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Teaching Minority Literature: the Case of Trieste

The paper presents the guidelines for teaching minority literature in the Trieste area, namely at the Slovenian and Italian high schools in Trieste. The teaching method proposed was created as a result of the need for new approaches in teaching literature due to the increasing heterogeneity of the population of high school students. The method takes into account the specific factors characteristic of the Triestine literary system, which affect the production and reception of literature in the Trieste area, that is the turbulent history of this territory during the 20th century and thus also the presence of various traumatic collective memories and postmemories present in this area. Considering these facts, the new teaching method is based on memory studies and literary imagology. In terms of the selection of literary texts it shifts from the nationally prescribed literature curriculum towards regional comparative literature.

Keywords: Trieste, Istria, minority literature, collective trauma, postmemory, literary imagology.

Poučevanje manjšinske literature: primer Trsta

Pričujoči prispevek predstavlja smernice za poučevanje literature manjšine s tržaškega prostora na slovenskih in italijanskih srednjih šolah v Trstu. Predlagani model poučevanja je nastal na podlagi potrebe po novem pristopu do poučevanja književnosti zaradi etnično vse bolj heterogene populacije dijakov. Pri tem upošteva specifične dejavnike znotraj tržaškega literarnega sistema, ki vplivajo na produkcijo in recepcijo literature na Tržaškem, in sicer razburkano zgodovino tržaškega prostora tekom 20. stoletja ter posledično prisotnost različnih travmatičnih kolektivnih memorij in postmemorij na Tržaškem. Na podlagi teh danosti se novi model poučevanja opira na spominske študije in na literarno imagologijo. Pri delu z literarnimi besedili se odmika od nacionalno koncipirane literature v smeri regionalne literarne komparatistike.

Ključne besede: Trst, Istra, manjšinska književnost, kolektivna travma, postmemorija, literarna imagologija.

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1. Introduction

The paper¹ discusses the possibilities of implementing a unified method of minority literature teaching in the Trieste area. The target users are high school students and teachers of the high schools in the Trieste area with the Slovenian and Italian languages of instruction. The method described strives for the highest level of unity possible, as the actual implementation of the method in the classroom depends on the circumstances in individual classrooms and the level of the multicultural consciousness that the high school students and teachers possess. Moreover, the method represents a shift from the nationally adopted concept of literary history towards regional literary comparative studies and the fact that the high school teachers of Italian and Slovenian literatures approach the method from two different standpoints (Slovenian or Italian literary history).

The method described forms a part of the wider research studying the opportunities for teaching multicultural education through language and literature.² The difference lies in the fact that this method as such does not focus on multicultural education, but rather already requires from teachers and students a satisfactory level of multicultural awareness so that they can become acquainted with the complex literature of the Trieste area. This method is thus most appropriate for the students of the final years of high schools (the students before graduation), who have already acquired the necessary cross-cultural competences during their schooling.³

The purpose of the model is thus to help the teachers to deal with the Triestine minority literature in literature classes. The decision to familiarise high school students with this corpus of texts might actually, despite the expected positive effects, cause uneasiness and many a dilemma, as the Trieste territory is very specific due to the nationalist tensions, clashes and migration which occurred there in the 20th century.

The paper also sheds light on the period of the Triestine irredentism, that is the struggles to annex Trieste to the Kingdom of Italy, and the later fascist period with its politics of planned assimilation of the Slovenian population. In addition, the post-war immigration of the Istrians to Trieste⁴ is also of significant importance for this study.

In the context of memory studies, one can assume that such experiences caused a traumatic collective memory and postmemory.⁵ Due to the multicultural character of the Trieste area they can be studied through the multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009): Trieste is a city where different communities are present, therefore it is a city of different collective memories. Taking into account the hypothesis that literature represents a space for manifesting traumatic experiences (Boulter 2013), one can conclude that in Trieste the traumatic collective memories of different communities are reflected in literature. The authors in the Trieste area thus form the structure of the literary narration⁶

depending on the collective memory (postmemory) of the community that they belong to.

The above-mentioned fact represents a special challenge in teaching the Triestine literature, particularly if one takes into account the currently ethnically heterogeneous population of high school students in class and their different levels of identification with the Slovenian minority or the majority Italian nation (Pertot & Kosic 2014; Obid 2018), as the collective memory and postmemory do not only affect the production of literary works, but also its reception.

In terms of literary imagology,⁷ one can therefore claim that literary works are studied through the perspective of the home (observing) culture. Adopting this approach often leads to the automatic acceptance of the (stereotypical) literary images of The Other (the other culture, the observed culture), that is to the heteroimage. Besides that, no deeper reflection and critical distance are applied when accepting literary auto-images representing the images of one own's culture and metaimages, that is the opinion of the home culture on how it is accepted, valued and experienced by the other culture.

