

THE IMPORTANCE OF A NOVEL FOR THE SURVIVAL
OF A MINORITY

Zmote dijaka Tjaža by Florjan Lipuš

Zgodovinska izkušnja nas uči, da narod obstaja, dokler obstaja njegov jezik. Živost jezika se najbolje potrjuje z literarnim ustvarjanjem. Literarno ustvarjenje je torej pogoj za obstoj slehernega naroda, posebno še v obdobjih, ko je narod v težavah – v takih okoliščinah je literarno ustvarjanje potrebno za narodov obstoj. Vedno me je zanimala literatura koroških Slovencev in vedno sem jo natančno spremljal. Tokrat bi se rad ustavil ob Lipuševem romanu *Zmote dijaka Tjaža* in obsežni pozitivni reakciji, ki jo je vzbudila objava tega romana med nemško govorečimi. Literarno delo je tako prispevalo k afirmaciji ogrožene narodne manjšine.

recepcija, narodna manjšina, koroški Slovenci, zamejska književnost, F. Lipuš, *Zmote dijaka Tjaža*, prevajanje v nemščino, P. Handke

Historical experience tells us that a people lives as long as its language lives. The living status of a language is best confirmed through literary creation. Literary creation, thus, represents a precondition for the existence of every people, particularly when a people goes through a period of difficulties: it is necessary for its survival in such situations. I have always been interested in the literature of Carinthian Slovenes and have followed it closely. On this occasion, I would like to dwell on Lipuš's novel *Zmote dijaka Tjaža* and on the extensive positive response it provoked in the public opinion of the majority people following its publication in German. A work of literature, thus, contributed to the affirmation of a particularly endangered national minority.

reader-response, national minority, Carinthian Slovenes, literature of Slovene minorities, F. Lipuš, *Zmote dijaka Tjaža*, translation into German, P. Handke

One of the essays in Franc Zadavec's book about the most important Slovenian novelists of the 20th century, which, in the short time since it was first published, has already become a standard work for the study of Slovenian literature, is dedicated to Florjan Lipuš (*Slovenski roman dvajsetega stoletja*, Murska Sobota, 2000, 168–179). From the essay we find out that Florjan Lipuš wrote his first novel, *Zmote dijaka Tjaža*, between 1958 and 1963, and that it was originally published, in instalments only, in the literary periodical *Mladje – literatura in kritika*. We can only add that, in the then prevalent intellectual atmosphere in the Slovenian part of Carinthia, these fragments encountered a negative reception. When, in the year

1972, the Maribor publishing house Založba Obzorja published the entire story about a pupil called Tjaž, the reception was rather subdued. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the only ones to see the value of this work were Marjan Kramberger, Vili Vuk and Marjan Dolgan. I have read that not even the two weekly magazines published by Carinthian Slovenes gave it a mention. In Graz, on the other hand, issue number 68 of *Manuskripti*, a magazine publishing the work of young writers intent on waking up the slumbering spirit of their town, who exhibited great interest in everything that was new, in intellectual terms, including the territory of the former Yugoslavia, published a sizeable excerpt from the work in question in German translation. That, however, was all that one could find out about this work abroad.

But when, nine years later, the novel was translated into German by Peter Handke, in collaboration with Helga Mračnikar, and published in its entirety, its reception in countries where German is spoken was outstanding. All the leading German and Austrian papers and magazines printed extensive reviews; in Switzerland, *Neue Züricher Zeitung* mentioned it on several occasions, and one of the leading German TV channels included it in its list of best books. The titles of these reviews are rather characteristic in their own right. We can mostly divide these essays into two groups, those stressing the political importance of this novel as a call to pay closer attention to the position of the Slovenian people in Carinthia under Austria, and those stressing the literary value of this work. As regards the former, the very titles of these reviews are characteristic enough: for example, *Der personifizierte Artikel 7, Grossoffensive für Minderheiten* or *Grosser Bahnhof für Handke und Lipuš*. On the occasion of the presentation of this work in the great 20th Century Hall of the Vienna Museum, whose seating capacity is up to 1,000 people, and which was filled to capacity (among those present were the Austrian Chancellor Kreisky, along with some Government members and foreign diplomats). Kreisky personally thanked Handke “for helping those striving to ensure the members of this national minority, who are few but so very talented, their rightful place, which they are not denied in formal terms but are prevented from attaining in real terms ... Not only does this minority have the right to an equal status – it also deserves to enjoy an advantageous position.” This comment prompted the reviewer to remark: “Let us hope that the Chancellor was not uttering mere empty phrases but was sincerely attempting to ensure that Carinthian Slovenes should have the same rights that South Tyroleans have enjoyed for a long time” (*Extrablatt* 5, 1981).

