

Boys and Critics: The Reception of the First Slovenian Homoerotic Novel as a Reflection of Sociocultural Changes

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Abstract: France Novšak published his novel *Dečki: roman iz dijaškega internata* (Boys: A Novel from a Boarding School) in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1938 and, with some alterations, in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1970. It was reprinted in the Republic of Slovenia in 2016. The paper looks into how the novel has been received in the three different states and socio-political systems and considers what the criticism can tell us about the changing attitudes towards homosexuality. It covers all the milestones on the novel's path from the furore surrounding its first publication to the silence surrounding the second and its eventual reputation as the first homoerotic novel in Slovenian literature.

Keywords: France Novšak (1916–1991), *Dečki*, reception, homoerotic literature, Slovenia

Introduction

The Slovenian writer France Novšak (1916–1991) was born in Ljubljana and educated in Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade. He is the author of a couple of stories for children and some poetry as well as, more notably, four novels, all of which were published before the end of World War II. After the war, Novšak worked as a cultural and literary journalist, translator and lexicographer.

Today, Novšak is primarily known for his novel *Dečki: roman iz dijaškega internata* (Boys: A Novel from a Boarding School), which he wrote in 1936. In 1937, excerpts from the novel were published in three consecutive issues of the literary journal *Ljubljanski zvon*, and the first book edition came out in late 1938. The novel was published again in 1970 and 2016.

This paper considers the three editions chronologically, together with other milestones and defining circumstances in the novel's reception history. In other words, it shows how homosexuality can save your life. Or at least your book's life.

The Novel and Its First Critics

France Novšak's novel was not the first in Slovenian literature to include homoerotic elements, motifs or episodes (see Mozetič *Modra svetloba*; Zupan Sosič 321-322; Mihurko Poniž 143-151). Besides, Slovenian readers before World War II must have been familiar with at least some foreign authors' texts thematising same-sex love, or the scandals the authors and the books were embroiled in, as well as the attempts at decriminalising homosexual acts, especially by Magnus Hirschfeld, who is referenced comprehensively in an anonymous Slovenian booklet *Homoseksualnost* (Homosexuality, 1926). Nevertheless, in terms of original Slovenian literature young Novšak created something quite unique and remarkable.

In the novel's plot, Zdenko Castelli (13 going on 14) from Serbia and Nani Papali (turning 17 in the school year delimiting the novel's plot) from Slovenia meet at St. Mary's Institute, a Catholic boarding school in Zagreb, Croatia. Zdenko is the subject of great admiration, with students as well as educators generally regarding him as the most beautiful boy. He immediately catches Nani's eye, and the boys' relationship becomes very intimate very quickly. After the very intense and life-changing school year Nani and Zdenko eventually surrender to external pressures and decide to go separate ways. But not before spending the last summer together, in which Nani writes down his memories of the previous year – the novel that we have just read.

The novel describes in some detail the awakening adolescent body, which culminates in the boys' kisses and the iconic bathroom scene, where Nani and Zdenko admire each other's naked bodies. However, Nani and Zdenko are acutely aware that "these things"¹ are prohibited and they find themselves at the inevitable crossroads: should they accept external morality or clutch to their personal one, risking conflicts with the environment? We are presented with a surprisingly frank discussion of adolescent same-sex desire, in particular the boys' oscillation between their intense feelings of love and adverse social expectations. Accordingly, coping with the heteronormative matrix turns out to be an essential part of the relationship between the protagonists as well as the novel itself.

The novel develops in accordance with Gregory Woods's observation that "boarding-school is the citadel of the passing phase" (326). But not entirely and not without glitches. Nani dies very young, and what is left to him of heterosexual bliss is marred by memories of his boarding-school past. As for Zdenko, the last we read of him is that he is lonely and finds some solace with the widows he is staying with. But earlier on, the narrator gives a much darker account of the boys' likely future: at the end of the school

1 Being decades too early for any really proud, emancipatory affirmation of their identities, the boys rely on the discourse of demonstrative pronouns: "these things" ("te stvari" (Novšak 66)) indicate – what we now perceive as – the deeply ingrained shame of pre-emancipatory tradition, where homosexuality was a sin best kept in silence.

year the boys will be separated and destiny “will (perhaps) send one of them into girls’ arms and leave the other one to take his own life because of unfulfilled and even unfulfillable desire” (Novšak 178).²

The journal that first published excerpts from the novel, the *Ljubljanski zvon* (The Ljubljana Bell, 1881–1941), was one of the most prominent literary journals before World War II. It was politically liberal and it supported the Liberation Front (partisans) and communists. When *Dečki* was published the journal was edited by Juš Kozak, Ferdo Kozak’s brother, who was Novšak’s teacher. Novšak refers to them both as “benevolent teachers and counsellors” (Novšak 249).