In terms of the minority literature, the paper focuses on the Slovenian Triestine literature and the Istrio-Triestine literature. The term Slovenian Triestine literature denotes the 20th and 21st centuries literature written in Slovenian by the authors belonging to the Slovenian community in the Trieste area. In the article, the term Istrio-Triestine literature denotes the literature of the authors from Istria who immigrated to Trieste after World War II and write in Italian. Both literatures are discussed as minority literatures, as their images of the Trieste area differ from the formal image found in the Italian Triestine literature.⁸ That is, all three images often stand in opposition to each other and the co-placement of all three literary images, arising from three different collective memories, offers a comprehensive representation of the literary image of Trieste. The teaching approach proposed is therefore based on the use of the comparative method.⁹

2. Teaching Minority Literature in Trieste: a Comparative Approach

According to the available data, high schools in the Trieste area do not deal with the three literatures simultaneously, meaning that the comparative method is not used. At present, these schools teach minority literature in separate sections, without establishing comparisons: the Slovenian Triestine literature is taught at the Slovenian high schools in Trieste within the scope of teaching hours dedicated to teaching national (Slovenian) literature.¹⁰ There is no data available on the systematic teaching of the Istrio-Triestine literature at the Slovenian or Italian high schools. In addition, no data is available about the actual teaching of the Slovenian Triestine literature at the Italian high schools in Trieste.

The obstacle for introducing a comparative approach and including the minority literature in the learning process is most likely not of linguistic nature. The high school students attending the Slovenian high schools in Trieste usually have a good command of the Italian language. To accommodate the needs of the students from the Italian high schools, who have a poor command of the Slovenian language, the translations of the Slovenian Triestine literature into Italian are available. One can therefore assume that the discomfort in teaching the minority literature is mostly due to the lack of the relevant cross-cultural competences¹¹ of high school teachers and students, and due to the lack of the teaching materials taking into account the multidirectional collective memory of Trieste.¹²

According to the ethnically heterogeneous population of high school students in Trieste at present, the use of the comparative teaching method seems to be reasonable not only at the Italian high schools, which do not teach minority literature yet, but also at the Slovenian high schools in the Trieste area, which have an already established method of teaching the Slovenian Triestine literature, described in the following parts of this study.

For the purpose of teaching the Slovenian literature at the Slovenian high schools in Italy, certain school readers and course books were published in the Trieste area in the second half of the 20th century.¹³ The latter comprise, in comparison with the school readers used in Slovenia, more authors from the territory of the present Friuli Venezia Giulia (Italy), and the Goriška and the Littoral-Karst regions (Slovenia). Such a selection of authors was most likely created in order to strengthen the image of the existence of the Slovenianness in a wider cross-border area between Italy and Slovenia and in order to contribute to the preserving of the memory of the traumatic events related to the suppression of the Slovenians. In line with this fact, the existing approaches to the Slovenian Triestine literature arise from the standpoint of the Slovenian Triestine community (the observing culture). The literary reception of the observed corpus of texts is thus based on a specific perspective on the Trieste area and on the collective memory and postmemory of the Slovenian Triestine community, which is, for the sake of the present study, illustrated through the following stages: Trieste at the end of the 19th century as one of the key centres of the Slovenian culture, the collective trauma of burning down the Narodni dom (the Slovenian Cultural Centre) in Trieste in 1920, the ban on the use of the Slovenian language between the two wars, forced assimilation and the loss of Trieste after World War II.

Since also the Slovenian Triestine authors¹⁴ share this standpoint, their works possess predictable structural elements supporting the given standpoint: their plots mostly occur in the Trieste area in 20th or 21st century. The struggle to preserve the Slovenian identity, language and culture is usually placed in the foreground of the literary work and the classification of the literary characters

follows this idea: the protagonists act in favour of Slovenianness, while their opponents are characterised by doubtful ethical values. The struggle for preserving the Slovenianness actually represents a struggle for everything good, fair and non-violent as accepted by the society. In the Slovenian Triestine literature, positive characters are mostly Slovenian characters. Their opponents are usually Italian speaking characters. Literary characters are thus mostly formed according to the principle of pure identity position (Slovenian or Italian). If the opponents of the Slovenianness do appear among the Slovenian characters, they are portrayed as negative characters, facing sentence or perhaps even death. And such is, for instance, the fate of the Slovenian female renegade described in the novel *Parnik trobi nji* (The Steamer Sounds a Horn for Her) by Boris Pahor (Pahor 1964). The emergence of the so-called multiple national identities in the Friuli Venezia Giulia are not yet discussed¹⁵ in the literary texts of the existing school readers.