The thematic focus of this novel, as has been pointed out in one review, is on a people in Austria whose members are constantly being counted by means of statistics; this process will go on until only a few of them are left, which will be useful for tourism.

In this way, the well-known literary critic Martin Lüdke, writing for *Die Zeit*, a leading weekly magazine for German intellectuals, called this novel a testimony not

only to the position of the Slovenian minority in Carinthia but also to the hopeless position of the individual under such circumstances:

Möglicherweise steht der Tjaž für die Slowenen in Österreich, für die Unterdrückung einer kleinen Minderheit in einem ohnehin kleinen Volk, für die eingekapselte Anarchie, die an der starren, versteinerten, lebensverhindernden Ordnung kratzt. Sicher steht der Tjaž aber auch für sich: eine ausweglose Existenz, winzig, verstümmelt, ohne Hoffnung. Selbst der Glaube ist ihm ausgetrieben worden, von den Institutionen, die ihn verwalten. „Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns die Hoffnung gegeben“ – schrieb einmal Walter Benjamin. Solche Zuversicht wird von dem Roman des Slowenen Florjan Lipuš dementiert – oder: doch auch bestätigt?

A lot of reviews have dwelt on the language and the style of this novel, and on the way Handke transposed them into German. In point of fact, Handke did not really translate this work; what he did was *nachgedichtet*, to use a German phrase: he used this text to create his own poetic work. In the opinion of one reviewer, this represented a return to his Slovenian origin. I have read with interest what Peter Kersche, somewhat critically, has written about this (*Die Brücke*, October 1981). What Handke had to deal with was a gnarled, knotty language, archaic due to the fact that it is disappearing. However, Lipuš used this language in a most picturesque manner, so that the translator had to allow himself great poetic licence.

Several reviews have also pointed out similarities with Musil's novel *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless* and with Friedrich Torberg's *Der Schüler Gerber*. The problem of adolescence is the same, but the social background is entirely different. What the reviewers could not know, however, was that Ernst Zdoerer, who also attended a seminary – in South Tyrol – would write a similar novel from the point of view of a member of the German minority in Italy, faced with similar minority problems (*Das Glück beim Händewaschen*, 1976), but these problems, although very much in evidence, cannot be compared with the difficult situation faced by Carinthian Slovenes.

Having written *Resisting Sorrow*, *The Removal of a Village* and *Suspicious Behaviour*, Florjan Lipuš, we learn, has wavered of late in his faith in the survival of his people in Carinthia. But it would appear that this people will survive owing to him, among others. Chance played a part as well. It took the name of a great, well-known writer, Peter Handke, for Florjan Lipuš to be discovered and for his message in defence of his ethnic group to be heard. The message is based on the preservation of the identity of this ethnic group through its language. The message is that literature in Carinthia is part of the common Slovenian culture, and that striving for “*Zweisprachigkeit*” leads to a change of identity. That is why this writer has been attacked by those advocating Germanising tendencies. But many have bravely defended his cause. Klaus Amann, a professor of Germanistics in Celovec, raised his voice against the authorities in Vienna, Carinthia and Celovec because of their refusal to help organise a symposium on the work of Florjan Lipuš. Klaus Amann's

protest was supported by the most eminent Austrian writers. The symposium was eventually held as planned (*Lipuř-Symposium mit politischem Eklat*, *Standard*, 13./14. 12. 1997; see also Klaus Amann's view, published in the same issue: *Ich werde mich diesem Geist nicht beugen*).