih medijih, ta obljuba – četudi utegne biti zgolj iluzija – sovpada z interesom bralstva iz srednjih slojev sodobnih zahodnih družb. A vsaka od obravnavanih knjig je poleg predstavnice popotniškega pisanja na svojevrsten način tudi primer življenjepisnega pisanja oziroma primer žanrske

hibridnosti. Zanje so namreč značilni prepleti, soočanja in predelave žanrov popotniškega pisanja, življenjepisja ter neliterarnih priročnikov in vodnikov, posvajajo pa tudi značilnosti kanoničnih pripovednih žanrov. V članku je to prikazano z natančnim branjem besedil, ki s svojo težnjo po avtentičnosti reprezentacije surove izkušnje vertikalnih preizkušenj ter z drugimi formalnimi, tematskimi in slogovnimi značilnostmi razkrivajo svoj mejni položaj med literarnimi in pragmatičnimi besedili, pri tem pa ne skrivajo svojih simpatij do umetniške literature.

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