It should be added that the structure described is not always placed in the foreground, which means that the literary work speaks of another place, period and topic. However, in the background one can notice a subtle narrative structure, which occasionally enters the literary work. This is, for example, characteristic of the modern Slovenian Triestine crime novel *Umor pod K2* by Dušan Jelinčič (Jelinčič 2000). The novel is about mountaineering and murders committed during the ascent to the summit of the Eiger, while the background of the novel depicts the everlasting tensions between the representatives of the former colonies (positive characters) and the representatives of the ruling community (negative characters). It can be assumed that this reflects the Slovenian-Italian tensions within the relations between the colonies and the West (a parallel already drawn by Kosovel earlier, upon reading Tagore's works (Jelnikar 2016).

As it can be noted, the existing approach towards the Slovenian Triestine literature taken by the Slovenian high schools in Trieste can have negative effects on the self-image of students, who identify themselves with the negatively characterised culture. Therefore, the proposed method for teaching literature in the minority language offers an upgrade of the already existing method, namely the simultaneous studies of two literary works created in the Trieste area in approximately the same literary period, but on the basis of different collective memories related to the Trieste area. The present study focuses on the discussion of the two narrative works, one belonging to the corpus of the Slovenian Triestine literature and the other to the corpus of the Istrio-Triestine literature: *Pena majskega vala* (Čuk 1998) and *Verde acqua* (Madiere 1987).¹⁶

The Istrio-Triestine literature, like the literature of the Slovenian Triestine authors, is based on the collective trauma of the emigration from Istria. Consequently, the corpus of the Istrio-Triestine literature has a predictable plot: it depicts the two stages of emigration from Istria. First, the emigration decision-making moments and the emigration process itself are described, followed by

the second stage, namely the arrival and the settlement in the refugee centres in the Trieste area. As a result, these works depict Trieste as an alien city, a city of eradication, starving and unemployment. On the other hand, the works idealise Istria and praise its nature, soil, sea, sunshine and vegetation.¹⁷

The advantage of using the comparative method is the possibility for the high school students to observe the Trieste area from different perspectives, meaning that these students not only become acquainted with the expected image on the Trieste area, but also view it through the Istrio-Triestine perspective. The purpose of such a confrontation is not to value the two perspectives but rather to familiarise the students with the structural elements of the literary narration and literary conventions.

During the creative writing process, the high school students learn about the above-mentioned notions through various creative writing exercises, as they try to continue/change the given plot and put themselves in the shoes of the literary characters. Some examples are described below.

The novel *Pena majskega vala* sets its plot in the Trieste area in the second half of the 20th century. The main Romanesque characters are Maks and Luisa, who fall in love, but face the opposing external, socio-political factors. Maks is the son of a nationally conscious Triestine Slovenian, while Luisa is the daughter of an Istrian, who moved to the Trieste area and shows an explicitly anti-Slovenian orientation. The author leaves the end of the novel to a certain extent open as far as the plot is concerned, and thus the reader is unable to tell with certainty whether the young lovers will be able to surpass the ethnic contrasts. The author only points towards the fact that the characters have to bear the heavy burden of the external attempts to separate them from each other.

One can observe that the narrative structure fits the corpus of the literary works describing young lovers who are unable to live happily due to unfavourable external circumstances. One of such classic plots is the plot about Romeo and Juliet. When discussing the given works, the high school students can also search for other works of world literature which have a similar structure. At the same time, during the creative writing process the students attempt to compose a short sequence of the novel that follows, for instance, with the help of the guiding questions: "Write a chapter of the novel (one typed page), in which Maks and Luisa decide to leave Trieste and try to start a new life in Australia. How are they going to cope with the separation from their parents, relatives, friends and from the local environment? Which language are they going to use to communicate with each other? What fate is their love going to face?"

The main negative character of the novel in question is Luisa's father. In this case, a metaimage (this is the observing culture's perception of the way the Others look at them) is used and it is thus reasonable to establish a comparison with a literary work belonging to the Istrio-Triestine literature, such as with the narrative opus of Marisa Madieri, as it offers a different image of the immigrants

from Istria, based on the perspective of an Istrian immigrant in Trieste and her experiencing of the Trieste area. This plot is also placed in the Trieste area in the second half of the 20th century. The first-person female narrator of the plot revives her memories of her youth spent in a refugee centre in Trieste, and describes her feelings of being different and her feelings of shame due to poverty, as well as her nostalgic memories of her childhood period in Istria, described in an idealised manner.