After the novel came out, the *Ljubljanski zvon* published a favourable review by Vladimir Pavšič (1913–1993, better known as Matej Bor, a renowned poet, translator, playwright, journalist and partisan). Pavšič notes on the controversial, moralistic reception of the novel, but commends Novšak on his treatment of the topics of boarding-school education, adolescents’ physical and mental development and oscillation between “normal” and “abnormal” eroticism (311). With reference to homoeroticism, Pavšič distinguishes between the topic itself and how Novšak treats it – it could have been “disgusting and off-putting” if the writer had not handled it with “tact and taste”; as it is, there is evidence for a strong will for the “normal”, for the boys to find girls (311–312).

The other side of the storm of controversy alluded to by Pavšič was represented by the other major literary and cultural journal – the Catholic *Dom in svet* (Home and the World, 1888–1944). Its editor Tine Debeljak and some contributors supported the Home Guard (collaborators with the occupying forces) and the journal continued to be published after foreign occupation – unlike the *Ljubljanski zvon*, which complied with the “cultural silence” introduced in the country by the Liberation Front.

Writing for the *Dom in svet*, the reviewer Mirko Javornik termed Novšak’s novel a complete failure, immature and overly sentimental, formally and stylistically worthless, “nothing but the first longer homosexual piece in Slovenian literature”, written “at the level of adolescent diaries”; it is best seen as “pornography intended for various private circles” (230).

The editor of the journal, Tine Debeljak (whose destiny was similar to Javornik’s; they both emigrated immediately after World War II and lived abroad for the rest of their lives), left behind, in his desk drawer, an unpublished, lengthy and detailed analysis of what he perceived to be Novšak’s novelistic communist conspiracy. Written in 1945, Debeljak’s “Cultural Bolshevism in France Novšak’s Novels” starts with Novšak’s last novel, *Globoko jezero* (The Deep Lake, 1944), but it discusses his other novels, too, including *Dečki*. This book, argues Debeljak,

2 The adverb “perhaps” was only added in the second edition of the novel (1970).

denies God, Christ's divinity, Mary's divine motherhood, belief in the afterlife, it mocks Christian morality, sacraments, saints, monastic and missionary calling, Church authorities, Christian education.

It advocates uninhibited pleasure, self-pollution, the sin of Sodom, adolescent affairs, free love.

It incites class hatred, revolution, underground action.

It takes Bolshevism to be the only correct solution to the question of the meaning of life. (Debeljak 41)

The clash between the two titan journals reflects well the great cultural and political divide so defining of the Slovenian world before and during World War II and still so familiar today. However, the polemics were representative not only of literary and cultural politics, but also, more generally, of how gender and sexual non-normativity was perceived: although there seemed to be fundamental political and cultural differences, same-sex desire was seen by both sides as an abnormal deviation.

Boys in Yugoslavia

The first decades of Novšak's reception after the Second World War were limited to occasional, brief observations focusing on his criticism of Catholic education and false morals, but the dominant feature was silence. This is probably understandable – socialism was officially atheist, but despite the new world that was supposed to have been created, socialist sexual morals and ethics were traditionalist and heteronormative.

In spite of everything and despite the silence, the novel was published in its second edition in 1970 by a major Slovenian publisher. Unfortunately, I have been unable to uncover what motivated this remarkable publishing accomplishment, particularly at a time when “unnatural intercourse” between men was still criminalised by the Penal Code (these acts were not decriminalised until 1977).

Novšak revised his text mainly stylistically although certain changes have significant interpretative consequences, and some of these textual variants are highlighted in the 2016 edition of the novel.