According to its structure, the plot can be placed in the corpus of the texts presenting the main characters who are, due to unfavourable external circumstances, forced to leave their birthplace and start a new life in a new environment. Consequently, the birthplace is described in an idealised manner, while the settlement location is described in a negative manner. The high school students can, with the help of the teachers, try to find other works of world literature which have a comparable structure and are familiar to them. They can also search for the works of the Slovenian authors depicting homesickness as a result of emigration in the period between the two wars (as described in the sonnet of Alojz Gradnik: *V tujini I*). During the creative writing process, the students then produce an essay in which they imagine that they would suddenly have to leave Trieste (their home city) overnight due to war/natural disaster and move to an unknown place.

3. Conclusion

The teaching approach proposed can thus be understood as a new paradigm of teaching the Triestine literature. The feedback provided by the high school teachers and students who are going to tackle literature by following the new guidelines will enable the further development of the model. Since the teaching method proposed was created by taking into account the historical facts about the Trieste area and the current needs arising in the same territory, as well as the specifics of the Triestine literature, it cannot be directly applied to the curricula of the high schools in other parts of Europe with an ethnically heterogeneous structure of students. It can, however, serve as an idea or encouragement for constructing a new approach for teaching literature, which would be adapted to the needs of the target environment. It can actually be claimed that understanding the literature emerging in the local environment contributes to the understanding of oneself. This is, however, only possible if a comprehensive approach is adopted and the readers obtain the relevant knowledge of both – the minority literature and of the literature of the majority population living in the region.

References

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Notes

- ¹ The paper is based on the research work carried out during the project EDUKA2 – Per una governance transfrontaliera dell'istruzione/Čezmejno upravljanje izobraževanja/For a cross-border governance of education pursuant to the Interreg Cooperation Programme V-A Italy-Slovenia 2014–2020 – European Regional Development Fund; CUP: G26E17000000009.
- ² E.g. Zudič Antonič 2012, 2017. One should also point out the findings of the study in the field of cross-cultural teaching methodology (teaching the Slovenian language and literature in Austria; Bedenk & Vučajnk 2009), which was performed in order to improve the teaching process, which includes very heterogeneous groups of students belonging to various cultures and languages. The study also showed that for all levels of learning Slovenian literary texts and materials covering socio-cultural contents should be prepared, if possible in the e-form.
- ³ One of the main aims of this teaching method is definitely developing the cross-cultural awareness. Byram (2005), for example, thinks that the two basic conditions for cross-cultural communication skills are the knowledge about oneself and the other. In this respect it is important to point out that in the border areas, where different cultures exist, getting to know one another and mutual respect are a necessary condition ensuring the quality of the teaching process at school. Literature classes offer an exchange of opinions, standpoints and values, while creative writing enables a constructive implementation of the curriculum content. In this respect, Meta Grosman (2004) points out the specifics and new challenges in acquiring the cross-cultural awareness of the 21st century, as this brings new migration processes, an increasingly global culture and thus new dimensions in the relationship between languages and cultures (such as the use of English in writing literary works by the representatives of other linguistic communities).

- ⁴ On the respective events related to the history of Trieste, see for example, Ara (2007), Gombač (2005), Vivante (1984), Kacin-Wohinz & Pirjevec (2000).
- ⁵ The paper is based on the concepts of collective memory (Halbwachs 2001) and postmemory, introduced by Marianne Hirsch, concerning the structure through which the traumatic experiences are passed on from the generation which experienced a collective trauma to the next generation (Hirsch 2008).
- ⁶ Arising from narratology (Bal 2009). In terms of the structural elements, according to the specifics of the corpus of the literary works studied, I have pointed out the place and time of narration, the manner of depicting a certain place (landscape, city), the plot's climax and the division of the characters into protagonists and antagonists according to their ethnic backgrounds.
- ⁷ Literary imagology is a branch of comparative literature, studying the image of the home culture in foreign works and the image of the foreign culture in home literature. For further information see Leerssen (2006, 2016), Pageaux (2008, 2010).
- ⁸ It is based on the concept of the minority literature in Deleuze and Guattari (1995). According to this concept, minority literature denotes the literature written by a minority in a dominant language. Consequently, the Istrio-Triestine literature is a minority literature. A specific question beyond the scope of this study is whether also Italian Triestine literature is a minority literature. More on the term Triestinità and the Italian Triestine literature see Toroš (2014).
- ⁹ According to the existing guidelines for teaching literature, the approach proposed belongs to the field of systemic literature teaching methodology (Krakar Vogel & Mileva Blažič 2012), as it includes learning about the context factors. The learning methods mostly include research work, team work, role play, artistic expression of the texts read and the use of media (Žbogar 2018, 88–89), and predominantly focus on the post-creation process and creative writing on the basis of the works read.
- ¹⁰ Classes of the Slovenian language and literature are carried out in all five years of schooling at the higher secondary schools in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region (higher secondary schools in Italy roughly correspond to high schools in Slovenia, encompassing the age group between 14 and 19 years of age and last for five years). In line with the Acts (1012/1961 and 932/1973), the Slovenian higher secondary schools in Italy have the right to the classes of the Slovenian language and literature: the number of teaching hours per week varies according to the vocational orientation of the school. At present, in Trieste there are six higher secondary schools with Slovenian as language of instruction. All Slovenian higher secondary schools in Italy have to carry out classes dedicated to the Slovenian language and literature as part of the syllabus designated for teaching the Italian language and literature. This means that the students of the Slovenian higher secondary schools in Italy have fewer contact hours of the Italian language and literature, and yet have to learn the whole syllabus prescribed by the legislation. World literature is usually taught during the Italian literature classes, while the classes of the Slovenian language and literature mostly only deal with the Slovenian literature. It must also be pointed out that in the first two years of schooling the classes of the Slovenian language and literature are dedicated to both – language and literature. Approximately half of the time is dedicated to the Slovenian language and the remaining half to the Slovenian literature. From the third to the fifth year all teaching hours are dedicated to the Slovenian literature. It should also be pointed out that the ministry guidelines as well as in the school curricula clearly state that the learning outcomes of the Slovenian language classes are, besides the main outcome, namely developing the ability to communicate and convey messages in the Slovenian language, also establishing similarities and comparisons of the Slovenian and Italian languages, culture, history and art; devoting attention to the questions of national identity and multiculturalism.
- ¹¹ On cross-cultural education see Zudič Antonič (2017).
- ¹² The first steps towards a comparative approach to dealing with literature were made during the project EDUKA2, <http://www.eduka2.eu/materiali-didattici/didattica-transfrontaliera/>. For

the needs concerning teaching the Istrian literature refer to Zudič Antonič (2014). Some of the previous suggestions should also be pointed out: the independent dealing with minority literature as an independent literary system, separated from the national system and rather incorporated into its own space and time, has also been discussed by David Bandelj (2010, 438), who was, among other reasons, led by the fact that certain minority authors decide to write in more languages. In this respect, Jadranka Cergol (2014, 65) has found out that one cannot talk about independent minority literature, as it is, due to the connections between language and culture, still incorporated in its national literature and it is tightly intertwined with it. Miran Košuta (2008) understands and describes the minority literature through five typological dimensions – the ontological, the ethnic, the national, the spatial and the linguistic dimensions. In addition, Cergol (2014) also mentions the historical memory, which should enable the ethnic community to preserve the testimonies of its ancestors.

- ¹³ E.g.: Nada Pertot, 1979, *Od antike do danes: I. slovensko berilo za višje srednje šole, Deželni šolski urad za Furlanijo-Juljsko krajino, Trst*. The comparative empirical study including 420 higher secondary school students and 43 teachers in total (Melinc Mlekuž 2016), clearly stated out that the teachers and students wished to have new course books for literature (and language), which would evaluate the life circumstances and the situation of the Slovenians in Italy, and would, above all, also include the works of younger Slovenian authors in Italy, writing about the topics related to identity, generational conflicts, loyalty to one own's roots and tradition.
- ¹⁴ Mainly the works of authors born in the first and second half of the 20th century have been taken into account.
- ¹⁵ A shift from this structure can be noticed in the novel *Zlata poroka ali Tržaški blues* (The Golden Wedding or The Blues of Trieste) by the Triestine novel writer Evelina Umek (Umek 2010), as we face the heterogeneous identity of the Slovenian minority in Italy, particularly in the Trieste area. Despite this, the most positive characters appearing in the novel are those who mostly identify themselves with the Slovenianness (Stekar 2015).
- ¹⁶ These two works are suitable for higher secondary school students in their last year of schooling, who are supposed to possess well-developed metacognitive reading skills and are therefore able to read literary works through evaluating, judging, comparing analysing and interpreting from various standpoints (Žbogar 2018, 84–85). Both works actually encourage these two particular aspects of the reading process, focusing on the comparison of two different experiences of the Triestine territory and its cultural and historical dynamics.
- ¹⁷ See also Scott Valentino (2001).