The second edition came with an Afterword by Jože Kastelic, who argues for the recognition of the literary qualities of the novel (259-260) but finds himself in quite a fix when trying to explain away or gloss over the boys' relationship. I find his spiralling logic a little difficult to follow, but he struggles very hard to persuade the reader that what they might see is not what is really there. He maintains that the boys' relationship results from the school's suffocating atmosphere and religious strictness, and although it is unnatural (*nenaraven*) it is not against nature (*protinaraven*) (258). Furthermore, Kastelic distinguishes between eroticism and sexuality so as to suggest that only in sexuality would it be possible to speak of homoerotic abnormality and, hence, Nani and Zdenko

remain pure (258-259). Such interpretative attempts may indicate some sort of loyalty to Novšak, who Kastelic had known since before World War II, and perhaps he did not want to taint his friend's reputation with inappropriate associations, given the social and political circumstances in which the novel was re-issued. Seen from today, however, Kastelic's arguments are clearly based on a homophobic premise: homosexuality is something negative, and a homo-affirmative interpretation would mean betrayal. This leads to denial – whether on purpose or because of a lack of insight is another question.

In this context, and as a sort of contrast to Kastelic, I would like to call attention to another review (there were more, but they limit themselves to seeing the boys' relationship as an unproblematic passing phase or a consequence of an inappropriate milieu). Jože Šifrer, although praising certain aspects of the novel, perceives it as dated and argues that it has little to say to "us" (922). On the other hand, Šifrer recognises that a more thorough examination of same-sex "delusion" would be required, thus indirectly confirming the need for the representation "a certain kind of people" (921) in literature.

Potentially significant, but only appreciated decades after it was made in 1976, was the amateur film adaptation of the novel by Stanko Jost (b. 1944), who reports having had problems with authorities as well as some of the actors when making the film (*Ozmeč*). The adaptation is set in Slovenia at a modern-day, lay boarding school and the boys are contemporary socialist long-haired adolescents. In contrast to the novel, religion plays no role and the boys' eroticism is quite explicit. The film did little to generate interest in Novšak and his novel(s), as it only had two screenings in 1977, until it was resurrected by the Ljubljana LGBT Film Festival in 2004. Novšak did not attend either of the initial screenings nor did the filmmaker attend the screening at the festival in 2004.

A New Life

The silence surrounding the novel was not broken to any significant degree until it was included in the anthology *Modra svetloba: homoerotična ljubezen v slovenski literaturi* (Blue Light: Homoerotic Love in Slovenian Literature), edited by Brane Mozetič in 1990. This anthology was the most important single event in the resurgence of interest in Novšak's work. It gave the novel new visibility and it was the first openly activist intervention in the author's canonisation process. *Modra svetloba* was also the first book in the LGBTQ+ book series Lambda, one of the lasting achievements of the LGBTQ+ activism emphasising culture and the arts initiated in 1984 by the Magnus Festival (the book series is still in existence, having published over 140 titles of LGBTQ+ fiction, history and theory).

In the anthology the novel is described as "the first and so far only gay novel in Slovenia" (Mozetič 20), giving it the label that has stuck with it and saved it from oblivion

but also largely delimited analyses of the novel to its depiction of same-sex desire.

Following the anthology, *Boys* gradually made it into reference books, literary studies, histories, overviews and students' papers, theses and dissertations, where practically all the debates focus – relatively narrowly – on what I have been focusing on – relatively narrowly – in this paper: the novel's representation of sexuality. References to “the passing phase” of homoerotic attachments have not disappeared, of course, but the novel has been interpreted affirmatively, and overwhelmingly so. The first article in a scholarly journal to deal exclusively with the novel was published in 2009 (Zavrl, “Dečki”).

The novel has also been interpreted as a young adult novel (e.g. Pirnar 239-240; Picco 8-9; Blažič), positioning it at the intersection of literature and pedagogy. This is in sync with the wider social and political developments that have seen LGBTQ+ issues become more mainstream – as well as more openly opposed.

A new milestone in the reception of France Novšak's novel was its third edition in 2016, when it was published in the Lambda book series, this time with some textual variants juxtaposing its three editions, and the first comprehensive overview of Novšak's life and work (Zavrl, “France Novšak”). The aim of the publisher was to situate the novel firmly in Slovenian literary history and make it available to modern LGBTQ+ readers, something that has been noticed by (some of) the reviewers, too (Bratož).

The reception of France Novšak's novel *Dečki* seems to have proved that Vladimir Pavšič was right when writing in 1939 that “time is fickle, and it may turn out that Novšak's novel, despite its funeral according to all the rites, has not been buried quite so irretrievably” (311). Perhaps the most ironic aspect if it all is that the novel has survived almost exclusively because of what it was originally rejected for: homosexuality has saved its life.

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